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Making a place for police

- **Mountain View:** Cheaper housing for public-safety officers debated.

BY NOAM LEVEY
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While Bay Area communities watch their police officers and firefighters moving ever farther from the communities they protect, Mountain View is pushing forward with a plan to stem the exodus.

This month, the city council is scheduled to consider giving priority to public safety officials in the city's below-market-rate housing.

It's an idea whose time has come, say city leaders who fear Mountain View will suffer during natural disasters if emergency personnel have to come from their homes in the Central Valley to help.

Many cities have talked of assisting public service workers, but few have designated money to make it happen. And as city council members debate the new policies this year, they may have to make some tough choices about who deserves Mountain View's coveted affordable housing units.

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Mountain View committed itself to affordable housing in September when the city council voted overwhelmingly to enact a "below-market-rate" ordinance that requires developers to make 10 percent of new housing developments affordable for the area's less affluent residents.

It was a popular move in a city where many residents are staggering under a soaring real estate market that pushed the median home sale price in Mountain View in November to \$499,000. But few expect the ordinance to solve the city's housing problems overnight, and demand for the affordable units promises to be fierce.

Many cities that have developed affordable housing have given preference to residents who live or work in the community. And it appears there is broad consensus that Mountain View should do the same thing.

Support for police officers and firefighters is more unusual, but several city council members have already lined up behind the plan.

"The biggest priority must be public safety," said council member Rosemary Stasek. "It's important to have our police officers and firefighters be full-time members of the community."

Today, young officers who cannot afford homes on the Peninsula or in the South Bay are heading for communities such as Tracy in the Central Valley and Pleasanton and Livermore in the East Bay. Some commute hours every day to get to their jobs. Others have pulled up stakes completely and taken jobs in less expensive communities around Sacramento or north of the Bay Area.

Police veterans sadly note this phenomenon is robbing local cities of officers who once played leadership roles in their communities. And more immediately, they and others say, it could harm cities during times of extreme need.

"If we have a major earthquake, and most officers have to come in from Tracy, they're simply never going to get here," said Mountain View Police Chief Mike Maehler.

Mountain View police officer Lloyd Curns, who

commutes from his home in Hercules, said housing assistance would also encourage officers to remain at the Mountain View Police Department instead of moving to departments closer to home. "If there's anything that could make finding a home easier, I think a lot of people would be interested," Curns said.

Yet, while a group of Peninsula and South Bay police departments began meeting this fall to talk about solutions, only a few communities have taken concrete steps to address the problem.

In Marin County, the town of Corte Madera has been giving public safety workers priority in affordable housing units for about five years. Los Angeles last year kicked off a program to give police officers and firefighters low-interest loans and other incentives to buy homes in the city.

But these cities are the minority. And when talk turns to helping selected people in the community find housing, questions inevitably surface about who most deserves assistance. Mountain View planners project that only about 140 to 160 below-market-rate housing units will be built in the city in the next 10 years, far below the anticipated demand.

Are police officers and firefighters the only public service workers who should get access to lower-cost housing?

Corte Madera, for example, gives secondary priority in its affordable housing units to all public workers. Mountain View Mayor Ralph Faravelli suggested that teachers, too, should get help with housing.

Others who might be given priority under the proposed guidelines include any city staff members who are required to work in an emergency, all public employees, families with children or those who once lived in Mountain View but have moved away.

"If we could do it for all these groups, it would be wonderful," Faravelli said, noting that the city probably will not be able to help everyone. "We'll have to see how it works out."

Council members are scheduled to begin discussions of the proposed guidelines at their Jan. 12 meeting.

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