

California's housing shortage is not sustainable

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New reports from the nonprofit California Housing Partnership provide insight into just how significant the shortage of affordable housing in Southern California really is.

According to the reports, Southern California needs upward of a million new affordable housing units just to meet current demand.

In Los Angeles County, it is estimated another 568,000 more affordable rental homes are needed to keep up with demand. According to the report, the county's poverty rate rises from 17.2 percent to 24.9 percent when adjusting for housing costs and social benefits.

In Orange County, it is estimated another 92,738 more affordable rental homes are needed to keep up with demand. According to the report, Orange County's poverty rate nearly doubled from 11.9 percent using the official poverty measure to 21.3 percent when factoring in housing costs and social benefits.

In Riverside County, it is estimated another 64,526 more affordable rental homes are needed to keep up with demand. According to the report, about 25 percent of low-income households in the county are "severely cost burdened," meaning they put 50 percent or more of their income toward housing.

In San Bernardino County, it is estimated another 72,032 more affordable rental homes are needed to keep up with demand. According to the report, about 15 percent of low-income households in the county are severely cost burdened, while 49 percent of very low-income households are severely cost burdened.

Considering the wide income disparities across California, it's also worth highlighting that while median income households in the four counties tend to spend about a third or slightly less on housing, for households earning half or less of the median incomes, they on average spend anywhere from 66 percent (in Riverside County) to 78 percent (in Orange County) of their incomes on housing.

That leaves little for all the other needs of life.

This is not a sustainable situation.

Solving it is the hard part, for it will require convincing NIMBYs to stop blocking housing developments they just don't like, and for zoning to become more accommodating to development and for CEQA regulations not to be abused so as to simply tie up housing.

On each of these fronts, there is no simple way forward. The message has to be gotten across to those who resist the development of new housing in their communities that communities are better off when people can not only afford to live, but can do so without having to commute long hours away from home to work.

With respect to the restrictions local governments place on developable land, it will take a concerted effort to facilitate greater liberalization, because local governments are particularly susceptible to NIMBY complaints.

And finally, CEQA reform has so far been one of those things almost everyone acknowledges needs to be done, but no one has been able to get very far with. It's critical that well-intended laws are no longer abused just because some people don't like a particular development.

Absent greater pushes on these efforts, this isn't a problem the state can spend its way out of.