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Addressing the Housing Crisis During Drought Conditions

Sonoma County is facing a much drier future. The problem requires serious and sustained action. But it's no excuse for failing to tackle Sonoma County's housing crisis with new residential development that's much more water-efficient than much of our existing housing. To build or not to build in the face of drought is a false dichotomy. There is a third option: build for water conservation and environmental sustainability, and enact policies that promote both.

Water Conservation Measures Are Highly Effective

The best means of reducing water use is conservation. Home appliances are now far more efficient than in the past, drastically decreasing water use; modern high-efficiency toilets, for example, can be twice as efficient as older models. Conservation measures have already made a significant difference. The county's water provider, Sonoma Water, notes: "We are selling 32% less water than in the past despite an increase in population/development."

Indeed, according to Sonoma Water, non-essential outdoor uses like lawn watering account for 50% of water consumption by single-family homes. In June 2021, the City of Healdsburg banned the use of outdoor sprinklers and drip irrigation systems, as well as the planting of new landscaping or grass. Yet Healdsburg is the exception; nightly lawn watering is still allowed in Santa Rosa, Rohnert Park, and Petaluma, among other cities.

New Multi-Family Housing is More Water-Efficient

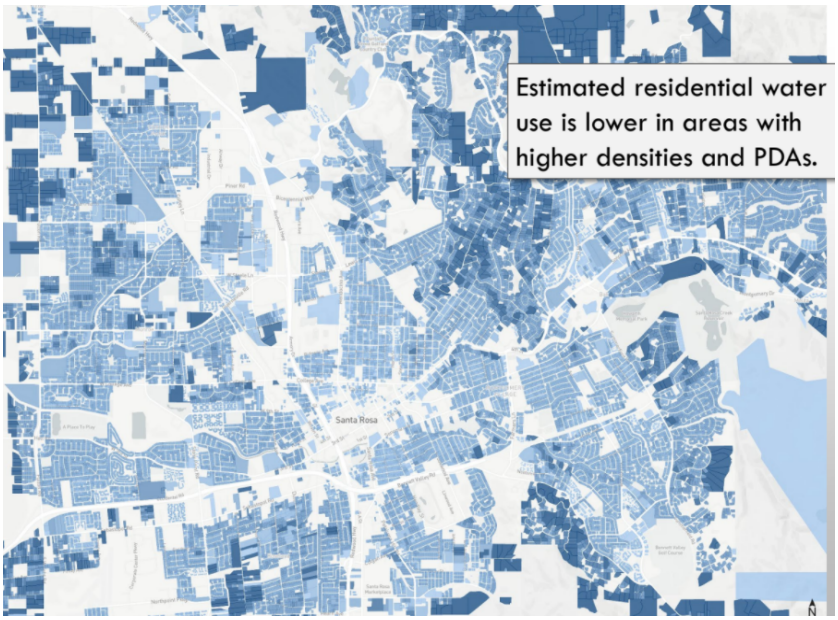

Figure 1

In general, the smaller the lot size, the less water is used. In an analysis of the housing pipeline for Sonoma County, the Sonoma County Transportation Authority has estimated that the water consumption of single-family homes on small lots in central Santa Rosa may be less than one-third that of homes on large lots on the east side of the city, as shown in Figure 1.

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It stands to reason, then, that multi-family housing also tends to be more efficient than single-family detached housing. Researchers have drawn this conclusion from national datasets, noting that this is consistent with reduced irrigation needs in multifamily housing. It's also backed up by data from Sonoma County. As shown in the table below, per capita water use in Sonoma County cities is correlated with the percentage of single-family housing. Petaluma, with 70% single-family detached housing units, uses almost twice the water per capita of Rohnert Park, where the majority of housing units are in multi-family structures.

Water use is higher in lower-density areas

City	Water delivered 2020-2021 (acre-ft/pers.)	% single-family detached housing
Petaluma	0.132	70
Santa Rosa	0.101	58
Cotati	0.082	54
Rohnert Park	0.069	45

Table 1

Furthermore, new housing in Sonoma County is built to be significantly more sustainable both in water and energy use. The Annadel Apartments in northwest Santa Rosa, for example, were built with drought-tolerant plantings and an efficient irrigation system.

Housing Moratoria in Cities May Be Illegal Under California Law

Water-efficient landscaping at The Annadel

It is also important to note that it would be illegal for most cities in Sonoma County to impose moratoria on new housing, regardless of the rationale. The Housing Crisis Act of 2019 specifically prohibits the imposition of development moratoria by cities with a population greater than 5,000. The only places exempt from the regulation are smaller communities, generally unincorporated places, such as Penngrove and Bodega Bay.

Addressing water use is vital to Sonoma County's future, but drought is no excuse for failing to tackle the housing crisis in our community. Efficiency measures and water use restrictions are the most effective interventions, not anti-housing measures that fail to fix drought and exacerbate the struggles of so many Sonoma County residents to find housing.