The people who are truly harmed when cities say no to new housing

The small community of Brisbane, Calif., just south of San Francisco, has a rare opportunity that advocates argue could help ease the region's massive housing crisis.

The town is home to a 684-acre plot of former industrial land. A developer wants to clean it up and build a mixed-use project, with public parkland, that could include more than 4,000 new units of housing. And the site surrounds a stop on the regional rail line that connects workers to jobs in San Francisco and Silicon Valley.

It's exactly the kind of flat, spacious, hard-to-find place where you'd want to drop new housing in the Bay Area without displacing current residents or exacerbating traffic. But many Brisbane officials and residents prefer a plan for the land that would include no new housing at all. As the San Jose Mercury News recently reported:

A 2015 community survey found that 43 percent of Brisbane residents opposed any housing on the site, while just 2 percent favored 4,000 units or more. The survey found residents were far more concerned about preserving open space and their quality of life than adding "housing that working families can afford."

This is unconscionable to people trying to solve a housing and transportation crunch that has turned the Bay Area into a gridlocked and gated community where local teachers can't afford to live. And the Brisbane episode is a more extreme version of a plot line that keeps popping up, as individual towns stymie efforts to address what is a regional quandary.

The story reminded me of an insight I borrow from Luke Tate, a special assistant to the president for economic mobility. Part of the challenge throughout California and plenty of other communities, he once pointed out to me, is that we tend to make local policy — and housing policy in particular — as if the only people who matter in a community are the ones who go to bed there at night.

We don't think of people who work but don't "live" there, or who'd like to live there but can't afford to, or who once lived there but had to leave, or who could access better jobs if only they could move there, or who commute through there as part of their daily lives.

You may effectively live your life within, say, San Francisco or Washington, D.C., going to school there, working there, dropping your children at day care there, spending your money and your waking time there. But if, at the end of the day, you go sleep somewhere else, you are invisible to the process of how we decide what's right for that city.

Put it that way, and the premise seems odd: Why plan a place as if the only people invested in it are the ones who use it at night?
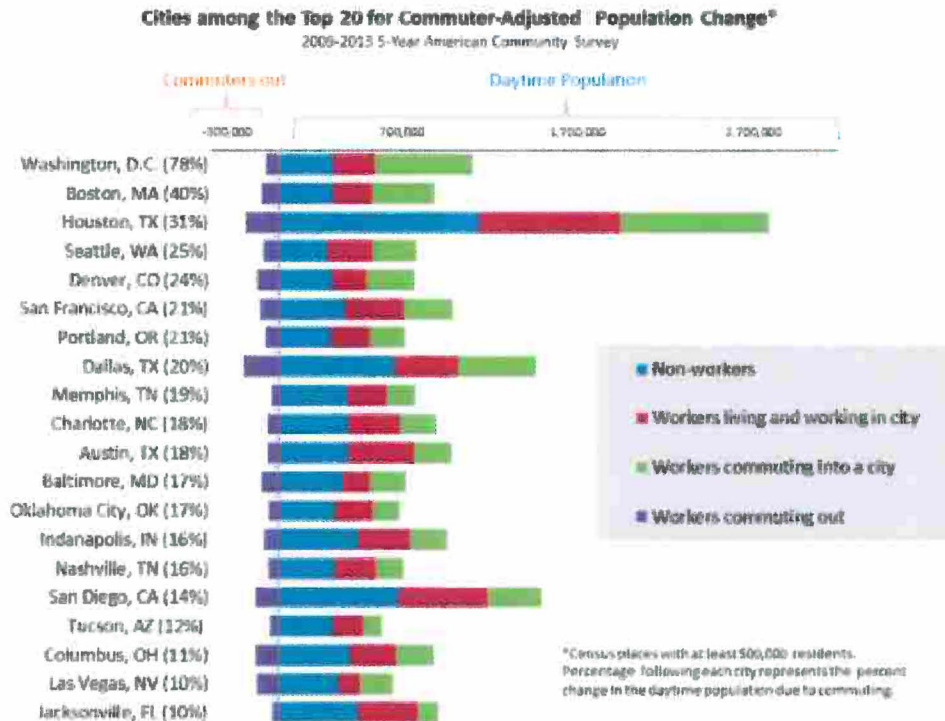
This isn't an argument for giving voting rights in Brisbane to anyone who passes through it on the train. But it raises the essential question of who we really make policy for. How would the decisions we reach in local communities change if we considered not just current homeowning voters, but also local firefighters who can't afford to live in the communities they serve, and teachers whom school districts struggle to lure, and line cooks who've been priced out of town?

Any functioning community needs all of these characters, and is composed of more than just "residents." But the simple distinction between who can vote and who cannot leaves plenty of people in this gray area irrelevant to decisions about, for example, whether and where to build new housing.

This simple distinction also allows communities to ignore the externalities they create — as Brisbane, for example, forces more housing burden onto surrounding communities, or forces workers who'd like to live by the train if more housing existed there to feed highway traffic instead.

The Census Bureau captures some of the difference between clearly defined "residents" and the larger universe of people bound to a place with its count of "commuter-adjusted daytime populations." Manhattan's population, for one, nearly doubles during the daytime thanks to all the people who come in for work (in fact, if you take a quick mental snapshot of the island, many people who make the place what it is — taxi drivers, Wall Street workers, street vendors — probably don't live there).

This chart from Census researchers shows how much more fluid a city's population is than the notion we normally have of its "residents." The green here represents people who work in a city but don't sleep there; the purple people who sleep in a city but don't work there:

Cities among the Top 20 for Commuter-Adjusted Population Change*
2006-2013 5-Year American Community Survey

Legend:
- Non-workers
- Workers living and working in city
- Workers commuting into a city
- Workers commuting out

*Census places with at least 500,000 residents. Percentage following each city represents the percent change in the daytime population due to commuting.

The green group seldom factors in housing decisions made by existing residents (which is how you wind up with Silicon Valley towns that have added thousands of new jobs but scant new housing, and tech commuter shuttles that anger communities 50 miles away). That chart also doesn't capture all of the people who might like to move to a place or were displaced from it.
Planners often try to project how a community will grow in the future, but those theoretical future residents have little voice in political fights over what happens today.

One solution to this challenge is to make decisions at larger geographies that might capture more of the people we want to make policy for, as well as more of the policy goals that play out regionally (like reducing congestion, easing housing costs, enabling economic mobility). California Gov. Jerry Brown, for instance, has controversially proposed to streamline statewide decisions that are normally made at the local level about approving new developments that would include affordable housing.

As Timothy B. Lee wrote at Vox this week, a similar concept has kept housing supply and costs within reason in Tokyo. The difference there: Housing policy is set at the national level.

Local control is a bedrock principle in American communities, and to suggest its downsides is verboten (as Jerry Brown has discovered). But even without scuttling it entirely, it's fair to expect communities to own up to who they're really creating policy for — and who is left out.