

Los Angeles group home ordinance comes under fire

By Rick Orlov
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A coalition of religious and community leaders joined housing advocates on Thursday in opposing a measure that would place strict regulations on boarding houses throughout the city.

Calling itself the STOP CCFO (Community Care Facilities Ordinance), the group began a lobbying campaign urging city officials to change or reject Councilman Mitch Englander's proposal.

"If this goes ahead as it is written, it will take us back to 1955 when redlining was the rule," and minorities were barred from living in certain neighborhoods, said Greg Spiegel, director of public policy of the Inner City Law Center.

Englander said he has had several meetings with the organizations and changed the measure to meet their concerns regarding the impact on housing. The proposal is scheduled to go to the full City Council in the near future.

"The truth is we have a homeless and housing problem and this will open more opportunity to create housing," Englander said. "This is needed because unlicensed boarding homes have always been illegal. A lot of these codes go back to the 1940s and make no sense any longer.

"We think this will end up creating more housing in the city. We have done more to help than hurt the housing situation."

Spiegel said the main concern with the proposal is how it seeks to change the definition of boarding houses to be any place with people living under four or more leases, as well as where they can be located.

Boarding homes are now allowed in some residential zones that have multi-family housing, Spiegel said. "This will take that away."

Spiegel said another aspect would serve to discriminate against those on parole or probation.

"It says that if there are three people on probation or parole, that becomes probationary housing and is illegal," Spiegel said.

He said efforts were made to work out a compromise with Englander, without success.

"We tried to point out our concerns, but we didn't get anywhere. We think if we could sit down for five minutes, we could work these things out."

The group home ordinance has been in the works for several years, but it has received renewed interest after the Dec. 2 shooting of four people at a Northridge home being used as a boarding house.

Officials said there had been no complaints about the boarding home from neighbors even though it was estimated more than a dozen people lived in the house. Englander said his proposal attempts to put more controls in place.

Other speakers against the proposal included the Rev. James Lawson, pastor emeritus at the Holman United Methodist Church and a national civil rights leader who marched with the Rev. Martin Luther King.

"It is unfortunate we have to protest an ordinance so much against what we believe in. It is unfair, unjust, unholy," Lawson said.

Jason Mandel of the United Way said the problems with the policy are seen by the different groups that oppose it.

"When the Central City Association, L.A. Chamber, AFL-CIO, homeless advocates, and 19 neighborhood councils are all on the same side of a policy battle, it says a lot about how flawed the policy is," Mandel said.

"By eliminating a significant chunk of affordable housing, the ordinance would force people onto the streets ... and would take housing away from veterans, the elderly who can't afford to live anywhere else and can't live independently and the disabled."