



**THOUSAND
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MARTINEZ**

Everybody Says We Need More Housing. What's the Deal? Housing & Martinez

Development is always controversial, especially in existing neighborhoods. On March 27th, our expert panel will discuss housing issues and trends in Martinez. Do we need more housing—considering that our population has shrunk? Many of our state legislators think so—and they're reducing environmental review for projects. "Our Neighborhood Voices" is working on an initiative to return local control of housing to local jurisdictions. Our housing element has not yet been accepted by the state, giving developers more power – – but they haven't taken advantage of it yet.

Thousand Friends is not opposed to development but location and quality of development matter. Martinez is a hidden gem, and has controlled growth, but development pressures are increasing. In the time of climate change, sea level rise, fire danger, and insurance prices are becoming bigger issues. State housing laws usually don't increase funding for roads, transit and parking. Workforce housing is being considered at the adult school site—and that process is just starting. We want to have a conversation with the community about housing

Thousand Friends of Martinez works to protect Martinez parks and open space, to improve our city government, and to defend our quality of life. Some of that includes responding to development policies or projects. Recently a local columnist has been spinning a series of incorrect assumptions about our "position on housing" because we encouraged the City to update its 1973 General Plan and have tried to improve the City's Housing Element with various suggestions as that state driven process has evolved.

#1 – TFM doesn't have a position or policy on housing. We've made a whole bunch of incremental suggestions for the General Plan and the Housing Element. We do think that housing is better on infill sites than on green fields, the waterfront or the edge of town, where environmental issues are more significant.

#2 – TFM doesn't think more housing is good or bad just because we think open space should be protected and defended. It's all about the pace and the quality of the projects even as the state increasingly takes away local controls on housing.

#3— TFM's effect on housing is minor compared to the lack of an updated General Plan until two years ago, a still not state certified Housing element, state mandates pushing more housing, developer financing and interest rates, and a city government with limited bandwidth which has been getting better more recently.

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We have had an impact on location of housing in some cases—resisting housing north of the tracks on the waterfront where flooding happens already with heavy rains and high tides, and sea level rise is inevitable (in our comments on the General Plan), for example. Or discouraging development and grading in the steepest most fire prone parts of town which are also often geologically unstable. For example, in the Measure I Parks overlay we helped sponsor to require a vote to change open space zoning, and in our support for Measure L the city’s vote to acquire the Alhambra Highlands property.

So what’s really going on with housing in Martinez?

Martinez Population

A little background:

Martinez is a historic town that was founded in 1849 in the beautiful Alhambra Valley, on the 17,000 acre Rancho El Pinole, and grew rapidly after that year’s Gold Rush. A ferry service across Carquinez Strait encouraged development and when County boundaries were developed after statehood, Martinez became the county seat of government.

Fish canneries and industrial development along the waterfront helped the town grow and the waterfront defined the town’s north boundary. Trains and ferries carried many visitors through Martinez until tunnels started being built through the Oakland Hills beginning in 1903, but especially with the first Caldecott tunnel in 1937. County traffic patterns shifted south as other areas began grew faster, such as Lamorinda, Walnut Creek and Concord, and the San Ramon Valley.

1910	2,115	53.3%
1920	3,858	82.4%
1930	6,569	70.3%
1940	7,381	12.4%
1950	8,268	12.0%
1960	9,604	16.2%
1970	16,506	71.9%
1980	22,582	36.8%
1990	31,808	40.9%
2000	35,866	12.8%
2010	35,824	-0.1%
2020	37,287	6.9%
2023	36,395	-2.4%

1900-1930 was the town’s fastest growth rate. Creation of oil refineries starting in 1915 helped support the town’s initial; growth, but in later years probably depressed growth. In 1939 the town basically stopped at the Alhambra Avenue curve near the County hospital. Alhambra High School was at the edge of town. No part of town extended south of present-day Highway 4.

Further growth took place after both world wars and orchards were replaced with small subdivisions stretching south down the valley, and on the hills south of Shell refinery. For over a hundred years the steep, landslide prone Franklin Hills were largely left alone as subdivisions extended south through flatter orchards

Concord and Pleasant Hill expanded toward Martinez’s boundaries and in 1964 Briones Regional Park’s creation began defining the city’s southern boundary, even as the County allowed developments along the edges of town. 1960-1990 was the city’s second fastest growth period. City

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development continued on rolling hills stretching south of Highway 4. The extension of BART to Central County in 1973 and the creation of Bishop Ranch near San Ramon continued to shift development away from Martinez.

