

Making San Francisco housing more affordable by design: Efficiency units

By: **Scott Wiener** | 07/08/12 4:00 AM

It's no secret that housing is expensive in San Francisco. Only 11 percent of San Franciscans can afford to purchase the average-priced home. Rents, always high, are even higher these days. It seems like we are perpetually at risk of pricing out our young people, working people, seniors, families and our middle class generally. To address this crisis, we need to think broadly and creatively and make our housing policies more flexible.

Government subsidies for affordable housing, while important, will never solve our entire affordability problem, or even a significant portion of it. We simply don't have enough public funding to spend our way out of our affordability gap. So, in addition to public subsidies, we need to encourage and allow housing developers to create housing affordable to different income levels, different ages and backgrounds, and different lifestyles. Right now, we're not doing that effectively and are getting a lot of luxury housing, some low-income housing, and not much housing affordable to the middle class.

Family-sized housing is important and should be encouraged. Yet, many San Franciscans are single. According to the 2010 census, 39 percent of San Franciscans live alone. In some parts of The City, more than half of residents live alone. One option — though by no means the only option — of creating more reasonably priced housing for people living alone is to provide more flexibility in the size of units, including small efficiency units. Smaller units are cheaper to build, which means that they are cheaper to buy and to rent.

While some people prefer and can afford large units, whether single-family homes or large flats, others do not need as much space or cannot afford it. Students and transition age youth, for example, may not need much space and certainly need affordably designed housing. Senior housing is another candidate for small-sized units. Some seniors cannot afford a significant amount of space, while others are no longer physically able to care for a large home. Young workers, many of whom are making just enough to get by and aren't home much, may also be interested in a smaller, more affordable unit.

I'm proposing legislation to allow for these smaller units, with a maximum of two people residing in them. Currently, San Francisco's Building Code requires that an efficiency unit contain at least 220 square feet of living space (i.e., the living room and bedroom area and not including kitchen, bathroom, and closet space). This minimum is well above the 150-square-foot minimum of living space allowed by California law, and my legislation would adopt that 150-square-foot standard for San Francisco. Other cities in California conform to this 150-square-foot minimum, including San Jose, Santa Barbara, Santa Maria, and Arcata. Seattle also has a 150-square-foot minimum, and New York City's minimum is even smaller.

My legislation will not change zoning limits such as height, bulk, density caps, setbacks and open-space requirements. It will simply provide our city with much-needed flexibility to create additional housing to meet our population's needs.

Flexibility is key here. If we are flexible, we can meet our future housing needs without pricing folks out of The City. Only in that way can we retain the diversity that makes San Francisco great.

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