

Ferraro Asks Emergency Be Declared in Housing Crisis, Wants Key Law Suspended

Los Angeles City Council President John Ferraro on Wednesday asked Mayor Tom Bradley to declare a state of emergency because of the local housing crisis.

Ferraro, in the most dramatic proposal from a city official to encourage new residential construction, also wants Gov. Jerry Brown to suspend a state law that would have the immediate effect of permitting higher density development in the city.

The zoning proposal recommended by Ferraro's Finding Committee on Housing heated up what is turning into a fierce political competition to establish leadership in the housing area.

Two key City Council members—who chair the housing and planning committees and who, like Ferraro, may be mayoral candidates next year—denounced the call for a state of emergency.

Using the emergency declaration, Ferraro wants Brown to suspend the State Subdivision Map Act in Los Angeles.

This would mean that zoning ordinances would govern density rather than community plans that generally set down much more stringent land use rules.

Ferraro said he told Bradley on Tuesday night that he would ask for the emergency declaration, and Ferraro reported the mayor "made no comment."

Bradley left Wednesday morning for Washington, D.C. and could not be reached for comment. However, Deputy Mayor Ray Remy said he thought the mayor would study Ferraro's request. A Brown spokesman in Sacramento said the governor would consider any request from the city.

Minutes after Ferraro held a City Hall news conference, Councilman Dave Cunningham released a five-page statement calling the request for a state of emergency "the most frightening and dangerous" of eight measures Ferraro introduced. Cunningham was briefed Tuesday by Ferraro on the housing package.

As Grants, Housing and Community Development Committee chairman, Cunningham is behind a program to build more subsidized low- and moderate-cost housing and he increasingly plays a housing leadership role.

And Councilman Zev Yaroslavsky, Planning Committee chairman, reached in Sacramento, said he was "astonished" by the proposal. "It would just leave the private sector to its own devices. I'm not sure that's what we want to do," he added.

The controversy over the emergency declaration plan echoed the storm that erupted last week when Ferraro and Cunningham, among others, criticized Councilman Bab Ronka for even proposing solutions to the city's desperate housing shortage.

"I'm not going to get into the fight," Yaroslavsky said of the competition by city officials to take political credit for measures that seek to ease the crisis. Yaroslavsky noted that he was addressing the "merits" and probably can support most of Ferraro's other proposals. They include increasing density, reducing parking requirements and lobbying for federal tax laws to encourage construction.

Late Wednesday, Ferraro answered his critics, saying in a prepared statement that his proposal would not undermine community plans or existing ordinances. "The community input which we have historically encouraged will still be an integral part of the process."

In uncharacteristically tough language, Ferraro termed it "absurd" to

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predict that "bulldozers are surrounding our boundaries, ready to plow through the city." He continued, "It is equally ridiculous to think that we can build a wall around this city and expect that people will not move in or out. I oppose this kind of elitist thinking."

Ronka commended Ferraro and his committee for "offering such creative and positive approaches" although he indicated that the emergency declaration might be considered as "perhaps a last approach."

With the city vacancy rate under 1% (experts consider 5% an acceptable figure) housing each day becomes a more potent issue.

In addition to Cunningham's standing committee, both Ferraro and Bradley have appointed developer-dominated committees to advise them on ways to spur residential construction. The mayor's panel is expected to report shortly.

Ferraro likened the present housing crisis to such emergencies as flood and fires, saying: "The rapidly spreading housing shortage epidemic threatens the health and safety of the citizens."

Under Ferraro's plan, a housing emergency would continue until the vacancy rate goes above 5%.

After the news conference, Ferraro told The Times that it is important for

city residents, including those "comfortable" in their homes and apartments, to realize the seriousness of the housing crisis.

He noted that some people in Los Angeles live in cars and that several families share small quarters that should be occupied by only one family. "It's an emergency," Ferraro said, adding: "I don't do flashy things like this arbitrarily."

Although he is acting mayor, Ferraro said he would not sign the emergency declaration unless he knows whether Bradley supports it.

Ferraro also is proposing state legislation that would exempt cities Map Act when their vacancy rate is below 50%.

Another recommendation would give developers a 30% increase in density in all multiple-unit residential zones.

But Cunningham, although considered a spokesman for the housing industry, said he opposes these steps because, "I do not believe it is sensible to waive controls on a blanket level."

Other Ferraro proposals include:

—Allowing developers to provide fewer parking spaces if they pay a fee to a transit fund, the proceeds of which would be used to augment public transportation near the development.

—Reducing parking requirements by allowing half of all stalls for compact cars, so that less space would be required for cars.

—Strongly encouraging city planning officials to approve maximum density for all new residential projects.

—Lobbying Congress to re-instate tax shelters for owners and builders of apartments.

In a related attempt to solve the housing crisis, leaders of the Campaign for Economic Democracy (CED)—heading the movement to bring rent controls to several California cities—called for a "new dialogue" between renters' rights groups and the building industry.

CED has sent a conciliatory letter to 75 "decision makers" in real estate, labor, the building industry and government, leader Tom Hayden told a press conference Wednesday in Los Angeles.

Hayden said he has no specific proposals for stimulating housing production but suggested forming some kind of "movement to attack outrageously high interest rates" and finding "alternative sources"—such as pension funds—for financing construction loans.