

# Questions Swirl About New Position and One City Employee's \$35,000 Raise

BY CAROLYN SCHUK

The creation of a new high-level Santa Clara planning job that doesn't appear in the 2021 budget, within days of a \$35,000 raise and unannounced title change for a planning manager has some City Hall insiders crying "cronyism."

At its May 4 meeting the Santa Clara City Council approved a new Assistant Director of Community Development (formerly the Planning Department) at City Manager Deanna Santana's recommendation. The action wasn't initially presented for discussion, and was instead put on the consent calendar — items that are approved in a single motion and normally without much discussion.

On April 19, the Assistant Director job was added to the May 4 City Council

agenda for approval. This was one day after Planning Manager Reena Brilliot received a \$35,000 raise and the title of Assistant to the City Manager but remained assigned to the Planning Department.

There are currently five Assistants to the City Manager positions, one of which was frozen in the May 7 Santa Clara proposed operating budget. Santana says that Brilliot's title change isn't filling that frozen position. (The Weekly has requested clarification and we will update this story when we receive it).

At the May 4 meeting Council Member Anthony Becker pulled the item for discussion. "I wanted to understand how we're being asked to approve a new management position," Becker said. "From what I understand there was a hiring freeze."

"Our CD [Community Development]

department has been ...impacted by the large scale [development] within our community," Santana told the Council. While the Community Development department has grown by 30 positions, "we just have division managers with no assistant [manager] in the middle," she said. There are currently two vacant management positions in Community Development.

The Assistant Director position was needed, Santana told The Weekly, given the additional workload from pandemic emergency ordinances and relief programs, new area master plans, implementation of new permitting and records management systems and new housing programs.

Despite the necessity, the job wasn't included in the 2021-22 proposed budget published on May 7 — almost three weeks after Santana proposed the new position.

Developer fees will fund the new position — salary of \$188,462 and \$245,000 — not the general fund, Santana told the Council. Three quarters of the Community Development staff is funded from special revenue funds separate from the general fund.

## Confusing Pushback About Recruitment

Santana indicated she intended to fill the new job quickly, prompting Becker to ask if the job was going to be filled by open recruitment — the job wasn't posted as an open position at the time. Santana bristled that it wasn't a decision for the Council to make or even recommend.

"I'm concerned with council interference in terms of advising and directing on

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# Planning Commission Recommends Senior Housing Development Stand Pat

BY ERIKA TOWNE

Despite a plea from the developer, Santa Clara's Planning Commission has recommended that the City Council reject a request to rezone a development at 190 N. Winchester Blvd.

The Santana Terrace Apartments is a completed development on Winchester Boulevard just south of Pruneridge Avenue. The development was approved by the City in Jan. 2016 as a 92-unit rental property for seniors 55 years of age and above. Now, developers are asking that the City rezone the property to general occupancy.

Developer USA Properties says it started pre-leasing in March of 2020, but COVID-19 took its toll. As of today, 20 units have been leased. Representatives for USA Properties say they have done everything they can to lease the units to seniors, but with no success. Now, they want to open rentals up to people of all ages.

"We've been having this discussion since the end of last year with the City and we're really at a breaking point," said Eric Morley, a lobbyist for USA Properties. "[We] don't want the property to continue to deteriorate further and be able to have these units be available during this continued housing crunch."

Commissioners were skeptical that the developer allowed enough time for senior housing to rebound after the COVID-19 closures. They voted 6-1 to recommend that the City Council deny the request with Commissioner Qian Huang voting no.

"What I do keep coming back to



On July 12, Santa Clara's Planning Commission recommended that the City Council deny a request from USA Properties to rezone a senior housing development at 190 North Winchester Ave. to general occupancy. USA Properties says it was only able to lease 20 of the 92 units within the complex because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

is during this trying time we've been through with COVID-19, we see the dawn approaching. So, who do we help financially so to speak and at whose expense?" asked Commissioner Nancy Biagini. "Do we help the developer who's clearly having some big issues? But are we doing that at the expense of seniors that may not recognize or been reached out to enough about the ability to move to a place that's more suitable to them?"

"I'm concerned and worried that the

original tenants which were brought in with a promise of a 55 and older lifestyle within this development will have to face this change without any input directly for or against other than in this meeting," said Commissioner Lance Saleme. "It seems odd that we could pull the rug out from under them right now and just say that anyone can go in there that wants to. It's different lifestyles, different expectations, different amenities for younger residents than it is for the senior residents."

## Commission Welcomes New Member

The Planning Commission welcomed its newest member during the July 12 meeting. All seven seats on the Commission are now filled.

Yashraj Bhatnagar was placed on the commission by the City Council. He fills one of the vacancies created when former commissioners Suds Jain and Anthony Becker were elected to the City Council last November.

Bhatnagar moved to Santa Clara from Canada in 1995. He says he's excited to work to better the city he loves.

"My real interest is in serving this lovely city that we live in that has, in my mind, a moniker of small but mighty," said Bhatnagar. "I just love the place that I live in and I want to see if this is an opportunity that can help me serve, give something back from everything that I've received so far."

Bhatnagar's term expires June 30, 2023.

## Commission Elects New Leadership

As is tradition on the Planning Commission, new leaders were elected to serve one-year terms in their respective positions.

Commissioner Biagini was elected as Chair of the Commission. She served the past year as Vice Chair. Commissioner Cherukuru was elected Vice Chair. She was previously the Planning Commission Secretary. Commissioner Ricci Herro was elected Secretary. All three will all assume their new roles at the next Planning Commission Meeting.

The Planning Commission's next meeting is Wednesday, Aug. 25 at 6 p.m.