

‘Homes for human beings’: Millennial-driven anti-NIMBY movement is winning with a simple message

In California, there is a new lobby for renters — market-rate renters.

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California’s unprecedented housing crisis has ushered a new power player onto the scene with a supply-and-demand message so succinct it could fit on a T-shirt: Build more homes.

Meet the YIMBYs, a network of pro-development, tech-funded, ‘Yes-In-My-Backyard’ organizations cropping up throughout the Bay Area and beyond to counter the sentiment against building more homes in existing neighborhoods. Led by millennials, who have been frozen out of the housing market and slammed by California’s skyrocketing rents, the movement has distilled a collection of wonky policies into an urgent problem with a ready solution.

“Where is my generation going to live?” Laura Clark, executive director of YIMBY Action, asked the San Francisco planning commission earlier this year. “Where are my kids going to live? My entire generation is stunted by the chronic housing shortage that has been brought on by people who can’t stand to have apartment buildings in their neighborhoods. And that is an outrage.”

California has built so few homes over the past four decades that it needs as many as 100,000 more per year in its high-cost metro areas — nearly double what it typically constructs — just to keep prices from rising faster than the national average, according to the Legislative Analyst’s Office.

Groups such as YIMBY Action, East Bay for Everyone, Palo Alto Forward, and Catalyze SV are using time-tested organizing tactics to chip away at the shortage. The new movement has helped like-minded candidates run for office, such as 31-year-old Adrian Fine, elected last year to the Palo Alto City Council.

“I graduated with 400 kids from Gunn High School,” said the Palo Alto native, “and there’s like two of us left. That’s not normal.”

The movement now has two lobbyists in Sacramento, where a YIMBY-sponsored bill to make it harder for cities to deny housing projects was just signed into law. The young activists also have unsettled the entrenched local politics of housing and land use, making it acceptable — even politically necessary — to favor more development in the Bay Area, said Sen. Scott Wiener, a former San Francisco supervisor who was first elected to the Legislature last year.

“You have changed everything,” Wiener told the crowd at the coalition’s gala in San Francisco last week, holding a homemade avocado trophy, a millennial meme, that honored him as Housing Legislator of the Year. “The politics have been turned on its head — in a good way.”

YIMBYs are united by a central idea: A shortage of homes — not an influx of new tech workers and other young people moving to the booming Bay Area — is the main culprit for the pain caused by runaway housing costs, including the displacement of longtime working-class residents.

“There’s people moving here every day,” said Sonja Trauss, a 35-year-old San Francisco transplant from Philadelphia who is at the forefront of the 3-year-old movement and running for supervisor. “I saw it, I was one of them.” But, she said, the message she heard was: “You are ruining San Francisco. You are ruining the Bay Area. Go home.”

Perhaps the most common criticism of the movement comes from those who say it does little for the low-income tenants most severely affected by widening income inequality in the Bay Area.

“They’re definitely not advocates for lower income people, even though the way they speak about it, you could be fooled into thinking that they are,” said Merika Reagan, an activist with Housing Now!, a

statewide coalition of affordable housing advocates. She said she was forced to leave her hometown of San Francisco because of the soaring rents — and now is struggling to stay in her increasingly costly East Oakland rental house.

California is actually having two related housing crises, said Miriam Zuk, a researcher who directs UC Berkeley's Center for Community Innovation. The first continues to hammer the poor and working-class, she said, while the second is squeezing moderate- and upper-income residents like those at the core of the YIMBY movement.

The Bay Area does need to build more, Zuk said. But, she said, "There's no reason to think that everybody's going to be better off if we just build a lot more housing. There's no reason to believe that if we just let the market do its thing and let development happen, the housing problems for low-income housing would be solved."

Leaders of San Francisco's YIMBY movement counter that they are pushing policies that make it easier for developers to build subsidized, affordable housing — not just market-rate homes. And without more building, they argue, rents will continue to soar.

Portrait: Sonja Trauss is a leader of the Bay Area's YIMBY (Yes In My Backyard) movement, which blames the housing crisis on the shortage of homes and promotes development in existing neighborhoods. (Dai Sugano/Bay Area News Group)

"We just flat out ran out of housing," said Trauss. "There's not enough to go around, and as with any kind of shortage if there's not enough to go around, rich people get what's there."

The YIMBY Party, whose groups include East Bay for Everyone, YIMBY Action and a legal nonprofit known as CaRLA, has raised more than \$1 million over three years, supported primarily by Yelp CEO Jeremy Stoppelman and other large employers whose workers can't afford to live near their jobs, according to Trauss. It also collects monthly dues from hundreds of members, she said, and receives some funding from developers.

"As a large employer myself, I'm like, 'This is a disaster,'" Stoppelman said in an interview outside the group's recent fundraiser. "I want to grow my business here in San Francisco. We love that we have our headquarters here — it's where we started — but as rents ever escalate, it's a real burden."

