

## THE HOMES OF LAFAYETTE *A Brief History of the Places We Live*

**W**ith its sprawling California ranch houses, hillside hideaways, and custom homes, Lafayette has a reputation as a classic Bay Area suburb.

But it's not all single family homes. With multifamily developments currently outpacing that of single family homes, Lafayette has a variety of dwellings including sophisticated loft-style condos, town homes, attractive senior housing, and tight-knit apartment communities close to free-way and mass transit.

And did you know that if you're a homeowner or renter, chances are you're living in a house built during the post-World War II boom when nearly 70 percent of the city's single family homes were constructed?

Lafayette's housing history follows the city's trajectory from a rural settlement founded in the mid-1800s to a bustling Bay Area suburb that prizes — and fiercely protects — its rolling hills, scenic ridge lines and small-town feel.

And although much of the flat land best suited for single family home construction has already been snapped up, developers continue to flock here to construct multifamily housing for commuters, empty-nesters and people intent on calling the city home.

In other words, Lafayette remains a desirable place to build, and the city continues to grow and change as the demand for housing increases, even as more of it goes up.

### **Rural Roots**

Settler Elam Brown built the first house in Lafayette around 1848 near a creek on Happy Valley Road. According to local historians, the structure was more of a rustic shelter than a home, and Brown followed it up a year later with a permanent residence at 32 Lafayette Circle.

As the small farming village grew, so did housing. While most of Lafayette's earliest homes have been razed, two of the oldest are still standing. One is a barn on Moraga Boulevard that was remodeled into a farm house in 1869 by landowner James Daley. The other is a farmhouse on Martino Road built in 1876 by a Genovese immigrant who settled in Lafayette.

Originally built on a 100 acre lot, the Martino home on the city's north side was constructed from virgin redwood, according to its current owner, Ray Peters. Today it sits on three-quarters of an acre and boasts a handful of accessory buildings and a bountiful garden.

Built on land used for grazing and dairy, the Moraga Boulevard home has passed through several owners drawn to its rustic charm. Current occupant Effie Herrick has owned the two-story house for more than two decades and is working on a remodel to restore some of its original features.



Elam Brown's house on Lafayette Circle, near the current site of the Cooperage Restaurant

Moraga Road and St. Mary's Road. Aspiring homeowners purchased plots of land for between \$1,000 to \$2,500 and could hire builders and architects to craft a home keeping with-in the tract home aesthetic.

More developments sprang up and local builders kept busy. One of the most prolific was Jack Marchant, who built about a quarter of the city's current stock of homes, including most of the low-slung ranchers that dot Burton Valley, Silver Springs, and Peardale, among other neighborhoods. Designed in partnership with associate Hirsch Morton, Marchant homes are known for their vaulted ceilings, large kitchens and expansive family rooms, and their footprints were typically about 1,700 square feet.

Other builders contributed to the housing boom. But as less of the city's flat land became available, people headed to the hills to build homes, according to local architect Tim Ward, who's been designing houses and other buildings in Lafayette since the mid-1980s.

### **Different Terrain, Changing Homes**

When Ward, who is a founder of Lafayette-based Ward Young Architecture, came on the scene, California ranch style homes had been replaced by Sea Ranch-inspired dwellings made of wood and glass that allowed their occupants unparalleled views of nature.

### **Boom Town**

Keeping in line with Lafayette's agricultural roots, much of Lafayette's early architecture was hand-hewn and homespun, with a scattering of more substantial residences here and there such as the two-story Carpentier estate — now gone — in Burton Valley, and a grand Victorian encircled by pear orchards on what is now Deer Hill Road.

But it was in the 1950's and 60's that the city's transformation from a pastoral town to a bustling suburb truly began.

One of the first major housing developments was Lafayette Homeland, a subdivision at

# HOMES OF LAFAYETTE

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“At that point, all the easy sites (in Lafayette) were gone,” Ward said, referring to the flat terrain that can make life a little easier for designers, architects, and builders of single family homes. The era of neighborhood-defining subdivisions had largely come and gone, and the lack of vacant and available lots thereafter transformed the business of single family home construction into a mix of remodeling, second-unit additions, and tear downs.

## Building for the Future

With so much of the city’s remaining land either preserved as open space or under private and public agency ownership, where is housing now being built? And what does it look like?

The answer is the array of multifamily complexes that have sprung up in the city’s downtown over the last few years.

Many of downtown’s older apartment complexes were completed in the 1960’s, so multifamily developments are nothing new in Lafayette. Their numbers, however, have increased in the past few years due to several factors including the lack of developable land outside downtown, the hot regional housing economy, and the changing needs of the city’s residents.

Some of the new housing has been tailored to specific populations. Merrill Gardens and the Belle Terre development in downtown’s east end, for instance, provide more than 130 units of senior housing.

Other developments, such as the Town Center complexes, target professionals and other residents who prefer the convenience and walkability of living near mass transit and the city center.

