

Aptos quality of life is under threat

by Mike Shenk

Our quality of life in Aptos is being threatened. The Aptos community is comprised of working and retired teachers, engineers, self-employed entrepreneurs, doctors, chefs, public sector employees, store clerks, restaurant and hotel personnel, employees of banking and financial institutions and of a broad range of local businesses; the list goes on. We are, each and everyone, stakeholders in the future of our Aptos community. Our involvement, or apathy, today will have specific consequences tomorrow.

Today my specific concerns include: the water shortage, the traffic, and the safety of residents during an emergency.

Saltwater intrusion threatens our community; traffic congestion is a daily challenge. Both of these situations will definitely be exacerbated by the construction of the Aptos Village Project in the heart of the old village. I can't even begin to envision 5,000 residents trying to make their way out Trout Gulch and Soquel Drive in the event of an emergency evacuation.

I personally attended community meetings organized by Ellen Pirie back in 2008 when this project was under consideration. I have spoken to countless Aptos residents, local business owners, and friends who attended those meetings. My conclusion, then and now, is that the overwhelming majority of Aptos people did not and do not want a project of this magnitude. Those who are in favor would like to see a New Leaf and a few shops and restaurants. I found that the majority of the people who actually want the proposed housing development are real estate agents, developers, and others who will profit initially in some way. To my mind, the best-case scenario would be to have a market and a few retail shops. But even that is a questionable proposition. By creating more shopping you don't necessarily create more tax revenue and jobs: you may well end up taking business away from existing stores

and restaurants. A New Leaf market will most probably put Aptos Naturals out of business and will definitely take a bite out of the Deluxe Market and Safeway.

I researched and learned why high-density mixed-use projects are mandated by the state of California. The reasons make sense for places where there is adequate space for the flow of traffic and abundant infrastructure. In our case, the Aptos Village Project is like putting a round peg in a square hole. It will definitely exacerbate the current problems facing us: lack of water, lack of affordable housing, traffic jams, transportation problems, and potential disaster during any type of emergency.

It seems to me that our local government is putting the cart before the horse. I agree that housing shortages cause home values to rise and the price of rentals to skyrocket. But building more expensive homes aggravates the situation.

We are quickly becoming a bedroom and weekend-home community for Silicon Valley. Our high cost of living means that people who work in restaurants, markets, convenience stores, box stores, shoe stores, hair salons, coffee shops etc. can't afford to live here anymore. The situation is appalling: we have people renting out walk-in closets as bedrooms; grown kids are living with their parents; three-to-four people sharing a one-bedroom apartment.

Our county leaders should work closely with developers to build tiny homes and apartment complexes that take up a much smaller footprint and are much more affordable.

Teachers, county workers, small business managers and owners, and other professionals of modest incomes can barely afford to live here unless they bought a home here 20 years ago or more. I know this is not news to you but we must address the challenge of providing affordable housing for the labor and professional workforce that fuels the economy of our county and community.

As an experienced business owner I know that to stay in business you must keep your overhead down and productivity up; and offer your product or service at fair market pricing. Similarly, our county must be run efficiently so it can afford to invest in better transportation, better infrastructure, better schools and after-school programs. The county must become more profitable by reducing overhead, increasing productivity and rewarding forward thinkers.

The time is now: I urge the taxpayers of our community to become well informed about these problems, to think critically and to act locally. We chose to live here because it's one of the best places on earth. Our progressive thinking is what makes Santa Cruz a great place to live. Please let's not turn our community into Anywhere, USA.