

Walters: Why California's housing problem is getting worse

The pace of building housing in California is failing to keep pace with the population growth.

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Capitol politicians — most of them, anyway — are celebrating a multibillion-dollar package of new taxes and fees to shore up the state's dilapidated transportation network.

Meanwhile, however, they take a lackadaisical attitude on a crisis that's infinitely more serious than rough roads and congestion — an ever-worsening shortage of housing. And some "solutions" would make it even more intractable.

Soaring housing costs are distressing millions of Californians, forcing them to devote 50 percent or more of their incomes to shelter. It hits the working poor particularly hard, gives us the nation's highest poverty rate and threatens the economy.

The breadth of the housing gap is shown in a couple of dry statistical reports that Brown's Department of Finance issued on Monday. One charts California population growth since 2010, and the other shows that housing supply grew only half as much.

California has seen a relatively modest population growth, 2.3 million or 6 percent, since 2010, but has added just 400,000 housing units, a 2.9 percent increase.

The state housing department calculates that we need to add 180,000 new units a year to keep pace with population and replace units lost to fire and demolition. We're barely building 100,000 new units a year now, and the net is only half of what we need.

In other words, the gap is getting wider every minute. Why? The virtually unanimous conclusion of housing experts is that the reluctance of local governments, particularly cities, to approve new housing projects due to backlash from self-proclaimed environmentalists and not-in-my-backyard activists is a major factor.

The new housing data seem to support that contention.

Los Angeles saw its population grow by 6.5 percent in 2010-17, but its housing stock increased just 4 percent.

Other cities' gaps were as bad or worse. San Diego: 8 percent population growth, 3.9 percent housing growth. San Francisco: population up 8.6 percent, housing up 5.9 percent. San Jose: 10.7 percent more people, just 5.7 percent more housing. Sacramento: population up 5.7, housing up 1.1 percent.

Nevertheless, Democrats who dominate the Capitol, from Gov. Jerry Brown down, have proposed — but not enacted — only tepid, marginal approaches that would do little to close the gap.

Brown proposed a very mild reform, forcing cities to accept projects that are transit oriented and/or meant for the poor. But he hasn't pushed very hard and faces opposition from environmentalists and labor unions who don't want to cut red tape that housing opponents use to thwart projects.

Quite a few other housing bills are floating around the Capitol, including one that would tax real estate transactions to underwrite low-income housing. But none would have a big impact, and some would actually discourage construction, such as allowing cities to enact tighter rent controls, or mandating higher-priced union labor on projects.

It seems that those in the Capitol want credit for trying to alleviate the housing crisis rather than actually doing something to solve it.