El Cerrito Mayfair Site:
A Case Study in Cities Leveraging their Land and the Market for Affordable Housing

Illustration: Holliday Development and BRIDGE Housing
In early 2016 the City of El Cerrito issued a Request for Qualifications (RFQ) for the acquisition and development of three parcels, known as the Mayfair site, into a mixed-use residential development. The Mayfair site is located adjacent to the El Cerrito Del Norte BART station, at the intersection of San Pablo Avenue and Cutting Boulevard. Totaling over 1.5 acres, the site a major catalyst in the Del Norte station area, advancing the city’s transit-oriented development (TOD) strategy, producing 67 units of affordable housing.\(^1\)

The city’s Redevelopment Authority (RDA) purchased the parcels between 1987-2009, and had two proposals that came close to being developed, but were interrupted by the recession and complications during the state’s RDA dissolution process.\(^2\) The redevelopment dissolution process allowed El Cerrito to obtain title to the property for purposes of future development, catalyzing the plan of building a vibrant mixed-use development project adjacent to important transit access points.\(^3\)

In 2015, the State of California Department of Finance issued El Cerrito a finding of completion, allowing the City to move forward with disposition and development at Mayfair. According to Melanie Mintz, the City of El Cerrito’s Community Development Director, the city wanted prompt activation of the site, as it would deliver active uses to contribute to the City’s tax base, as well as new life to San Pablo Ave. and Del Norte BART.

In order to attract potential development, the City wanted to make the RFQ straightforward and free from stringent requirements, as it wasn’t certain if real estate market conditions could deliver everything the city envisioned, after many years of trying to activate the site during the Redevelopment era. The San Pablo Area Specific Plan’s form-based code, which increases height allowances and decreased parking requirements, was one critical city policy that was in place to create more amenable conditions for mixed-use residential development.\(^4\)

One omission in the RFQ noted by advocates was affordable housing was not a required element for development submissions. However, the RFQ did state: “Prior to the dissolution of the Redevelopment Agency...Redevelopment Law [required] that at least 15 percent of all units built in the project area be affordable. The City encourages developers to consider the inclusion of affordable housing units as a part of their proposal.”\(^5\) According to Ms. Mintz, El Cerrito City

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\(^2\) The first proposal on the site was a 2005 project for a mixed-use development with a 15 percent of units set aside for low- and moderate-income households. The developer suspended the project due to “economic conditions.” The second mixed-use proposal, which did not include any affordable housing, was put forth in 2013, but the properties were not able to be transferred as they were entangled in ongoing litigation related to RDA dissolution.


Council and city staff saw this site as an opportunity for affordable housing, but did not want to deter high quality projects through stringent requirements, therefore only made this an encouraged component. However, City staff was heartened after conducting a walking tour of the site with developers, as several affordable housing teams attended. This helped signal that affordable housing was possible on the site, and that a submission was on the way.

After reviewing the eleven submitted responses to the RFQ, the City of El Cerrito selected a proposal from a collaboration between Holliday Development and BRIDGE Housing. The proposal includes 223 total units, including 67 affordable at three different below-market rate income levels, and a unique plan for inclusive community space. This proposal’s amount of affordable units are 100% higher than what would have been required under the Redevelopment Law. When the project was approved by City Council, the councilmembers and audience finished the vote in applause.

How did such a catalytic site come to include a higher level of affordable housing than would have been required under the Redevelopment Law, particularly when there was no additional city funding to help facilitate the construction of these below-market rate units?6 Per Ms. Mintz, it was the combination of the right partner at the right time, encouragement in the flexible language that the City included in the RFQ, and a strong form based code.

Holliday Development and BRIDGE Housing built the foundation for their imaginative, winning proposal within the City’s articulated vision for San Pablo Ave. The ability to increase building height and decrease the number of parking spaces allowed the plan to work financially for the development team. Ms. Mintz reinforced that the City didn’t want to get in the way of any development, and that “this project allowed us to see what could happen in a city-market that didn’t have any incentives” specifically for affordable housing development.

While the Mayfair site still in the entitlements phase, it is a standout example of how one city’s vision for transit oriented development can into projects through diligent long-range area planning and strong partnerships between market rate and affordable housing developers. It also is a beacon of the power that cities hold in the RFQ process when putting public land to bid. Even after Redevelopment, cities across California have incredible power to create equitable housing opportunities within their communities, and ability to leverage their assets and encourage specific developments that are inclusive.

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6 Although the property was not acquired with Low and Moderate Income Housing Funds, the Redevelopment Law includes an inclusionary housing requirement that 15% of all housing constructed in a project area be affordable to low and very low income households. El Cerrito, prior to dissolution, had met and exceeded its inclusionary requirement.
Thank You

The following individuals contributed to the development of this case study. We thank them for their time, as well as their commitment to equitable housing in the Bay Area:

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