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Editorial

Old folks have to live somewhere

A proposed 11-bed facility for elderly residents suffering from dementia draws complaints from residents. That's shortsighted.

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People generally don't think of the elderly as nuisance neighbors. They rarely throw loud late-night parties, play loud music or have loud sex. Nevertheless, the issue of elderly group homes is a controversial one in single-family neighborhoods.

On a stretch of leafy Sierra Bonita Avenue near Hollywood, an operator of board-and-care facilities wants to tear down a duplex and construct an 11-bed facility for elderly residents suffering from dementia. In theory, that's fine: According to state law, a city cannot prohibit licensed care facilities that meet the zoning requirements. But in this area, zoning regulations permit single-family homes and duplexes, and the state defines a family as consisting of any number of related members or up to six unrelated people. Because Raya's Paradise, the operator of the facility, wants to go over the six-bed limit, it applied for a zoning variance.

Neighbors weren't pleased. Some complained that 24 facilities for the elderly are already located within a mile of this project. Care facilities mean multiple cars of staff and visitors, parking problems, more trash and — some say — lower property values.

For his part, Moti Gamburd, the executive director of Raya's Paradise, says the 11-bed residence would require less staff and would cause less parking congestion than two side-by-side six-bed residences housing a total of 12 people — which he legally could open on the duplex lot. His company's facilities, he says, are meticulously kept, devoid of signage and blend in with their neighborhoods. Nonetheless, a city zoning administrator denied the variance, saying it would set a precedent that could start an erosion of "the low-density character and appearance of the area." Gamburd tried again under a different city ordinance and was again denied. His appeal of that ruling is scheduled to be heard Tuesday.

This page is generally not sympathetic to NIMBY arguments, and it is particularly troubling that people would disdain living near elderly people in group homes. We all get old — if we're lucky. We should not flinch from sharing with aging neighbors the communities that they helped build.

But there's a compromise. Raya's Paradise, as Gamburd noted, has the right to construct two six-bed facilities on the site. It might cost more, for its residents as well as the operator, but the facility could open while also maintaining the character of the neighborhood within current zoning rules.

A note of caution, though: The problem of how and where to care for elderly people suffering from dementia is only getting bigger. The number of people with Alzheimer's in Los Angeles County is expected to double by 2030. Raya's Paradise may leave Sierra Bonita, but this problem is not going away.