Catalyze SV, a YIMBY group that started meeting a year ago in a South Bay living room, is trying to make city planning in San Jose and Santa Clara more user-friendly so that discussions of new development include a broader cross-section of residents and aren't as confrontational, said co-founder Alex Shoor.

The legal advocacy nonprofit that Trauss co-founded — the California Renters Legal Advocacy and Education Fund — has sharper elbows. It has taken Berkeley, Lafayette and now Sausalito to court for alleged violations of the state's 35-year-old "anti-NIMBY (Not In My Backyard)" housing law, the Housing Accountability Act, which requires cities to approve building permits that meet existing zoning rules.

Last week, it filed a lawsuit against Sausalito over a proposed single-family home that the city denied. Just one home will be built if they win, but "lawsuits have educational value," said Ryan Patterson, the young lawyer representing the YIMBYs.

The lawsuit was announced to applause last week at a fundraising gala YIMBY Action held at San Francisco's historic Verdi nightclub. The event was a victory lap, an appeal to supporters, and a comedy roast.

Among the attendees was Todd David, the political director for Wiener's state Senate campaign who now directs the nonprofit San Francisco Housing Action Coalition.

"Being in the right place at the right time with the right message is either luck or genius," he said. "I've been in politics long enough to recognize they have something going on, and we are going to fully throw in with them."

All about YIMBY

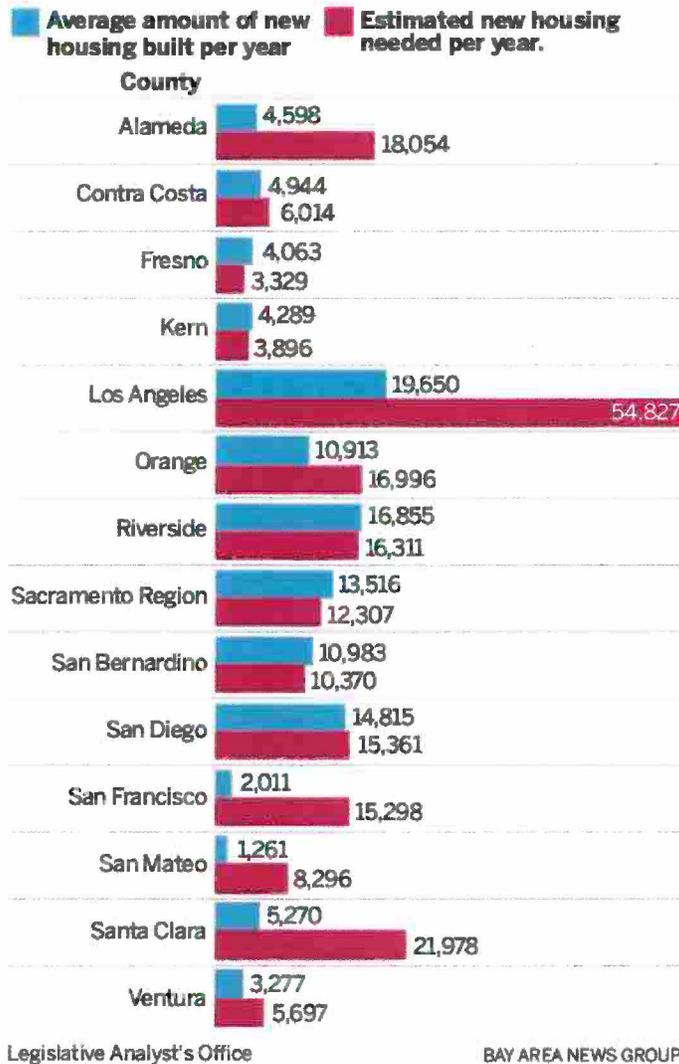
What does YIMBY mean?: Yes In My Backyard. It is a pro-development movement that grew in response to the housing crisis.

What does it do? Its leaders and volunteers lobby, testify at public hearings and sue to get more housing built in existing neighborhoods.

Who is behind it? The San Francisco-based YIMBY Party has raised more than \$1 million over the past three years, said one of its leaders, Sonja Trauss. Yelp CEO Jeremy Stoppelman is the biggest benefactor, she said, donating roughly a quarter of that total. Hospitals and other big employers have also supported the efforts, as have some developers and real-estate investors. The coalition collects monthly dues from hundreds of members.

HOUSING SHORTAGE

For decades, the Bay Area and Los Angeles built far fewer homes than were needed to keep prices from growing faster than the rest of the country. The estimates below are annual averages between 1980 and 2010. The state has since continued to lag behind.



Katy Murphy is based in Sacramento and covers state government for The Mercury News and East Bay Times, a beat she took on in January 2017. Before that, she was the news organization's higher education reporter, writing about UC, CSU, community colleges and private colleges. Long ago, she covered Oakland schools and other K-12 education issues