

Davis's Housing Crisis: A Standoff for Sterling Pointe

"We have been acting like children," admitted Mayor Robb Davis, referring to the University of California at Davis and the government of his own city. It's not the kind of statement you'd expect a politician to make, but, then again, Mayor Davis isn't your typical politician, and Davis isn't your typical town.

The city of Davis is built around the University. A third of the population, according to the 2010 census, is aged 18 to 24, and that's not even counting the ones who live in dormitories and apartments on campus, technically outside city limits. The city likes to describe itself as "non-traditional", "unique", with "the highest level of education in the state" (all quotes from the city website).

Student apathy means that long-term residents have set the agenda for politics in Davis, but, two weeks ago at City Council, along with the usual familiar faces, students flooded in to advocate for the building of a new, student-focused, apartment complex on 5th street: Sterling Pointe.

When encouraging members of Associated Students of the University of California at Davis to come to the City Council meeting, Sara Williams, chair of ASUCD's External Affairs Commission, noted that students would immediately stand out among the crowd of City Council attendees, and they did.

A clear split emerged in the room: homeowners and apartment renters, residents of the town and students at the university. By the time students entered the meeting, most of the seats had already been taken, and the energy in the room shifted as students came in with backpacks and makeshift signs. Students snapped, clapped and whooped as members of their own spoke, leading for one City Council member to lean forward and admonish them: "We don't do that here."

It's an old political adage that young people don't vote, especially not when it comes to local politics. In an university town like Davis, where most of the young people in question hope and expect to be gone in four years, and a large chunk of them aren't even registered as residents in the city (preferring instead their parents' permanent addresses), students have historically stayed out of city politics.

For a very long time, as long as any Davis political operative can really remember, the University and the City have been locked in an intractable stand-off, neither side willing to give in. The issue? 35,186 students, and where to put them.

And, wow, is it an issue. The city of Davis has been completely opposed to growth since 1986, when voters passed a measure meant to force Davis to slow the development of any new buildings, homes or apartment complexes as much as humanly possible. UC Davis, on the

other hand, has had the complete opposite policy, with the enrollment of undergraduates swelling from around 20,000 in 1986 to 35,000 today. With 75% of students living off-campus, that means more and more students trying to squeeze into less and less housing.

The City and the University use the 0.2% apartment vacancy rate to point fingers at each other. The City argues that most other UCs provide the bulk of students' housing, and that it's unfair of UC Davis to attempt to shirk responsibility. The University argues that, with the scant number of new developments approved since 1986 and a rising population, it's ridiculous that the city's still trying to artificially keep itself small.

"I feel like a pawn," said Samantha Chiang, an ASUCD student senator. Students around the room echoed her sentiments. A 0.2% vacancy rate is just a number for administrators and politicians, but students are the ones who are actually feeling the crisis. For students, an 0.2% vacancy rate means a housing market that starts in January just so renters can ensure a move-in date in September. It means that rents rise every year while financial aid stays the same, and that, every year, more and more students contemplate the possibility of becoming homeless.

Members of the community and citizens of Davis came to object to many of the details of the housing project. The neighbors of the proposed project on fifth street had already been in contact with the Sterling Pointe planning commission, nixing a mural too close to the street (an eyesore, in their opinion) and reducing the number of units. One particular sticking point was building height: Sterling Pointe was originally planned to be five stories all around, but residents' concern about the character of the neighborhood meant that most of the buildings were decreased to three stories.

"Keep Davis small," exhorted one member of the community, Phil Lehman, "Keep Davis Davis. We want our community to stay our community." Though the worry about building height and number of beds may seem nitpicky to some, residents of Davis argued passionately about maintaining aspects of a community that they loved: a small-town feel, the ability to know one's neighbors, quiet streets on weeknights.

Several noted that they have no control over whether the university chooses to admit more students, and that UC Davis seems determined to expand its capacity more and more and force the city to bear the brunt of that expansion. In fact, the most recent prospective housing development on-campus, more dorms that would have been built on Russell Field, was shot down by student athletes and intramural sports fans who didn't want to lose a place to practice. Nevertheless, UC Davis planned to admit 1750 more undergraduates in 2016 than it did in 2015, a number that will only increase as UC Davis continues to grow.

"Administrators and city councilmembers aren't the ones who are going to worry about finding a place to live," noted Max Lopez, a UC Davis student, "This isn't a problem that's going to get better if nobody does anything about it."

At last, as the last speaker left the podium and sat down at the edge of the room, the Davis City Council voted in favor of Sterling Pointe, to the delight of students and dismay of residents. Though student advocates claimed this battle as a success, the most recent city council meeting is far from the last time students will have to fight for more housing. There are still not enough apartments for an ever-increasing amount of students each year. And, politics aside, students and residents must learn to coexist: after all, some of the people on opposing sides of the argument at City Council may end up being neighbors next year.