In the late 1980's protection of the Franklin Hills west of downtown and the creation of Carquinez Strait Regional Shoreline defined the city's western boundary, as Waterbird Regional Preserve did on the east by protecting the wetlands across Highway 680.

After 1990 growth slowed dramatically. In 1990 the first county Urban Limit Line was approved, and in 2004 and 2006 it was made voter-approved. Most of Contra Costa's cities including Martinez adopted it, which further solidified Martinez boundaries. The Urban Limit Line can be changed with a vote of the people, and it's up for renewal in 2026 but it's held firm for twenty years.

So, geographically and topographically, Martinez is defined and protected from major expansion on all four sides by the waterfront and regional parks, and by the Urban Limit Line.

Demographics

Under 18	27.2%
65 years and older	17.6%
Housing – Owner Occupied	70.1%
Median Value -	\$824,700
Median w mortgage	\$3,075
Median rent	\$2,265
Households	14,673
Mean Travel time to work	30 minutes
Mean Household income	\$125,436
Land Area	12.6 square miles

There are pockets of unincorporated county lands that could be annexed to the city in Mountain View, Vine Hill and Pacheco, and in Alhambra Valley but generally it hasn't made economic sense, or there's been resistance by residents because of distrust of developers and city government or concern about increased taxes.

Almost by definition, the development opportunities that are left are called "smart growth" –using underutilized properties within the city—"infill properties"—for higher density development in compact land use patterns already served by utilities and transportation. Imagine turning a downtown parking lot into a mixed commercial residential development or replacing a church with condos. It creates controversy because inevitably it means more congestion and impacts on existing neighbors and neighborhoods.

Most of the development controversies in Martinez over the past 30-40 years have been about 1) repeated attempts to tear down and redevelop parts of our historic downtown and 2) residential development. Residents have resisted major changes that threaten the character of our town.

Luckily, major redevelopment is a thing of the past. But incremental residential development is likely the wave of the near future, along with more attached and detached ADUs – Accessory Dwelling

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Units, sometimes called “in-law units.” In the near term, the Martinez Unified School District may propose housing development along with renovation of the Adult School Site.

Seth Adams’ Observations

California has had a housing shortage since the Gold Rush. It’s nothing new.

The days of major sprawl in Martinez are over. It’s increasingly true countywide as well.

Anti-growth sentiment is based on the pace of change affecting quality of life and stretching shared services

Housing development doesn’t pay for itself. Commercial and industrial development might

Martinez has dodged several bullets with limited development in shoreline areas and high fire zones

Most suburban development does not generate enough revenue to pay for its own long-term maintenance

New development is subsidized by current residents who invested in existing infrastructure

California’s housing problem isn’t pace of new housing, it’s having a lot of jobs and the pace of immigration

Martinez’s biggest strength is its small size. Less to maintain.

There are lots of underutilized parcels in Martinez but just three active housing projects

Most of the city’s growth in unit numbers, affordable or otherwise, are ADUs – accessory dwelling units or in-law units. They’re the winner in gradually increasing density while also improving property values.

You need to work with residents to support moderate rates of development. In the past, the city hasn’t.

You can’t shame people or punish them into accepting change

People love property rights, property values, and cars



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Investment in many small projects is less risky than in a few big ones.

Fast growing cities like Pittsburg are addicted to one time building fees. It's not sustainable

Cities routinely trade the near-term cash advantages of new growth for the long-term financial obligations of maintaining infrastructure.

Most politicians focus on 2-4 year election cycles instead of long term obligations

If cities are not raising enough revenue to repair and replace infrastructure, the system cannot sustain itself.

We do not have even a fraction of the money necessary to maintain our basic infrastructure systems

Cities must invest inward to become sustainable. Expansion digs the hole deeper.

“How did you go bankrupt?” “Two ways. Gradually and then suddenly.”

How did our ancestors build such amazing places like Martinez? They built places that could financially sustain themselves.

The lessons of the Martinez Marina financial challenges can be extended to all of the city's infrastructure such as roads, schools, water, sewer etc.

The only way out of the suburban ponzi scheme is investment inward.