

Opinion: How San Jose can build housing our children can afford

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“If you fail to plan, you are planning to fail!” — Benjamin Franklin

The Silicon Valley Dream has become a housing nightmare for too many of our families floundering to stay afloat, or fleeing the region altogether.

With the help of community partners, San Jose has implemented many measures in recent years to confront this crisis, enacting an inclusionary program that will generate tens of millions of affordable housing dollars annually, strengthening rent control and tenant protections, rehousing more than 900 homeless veterans, and accelerating permitting approvals on high-rise construction.

Two forces remain more formidable than City Hall, however: supply and demand. In fact, in the last half-decade, we saw six times as much job growth as home production in our county.

To address our housing crisis, I recently proposed a 15-point plan which offers a balanced, but aggressive approach to build 25,000 homes in the next five years – 10,000 of them “affordable.” It’s an ambitious goal, but one we can achieve – while still protecting the character and quality of our single-family neighborhoods.

First, we need to expand high-density zoning along our CalTrain, light rail, and BART transit centers, particularly downtown. In addition to maximizing housing supply in urban areas, transit-oriented construction can provide an “affordable by design” solution: smaller units reduce costs for millennials and empty-nesters seeking an urban lifestyle, while denser housing within walking distance of amenities and transit can enable smaller households to trim auto-burdened budgets.

Second, we need to better utilize our scarce land. By reducing zoning barriers on targeted sites, we can encourage mixed-use development to revitalize declining neighborhood business districts, catalyze fledgling urban villages, replace seismically vulnerable “soft-story” apartments, and supplant “LULUs” (Locally Undesirable Land Uses) like liquor stores and bars. Participating school districts can also leverage city housing dollars to build affordable housing on school district land to help more teachers stay in San Jose.

Third, where the cost and duration of development cycles have hindered housing, we need to embrace innovation. We’re exploring partnerships with local employers to finance rent-restricted housing for nurses, teachers, and other residents in the “missing middle.” Piloting interim solutions, ranging from “safe parking” sites, to tiny homes, to motel conversions, could more rapidly house our homeless neighbors.

This is not a “housing-at-all-costs” plan, however. San Jose’s decades-long pattern of converting industrial and commercial land for homebuilding has undermined our fiscal capacity to provide basic services like police and fire protection, and left us with the lowest jobs-per-resident ratio of any major U.S. city. We also need not accept development that will exacerbate traffic congestion, such as the “Evergreen Senior Homes” ballot measure, which would allow wealthy developers to build a luxury gated community in the foothills without public scrutiny, environmental review, or traffic mitigations. More housing, yes – but not with bad planning.

Finally, our efforts will not succeed without a regional commitment. So long as jobs-heavy suburbs to our west shun housing in favor of revenue-producing employment centers, our housing crisis – and daily commutes – will worsen. We also need regional collaboration to overcome the de facto moratorium on housing development in North San Jose, a vestige of decades-old lawsuits. Furthermore, while we have several homeless housing developments (with supportive services) in the pipeline, we need sites for many more. This will require help from our neighboring cities and land-rich regional public agencies. Most importantly, we will need more neighborhoods throughout the valley to say “YES in my backyard.”

We can do this. We already have proposals for 8,400 housing units that can provide some needed relief. By keeping focused, and removing unnecessary barriers to development, we can build a Valley that our children can afford to live in.

Sam Liccardo is mayor of San Jose. He wrote this for The Mercury News.