

# Open Forum: Four ways to fix the California housing crisis

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Last week, I stepped down as director of California's Housing and Community Development department after almost four years. I have seen the good, the bad and the ugly in housing — as a housing developer, senior official with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, and, most recently, state housing director.

We implemented numerous historic housing investments and reforms during my tenure in Sacramento. Yet housing challenges throughout California continue to worsen.

I am convinced that we can and must take even bolder steps. Here's how:

## **First, we need to drastically increase the amount of residentially zoned land.**

Under new targets released by the state last month, Southern California cities and counties will have to plan to build 1.3 million new housing units — three times what local governments had proposed — over the next eight years. This is a good start, but we need to make sure cities surpass these ambitious targets in Southern California and in the Bay Area, whose targets are due from the state next year. And we must ensure the bulk of this new residential zoning is added to exclusive, job-rich coastal communities, not just inland exurbs.

Also important are bills such as San Francisco Assemblyman David Chiu's AB1763, currently on the governor's desk, allowing deed-restricted affordable-housing projects to build up to 80% more units; and San Francisco state Sen. Scott Wiener's SB50, stalled this year but up for reconsideration next year, setting minimum density standards for the most critical residential land, near high-frequency mass transit and in job-rich areas.

## **Second, we need vastly more “by right” residential zoning.**

Once a city has undertaken a civic process to develop appropriate zoning at the neighborhood level, it should fall solely to the city's professional planning staff to approve a proposed project. That should mean ensuring only that the project conform to the existing zoning and building codes and meet objective design standards, with no further modifications or environmental review necessary. The state has put such ministerial processes in place for certain kinds of multifamily housing and so-called in-law or accessory dwelling units (ADUs), but they are infrequently used.

It is preferable for cities themselves to enact ministerial zones as part of their regular housing plans and zoning updates. The state should do more to encourage that, as the governor has called for by embracing a new certification program to reward “pro-housing” cities.

## **Third, we need to fundamentally reconsider the logic of single-family housing.**

An estimated 80% of California's residential zoning prohibits anything other than single-family housing. This needs to change.

With the number of seniors and empty-nesters increasing, we need to consider how to get more out of our existing single-family homes and lots. A steady stream of ADU legislation since

2016 — including key bills on the governor's desk by Democratic Assemblymen Richard Bloom of Santa Monica and Phil Ting of San Francisco and Democratic state Sens. Bob Wieckowski of Fremont and Nancy Skinner of Berkeley — have begun to do the job, but more is needed. While most homeowners are now permitted to create a secondary unit by converting a portion of an existing house or adding a backyard cottage, they are overwhelmingly choosing not to do so.

The state needs to stimulate the nascent market for ADU professionals and facilitate better products for financing such units. And we need to consider a public education campaign to convince homeowners of the financial benefits and social value they provide in ensuring neighborhood diversity and stability.

**Fourth, we need to be open to planning new cities in undeveloped former industrial and agricultural areas within our metropolitan regions.**

Unlike the postwar period's planned communities, today's can be done right — by planning integrated, walkable, dense neighborhoods that support all races and incomes, take advantage of new construction technologies such as factory-built housing, and are ideally located along existing rail corridors.

It is worth noting an ominous recent survey by Edelman indicating that 63% of Millennials are considering leaving California because of the housing crisis. Where will the next generation go if we don't find a way to keep them here? Overwhelmingly, they will go to Texas and other coal-burning, sprawl-friendly states.

All of these ideas must command our attention if we wish to achieve a California where everyone can live, work and prosper. We can make tremendous progress if we summon the courage to make major change and ferociously tackle the obstacles that stand in the way.

*Ben Metcalf has served as director of the California Housing and Community Development Department and deputy assistant secretary of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's Office of Multifamily Housing Programs. He is the founder and principal of Stronger Foundations, which provides housing policy and practice solutions to address the affordable-housing shortage.*