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Opinion: In redevelopment debate, affordable housing must be a priority

By Mark Walker and Kevin Zwick
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Imagine a community with very little affordable housing and city streets lined with homeless men and women night after night. Picture families living on the verge of poverty with no place to turn when circumstances force them to lose their homes. Picture a city unable to attract and retain teachers, police officers and others who provide valuable services to our community.

As the debate about the state budget continues, redevelopment agencies are part of the discussion along with critical services provided by counties to the elderly, poor and homeless. We need to ensure that providing affordable housing is part of the larger discussion about how to best use public dollars.

We are not arguing that changes are unnecessary. But we need to keep in mind the core values of our community -- that each of us should have a safe, affordable home for our families, food for our table, schools for our children, access to health care and the opportunity for self-sustaining work.

Solving homelessness and poverty are some of the most difficult social issues we face. We all need a place to live to be able to contribute fully to our society, and we cannot focus on the preservation of

economic development funding without also prioritizing affordable housing.

Our last homeless census determined that Santa Clara County has more than 7,000 men, women and children homeless on any given night. Nationally, homelessness climbed by 3 percent this past year.

People who never imagined becoming homeless, including seniors, families and veterans, have steadily joined the ranks of the homeless.

Redevelopment agencies are required by law to devote 20 percent of their property tax revenue to affordable housing. Statewide, this provides \$1 billion for housing and homeless programs. In San Jose alone, more than \$835 million in redevelopment funds have been used to leverage another \$3.2 billion in private/public capital to create more than 21,700 affordable housing units in the past 20 years, according to the city's Housing Department.

This has provided tens of thousands of people with affordable rents or the ability to buy their first home. Rehabilitation loans and grants have made more than 6,000 homes and apartments available for low-income residents since 1988, supporting an estimated 19,500 construction and related jobs. This has allowed people who provide critical services in our community, as well as those who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, to have a safe place to call home.

Despite considerable effort, there remains no permanent source of funds for affordable housing at the state or federal level. If we don't prioritize it locally, we put our entire community at risk. It's nearly impossible to find steady employment, obtain an education or stay healthy without a roof over your head. Without housing, we run the risk of having to spend even more public dollars to help

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the growing ranks of the poor and homeless.

Our successes have been critical in meeting the escalating needs of families. We must continue our progress, embracing new and creative ways to aggressively address the affordable housing crisis.

Locally, we can demonstrate our values by committing that any redevelopment funds currently obligated to economic development projects convert to affordable housing if those projects do not come to fruition.

In Sacramento, we urge the governor and legislative leaders to be mindful of those who benefit most from the good work of our Redevelopment Agencies and commit to maintain the \$1 billion for affordable housing in our communities.

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