

Arguello: Governor's housing plan harms low-income communities

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There is a clear need for more low income and affordable housing in California. Unfortunately, Gov. Jerry Brown's latest so-called affordable housing policy favors developers and harms the environment, while doing little to put a roof over the heads of people facing housing insecurity.

Housing in many parts of our state is completely out of reach for many Californians. According to the California Association of Realtors, average home prices in coastal areas range from \$782,500 in Santa Clara County to \$660,000 in Orange County. In many places, you need at least double the median income to buy a home.

The need for new affordable housing is most acute around transit lines, as low-income residents are less likely to own private cars. That's exactly where home prices are going up the fastest. A growing number of families must choose between paying rent or buying food and accessing health -- basic needs that become unaffordable luxuries.

The governor's proposal would exempt almost all residential developments from environmental review and community input. It creates a false choice between environmental protection and affordable housing. What's more, this proposal allows projects near transit that are 95 percent luxury units to bypass environmental review. Creating such a broad exemption is much more likely to put urban dwellers at risk of air pollution and related public health risks than meaningfully increase our affordable housing stock.

The California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) is an important tool to protect the state's environment and low-income communities. It requires development proponents to identify environmental risks associated with a proposed project and outline opportunities for minimizing impacts. Nowhere is this process more important than in low-income people of color communities that are vulnerable to displacement.

Many transit-friendly affordable housing projects are already exempt from environmental review under CEQA thanks to bills like SB 226, SB 743 and SB 375. Brown's proposal defines urban areas so broadly that it is more likely to encourage sprawl-style development than the high-density housing that is so sorely needed.

An environmentally and socially just affordable housing plan must not endanger the cultural fabric of low-income communities. Instead, the governor's proposal is a gimme for luxury housing developers. Allowing developers to build 20 times as many market-rate units as affordable units leaves low-income residents out of luck and often on the street.

Low-income communities and communities of color can and do actively participate in the environmental review process to make sure that developments in their neighborhoods do not cause harm.

Thanks to CEQA, Moreno Valley residents breathe cleaner air despite the construction of a massive distribution center in their town. The health of West Long Beach residents benefitted from CEQA when a judge found a proposal for the expansion of port operations did not adequately consider public health impacts. In Richmond, residents of the Miraflores Senior Affordable Housing Project benefitted from the remediation of toxic chemicals in soil and groundwater identified through environmental review.

The notion that a development cannot cause environmental harm simply because it provides housing does not make sense. Think of the risks facing residents living in housing too close to freeways. Risks associated with residential development can range from displacing low-income tenants to building on toxic soils and creating a net contribution to climate change.

Brown's approach might create more housing. But it would not make a meaningful dent in the amount of affordable housing in California's most expensive regions. And it would sacrifice environmental and public health in the process.

California needs a thoughtful, comprehensive approach to increasing affordable housing. The governor's proposal isn't it.

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