Then there are developments such as the Woodbury, which is comprised of 56 loft-style condominiums designed for empty nesters and residents seeking to downsize from larger single family homes. A sister complex, The Woodbury Highlands, will soon offer 99 more condos. All told, about 500 units of multifamily housing have been approved for downtown over the last two decades.

Of course, new single family homes and remodels continue to crop up here and there, and large-scale projects such as The Homes at Deer Hill occasionally materialize too. But for now, large single family home developments seem more an exception than the rule. During the last five years, Lafayette has approved eight new multi-family units for every one new single family home.

As the city changes and grows, the story of housing in Lafayette will continue to evolve.

# WHAT IS AFFORDABLE HOUSING, ANYWAY?

With a growing population, skyrocketing home values, and demand for housing outpacing supply, there is a clear need for affordable housing in California. In fact, the affordable housing crisis is “the single biggest problem California faces,” said Ken Rosen, a professor at UC Berkeley’s Haas School of Business and chair of the Fisher Center for Real Estate and Urban Economics.

“If we don’t solve this problem, the economic impacts over the next five to 10 years will be devastating. Companies will move out. Young people won’t be able to afford to stay here,” says Rosen.

The problem is particularly acute in Lafayette, where the median home sales price currently hovers around \$1.4 million, according to real estate website Trulia. That’s around 450 percent higher than the \$254,000 median home sales price nationwide.

So what is Lafayette doing to address the affordable housing crisis?

In the past, before it was dissolved by the state, the city’s Redevelopment Agency used 20 percent of its funds to help finance affordable housing.



10 percent of the new Town Center Condominiums are affordable units

Following the loss of that program, the city asked developers to voluntarily include affordable housing in their projects, with mostly positive results. More recently, city leaders amended Lafayette’s zoning code to permit housing by right in the downtown, and rewrote the city’s inclusionary housing ordinance such that it now requires developers to set aside 15 percent of units in all for-sale multifamily developments as affordable to very low, low and moderate income households, and to disperse those units throughout the project.

So what does affordable mean in a city where homes go for millions of dollars and buyers must have hundreds of thousands of dollars in hand to qualify for a home loan?

“The affordable housing crisis is the single biggest problem California faces.”

According to state definitions of affordable housing, a household shouldn’t pay more than 30 percent of its gross income on rent.

While that may be doable for some community members, it’s not for others, including teachers, paramedics, retail workers, and others in service industries. An affordable rent for a fast food cook is about \$554 per month. It’s \$1,623 for a legal secretary. The average rent for a one-bedroom apartment in Lafayette is currently about \$2,436, according to [apartments.com](http://apartments.com).



# LEGISLATIVE UPDATE: STATE RESPONDS TO AFFORDABLE HOUSING CRISIS

While Lafayette and other cities are doing their part to encourage the development of affordable housing by using inclusionary housing ordinances and other planning tools, California lawmakers this year approved a plethora of new legislation to address the housing crisis.

Gov. Jerry Brown recently signed into law 15 bills aimed at easing the state's housing woes. These include a \$4 billion bond measure for low income housing that will go before voters in 2018 and financial incentives for the development of new neighborhoods.

The state already requires cities to plan for the creation of housing for all income levels in their general plans and through zoning. New legislation such as **Senate Bill 35** however, will directly impact how a city approves a housing project by streamlining that process.

What does that mean? In Lafayette, certain downtown developments may now be eligible for by-right approval. That's because, SB 35 "limits (a city's) ability to condition the project," said Jason Rhine, a legislative representative with the California League of Cities.

For example, say the city receives an application from a developer who wants to build an apartment building near the BART station. In the past, the proposal would undergo design and planning review, which can sometimes be lengthy as a city works with developers to fine-tune a project and ensure it addresses resident concerns.

Under SB 35, that subjective review will be replaced by a more objective process if a project meets certain criteria.

And any further analysis of a project's environmental impacts as required by the California Environmental Quality Act would be disallowed.

The new law will also impact parking near these streamlined developments. Under certain circumstances, cities may no longer be able to require parking for such a development within a half-mile of public transit; if the project is within an architecturally or historically significant historic district; when off-street parking permits are required but not offered to the residents of the development or when a car-sharing vehicle is located within a block of the development.

Another piece of legislation that will impact the approval process is **Senate Bill 167**. Sponsored by Sen. Nancy Skinner, D-Berkeley, the bill was catalyzed in part by Sonja Trauss, the founder of the San Francisco Bay Area Renters' Federation, or SFBARF, the pro-housing group that unsuccessfully challenged the city's approval of the Homes at Deer Hill project under the Housing Accountability Act (HAA).

SB 167 builds upon the HAA and makes it harder for city lawmakers to reject an affordable housing project they feel does not meet discretionary review standards.

It also compels a city to offer additional proof that the rejection of a project

that meets planning and zoning guidelines or is approved on the condition of lower density is justified unless it meets particular state criteria, such as the city exceeding the state-required share of affordable housing it is expected to accommodate.

