

What a new California bill could mean for San Diego housing

Senate Bill 50 would promote more housing along transit.
(John Gibbins/The San Diego Union-Tribune)

Senate Bill 50 is aimed at allowing increased density around transit. That could mean new apartment buildings along the Coaster commuter train in North County, or all the way down to the border next to the San Diego Trolley.

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APRIL 19, 2019

6 AM

A state senate bill making its way through Sacramento could mean high density housing gets built along transit stops throughout San Diego County.

That could mean new apartment buildings along the Coaster commuter train in North County, or all the way down to the border next to the San Diego Trolley. The way the bill is written, it would prevent communities from doing too much to stop zoning changes.

[Senate Bill 50](#), from state Sen. Scott Weiner (D-San Francisco), has passed its first legislative hurdle by moving out of the state's housing committee. But, it faces much opposition from communities dominated by single-family homes and tenants rights groups worried about displacement.

The legislation would allow four- to five-story apartment complexes to be built a half-mile from rail stations and ferry terminals, and a quarter-mile from bus stops. The majority of California is only zoned for single-family homes, which the bill's author said is making the state's housing crisis worse.

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“People can still build, buy and live in single-family homes,” Weiner said. “This isn’t about getting rid of single-family homes. This is about moving away from mandating that single-family homes are the only legal form of housing.”

He said rising home prices in California mean that owning a single-family home is out of reach for many. Because some communities only allow single-family homes, he said it is akin to segregation.

A previous version of the bill, Senate Bill 827, died in committee because of opposition from communities that felt it would destroy suburban neighborhoods, and tenants-rights groups worried low-income renters would be displaced. The new bill attempts to assuage this by allowing disadvantaged communities to propose other ideas for increasing housing and offering some tenant protections.

Rafael Bautista, organizer with San Diego Tenants United, said past up-zoning of low-income areas near transit -- even with promises of subsidized housing units - - has meant people end up getting kicked out of their homes, never to return.

“Historically, in San Diego, it hasn’t been to our benefit,” he said. “What we’ve seen is developers not taking into account people that are already there.”

Supporters include some big names: The California Association of Realtors, AARP, California Building Industry Association, California Chamber of Commerce, California Labor Federation and Facebook. Opponents include the League of California Cities, the AIDS Healthcare Foundation, and the cities of Beverly Hills, Pasadena and Redondo Beach.

In some ways, the intent of the bill is similar to Mayor Kevin Faulconer’s [housing proposal](#) unveiled in January that eliminates height limits as long as properties are within a half-mile of an existing or planned trolley or bus line. However, Mayor Faulconer has yet to state a position on Senate Bill 50. Mayors from San Francisco, Stockton, Oakland, Sacramento and San Jose have endorsed the bill.

California is not alone in looking at ways to increase housing. The Minneapolis City Council in December voted to end its single-family zoning throughout the

city to allow for more dense housing, said the [Star Tribune](#). While there was opposition to the plan from people who said it would lead to the bulldozing of neighborhoods, city council members argued it was needed to create a more diverse and environmentally-friendly community.

Does anyone want to live next to a train?

Increasing data is showing millennials will gravitate toward the suburbs and, single-family homes, as they get older and have children. This is a departure from previous beliefs of the generation wanting to only have experiences and not own property.

An analysis from the National Association of Home Builders (it hasn't been released yet but was covered by [The Wall Street Journal](#)) showed single-family construction rose nearly 7 percent in "exurban" areas, districts farther out from cities than the suburbs, in 2018. The NAHB study indicated millennials were increasingly wanting to move out of city centers and willing to trade off a long commute for a house.

However, the Pew Research Center estimates there are 71 million millennials and, even if they want a house, there might just not be enough to go around.

Also, the type of dwelling they desire doesn't quite match where millennials are moving, says a study from [Magnify Money](#). From 2011 to 2016, Census data showed millennials mainly moved to cities with good jobs and high wages, not always places where there was a great shot at homeownership.

The top place millennials moved was San Francisco, where the median home price — \$1.35 million in February, said [Realtor.com](#) — is out of reach for many people.

Frank Nothaft, chief economist for real estate tracker CoreLogic, said the problem with asking people what type of house they want to live in is they will almost always chose a single-family home —but surveys don't often ask how far they would be willing to drive to make it happen.

He said up-zoning an area does not mean it will automatically translate into more apartment buildings if people don't want them. If single-family homes are all a community will pay to live in, there won't be any apartment buildings.

"Developers respond to market forces," Nothaft said.

He said shelter is a bare necessity and it wouldn't be realistic to have only single-family homes in major cities.

"It'd be great to have a single-family home right here," he said, pointing at the Symphony Towers building in downtown San Diego during a recent visit. "But, it would be incredibly expensive."

Weiner said Californians desire all types of housing, but having limited options will continue to make building more housing difficult throughout the state.

"If someone wants to live in a suburb two hours outside of the nearest city — in a single-family home with a yard, and can afford it — more power to them," he said. "What our zoning laws are currently doing is banning apartment buildings and saying to people, 'You have to live in a single-family home and if you can't afford it, you can't live here.'"

Borre Winckel, CEO of the local Building Industry Association, said there is no way the state could meet housing shortages without increasing density. Gov. Gavin Newsom has called for [3.5 million new homes](#) to be built in the state over seven years.

"Something's got to give to meaningfully create housing supply," he said. "If this doesn't go forward, Newsom's plan won't work."

Changes to the bill

As Senate Bill 50 moves through committees, the bill's author has continued to make changes that are aimed at pleasing different interest groups.

The biggest thing that could change the nature of the bill is a stipulation that “job rich areas” are also given the same up-zoning as transit areas. The legislation said the areas would be identified by the California Department of Housing and Community Development, based on job totals and employment density.

The idea with the “Job rich” stipulation is that it would still achieve a goal of the bill to lower greenhouse gas emissions by cutting down commutes to work. It would also prevent communities from not putting in public transit to avoid density. Still, it would require something the housing department does not do at the moment.

How the jobs area change would affect San Diego County is difficult to figure out until the housing department actually creates the report, while transit is more straightforward. For instance, maps available online from the San Diego Association of Governments show that the much of the area around the Coaster commuter trail along the coast is zoned for single-family homes.

Another change to the legislation was setting requirements for subsidized units near up-zoned transit areas. Requirements would add 15 to 25 percent low-income units depending on the size of the project. Some affordable housing advocates had criticized the bill for not having a stipulation for subsidized units.

The bill is next set to be heard April 24 by the Committee on Government and Finance. If it passes there, it will next go to the Appropriations Committee before it can go to the full Senate in June.

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How would Senate Bill 50 change your neighborhood?

The San Diego Association of Governments has an interactive map online that allows visitors to see zoning for residential areas. How it works:

1. Go to <http://sdgis.sandag.org/map.aspx>
2. Select the “Existing land use” button on the right hand side (it may take a minute to load based on your Internet connection).
3. Drag the map to different areas of the county to see what is designated as “single family” (yellow) and “multi-family” (brown).

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