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Editorial: Thousand Oaks tackles housing blues

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(Photo: STAR FILE PHOTO)

We received another gloomy report last week on Ventura County's economy that cited the usual suspects —lack of jobs, lack of housing and especially lack of housing that people can afford. The Thousand Oaks Planning Commission, however, lifted our spirits this week with approval of some badly needed apartments in its city core.

We have long decried the county's severe lack of affordable housing. Save Open-space and Agricultural Resources growth-control laws have prevented urban sprawl, but the corollary of that — so-called "infill" development in core urban areas — is often thwarted by NIMBYism, general anti-growth sentiments and weak-willed city leaders.

Frankly, we are tired of hearing that people moved here from the San Fernando Valley for a quieter way of life and that building some housing for our kids is going to suddenly turn us into Orange County. Someone, after all, had to build the housing those folks bought. Without more infill units, more and more people are cramming into existing housing — bringing the very parking and traffic problems that so many here fear.

Not surprisingly, we heard some of those fears expressed about the Thousand Oaks project, which will include 36 apartments, 4,980 square feet of commercial space and outdoor dining areas at the site of the former Lupe's Mexican Restaurant on Thousand Oaks Boulevard. Fortunately, the project by Dalygroup Inc. and California Commercial Investment Group had much support — the Thousand Oaks Boulevard Association called it "not just the applicant's project, but rather the community's project" — and it was approved 3-1 by the Planning Commission. If that decision is appealed to the City Council, we urge that the approval be upheld.

The project is not perfect — some oak and sycamore trees must be removed or transplanted — and 36 apartments won't solve our housing crisis. But it's a step in the right direction, and it also may jump-start longtime city efforts to revitalize the 3 downtown miles of Thousand Oaks Boulevard between Moorpark Road and Duesenberg Drive.

City leaders for decades have talked about turning the mishmash of office buildings, strip malls and auto-repair shops into a vibrant, pedestrian-filled hub of restaurants, shops and boutique hotels. They finally approved a plan for that in 2011, the Thousand Oaks Boulevard Specific Plan, but the Dalygroup project is actually the first mixed-use proposal to come to the commission or council since then, according to a city staff report.

City leaders say businesses complain that the lack of housing and nightlife makes it difficult to attract young professionals. The specific plan allows a total of 420 new housing units in the area, and the Dalygroup project could be the catalyst for other mixed-use projects to follow suit.

In his gloomy economic talk last week, Matthew Fienup, executive director of the Center for Economic Research and Forecasting at California Lutheran University, talked about all the commute traffic being created here by the lack of affordable housing and high-paying jobs — and how infill development is part of the solution. We applaud Thousand Oaks for recognizing that this week and urge other Ventura County cities to do the same.

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