

Housing more Californians near transit and not in sprawl areas represents one of the most crucial ways to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Senate Bill 827 (Wiener) would [help do just that](#), by preventing local governments from zoning people (and homes) out of these prime transit areas. So it was surprising to see an environmental organization like Sierra Club California come out against the bill (here is their [opposition letter](#)).

Just how high are the environmental stakes of SB 827? Berkeley Law, together with the Turner Center and Next 10, recently [analyzed](#) the impact of putting all new residential development in California through 2030 within three miles of transit or in low-vehicle miles traveled neighborhoods (areas without rail but where residents drive at low rates) and found the following impacts:

Annual reductions of 1.79 million metric tons of greenhouse gas emissions compared to the business-as-usual scenario, which is the equivalent of taking 378,000 cars off the road and almost 15 percent of the emissions reductions needed to reach the state's Senate Bill 375 (Steinberg, 2008) targets from statewide land use changes.

Significantly, the geography we examined was farther from transit than what SB 827 encompasses, which only covers up to one-half mile near major transit. So the greenhouse gas savings and air quality improvements from building new homes near transit will be significantly greater under SB 827.

So why would Sierra Club oppose what is arguably the state's most important climate bill this term (as the *New York Times* [couches](#) it)? Let's go through their arguments:

First, they argue the SB 827 will fuel neighborhood opposition to new transit. Why would residents support a new rail line, Sierra Club argues, if SB 827 will force these residents to make land use changes to allow new people in their community to live near it? Perhaps the Sierra Club doesn't realize it, but they just made an important point *in favor* of SB 827. The better question is: why should we build expensive new rail lines through low-density communities, when they refuse to provide the ridership necessary to support these taxpayer investments? SB 827 is actually a great way to weed out bad rail projects with weak ridership in favor of more sensible transit investments, like bus-only lanes or rail in areas that can actually support it.

Second, they argue that bus routes and service changes all the time, so frequent transit

service now might be reduced, leaving SB 827-style dense development underserved by buses. But if you look at [the maps](#) of bus routes served with 15 minute peak headways, they cover major arterials that would be among the last places a transit agency would peg for service reduction, like Van Ness Avenue in San Francisco and Wilshire Boulevard in Los Angeles. And if Sierra Club is really concerned about service reductions, why not recommend an amendment that the bus routes must have been in service at 15 minute commute headways for a minimum period of time for SB 827 to qualify? Otherwise, this seems like a weak reason to oppose the bill outright.

Third, they are worried about displacement of low-income renters near transit. As I've [blogged before](#), this is a legitimate yet overblown concern. Gentrification and displacement is happening now like crazy, precisely because we're not building enough housing overall. Furthermore, developers will build in upscale transit areas where they can get higher returns, not in low-income neighborhoods. For example, a UCLA study [examining](#) low-income neighborhoods around the Blue Line light rail from Downtown Los Angeles to Long Beach showed virtually no investment in these areas, despite some very relaxed local zoning.

But if Sierra Club is truly concerned about displacement, why not recommend policies to address it in the bill, such as requirements for tenant relocation assistance, inclusionary zoning, or density bonuses? Instead, they offer no solutions, while failing to recognize the massive displacement already occurring due to the existing housing shortage. My question for Sierra Club: what do they propose to combat the gentrification and displacement currently happening now? And where do they want new homes to be built, if not in these prime transit areas?

Fourth, they argue for more incentives on growth instead of a state-based approach like SB 827. But incentives only go so far when you're up against well-heeled homeowner groups who will vote out elected officials who don't toe the exclusionary line. What incentives does Sierra Club believe might entice Westwood homeowners to support upzoning their single-family zone around the Expo Line? Or Rockridge neighbors to approve more density around the BART station there? Let's face it — local control in transit-rich, upscale areas mean the forces of exclusion win. Hence the critical need for approaches like SB 827.

Finally, Sierra Club complains that some of these new buildings near transit won't need to undertake environmental review under the California Environmental Quality Act, based on last year's SB 35. This is a bit of a convoluted argument. SB 35 only applies to jurisdictions behind on affordable housing production. The projects that are then eligible for SB 35 CEQA streamlining must otherwise meet [strict requirements](#) and be compliant with local zoning,

including providing a significant amount of affordable housing on-site (addressing the displacement concerns Sierra Club raised earlier). So the universe of projects that escapes CEQA review under SB 35 is already pretty minimal.

But more importantly, if you follow this line of argument, now that SB 35 is in effect, Sierra Club is basically saying they won't favor any zoning changes to allow new housing in communities that are behind on producing affordable units because it might mean CEQA doesn't apply to projects consistent with that zoning. I don't think that's a position Sierra Club really wants to take.

Overall, Sierra Club California appears to be at a reputational crossroads here on smart growth. Their image on this issue took a big hit when wealthy property owners used the San Francisco chapter to [oppose new housing](#) in the city, precisely the low-carbon area where new housing should go. And while Sierra Club made its mark stopping environmentally bad projects like dams and forest clear cuts, the climate fight now requires a [pivot](#) to supporting building things instead: in this case, badly needed housing in transit-rich areas.

Unfortunately, with their opposition to SB 827, Sierra Club California just took a big step backward on this crucial environmental issue.