Additionally, SB 167 imposes fines of \$10,000 per unit if a court finds a city or other local jurisdiction improperly violated the HAA. But the city does have the ability to remedy the matter and comply with the law. Under SB 167, a city has 60 days

to comply with a judge's order before paying the per-unit fine. If a city defies the court and is found to act in bad faith, the penalty would rise exponentially. "I would hope that no city defies a judge's order," Rhine said.

Other legislation that will have a local impact includes **SB 2**, which adds a \$75 document fee on all real estate transactions; **SB 3**, the \$4 billion general obligation bond that will go on the November 2018 ballot; **SB 540**, which allows for funding to help cities undertake neighborhood-specific streamlined planning and environmental review and requires developers to earmark a percentage of units for affordable housing; and **SB 166**, that calls for cities to add other sites to its housing element within the general plan where affordable housing could be built if it fails to meet unmet housing needs.



## Homes at Deer Hill Lawsuit Update

Plans by developer O'Brien Homes to build 44 single family homes and various recreation amenities on a hillside along Deer Hill Road are on hold while an appeals court judge reviews a lawsuit brought against the city by the group *Save Lafayette*, which opposes the project.

In June, the appeals court issued a stay on all work at the Deer Hill location while considering an appeal of a Contra Costa judge's dismissal of *Save Lafayette's* lawsuit against the city. The group is challenging the city's rejection of a referendum petition asking voters to decide the fate of the development.

The city has argued that the proposed referendum could have put Lafayette's zoning ordinance in conflict with its

general plan, a practice that is disallowed by established case law. Complicating the matter, however, is a recent ruling by the Sixth District Court of Appeal on a similar referendum petition in Morgan Hill. Essentially, that court ruled that such a referendum would *not* result in unlawful zoning, and that an alternative designation could be picked to bring zoning in line with the general plan.

Given the rate at which it works, it could be two years before the California Supreme Court reviews the Morgan Hill case and ultimately resolves the conflict between the two cases. The Homes at Deer Hill project is likely to be on hold until the Supreme Court makes its final determination.



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# LAFAYETTE BRIEFS

## Lafayette Listens!

*How's that new roundabout working for you?  
How well are our police doing?*



These are just a few questions for which the City wants answers, and thankfully there's a brand new tool that allows citizens to engage with each other and city leaders in a transparent online digital forum. Lafayette has joined Walnut Creek, Concord, Palo Alto and hundreds of other cities across the country to offer Open Town Hall, an online communication forum for civic engagement. In Lafayette, the forum will be known as *Lafayette Listens!* And it will let users offer their opinions through polls, surveys and other interactive media. The project is designed to deepen public participation, encourage transparency, and strengthen trust as the forum lets local governments pose important questions to residents on issues affecting their city. Think of it as your own online sandbox to talk about municipal and civic issues. Other cities have used the forum in a variety of ways, including gathering comments on proposed ordinances to surveying residents on housing needs within the community. Make sure to check out this important tool at [LafayetteListens.org](http://LafayetteListens.org).

## Batch and Brine Restaurant Coming to Town Center

The city's dining scene will soon have a new addition. Batch & Brine, a new restaurant from the operators of Broderick Roadhouse in Walnut Creek will occupy the former home of Swad India restaurant, near Pizza Antica on Mt. Diablo Boulevard. With roots in food truck culture, Broderick Roadhouse's founders are known for creating interesting restaurants that celebrate — and elevate — comfort food. Batch & Brine will join other dining spots on the city's celebrated Restaurant Row, including American Kitchen, Cooperage American Grille and Homegrown.

## New Redbud Art Installation on Display

There's a new work of art gracing Lafayette. Elon Christopher's "Red Bud Sprig," is up at the Jennifer Russell Building at the Lafayette Community Center. Installed last May, the 10-foot-long hanging sculpture depicts a branch comprised of welded aluminum tubing, brightly colored aluminum leaves and blown glass flowers. The City Council selected Lafayette's latest piece of public art last year. The artist received \$24,000 for the work and honorariums were given to the runners-up.

## Council Awards Work to Fix St. Mary's Road Slide

A slide that wiped out a portion of shoulder on St. Mary's Road between Driftwood Drive and Wallabi Court earlier this year is undergoing repair. The City Council awarded a contract in September to San Rafael-based Valentine Corporation, Inc. to stabilize the portion of Las Trampas Creek bank that slid into the creek after heavy rains. The contract includes fixing the damaged shoulder and repairs to the creek bank. The total project cost is \$610,340, which the city is drawing from the Slope Stabilization Fund and the general fund. Because this was a federally declared disaster, the city is eligible to receive federal and state reimbursement. Lafayette is expecting to receive a total of \$572,194 from the Federal Emergency Management Agency and the California Office of Emergency Services, leaving the city with an estimated \$38,146 share of the cost.

## CITY DIRECTORY

For Council Members call: 284-1968

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Messages to all Council Members:  
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*If you observe illegal dumping in creeks & storm drains or accidental spills on roads, call Contra Costa Hazardous Materials Division 646-2286.*

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