

There's a lot of talk in certain policy circles these days about [abundance](#), as a strategy to improve people's lives and lower the cost of living through better governance. Nowhere is "abundance" needed more than in California, where housing costs due to a dire long-term shortage of homes has made the state one of the [most expensive](#) to live in in the country.

Although the logical response to an extreme shortage would be to build more housing of all types, that wasn't the tone at last week's California Senate Housing Committee, where legislators were evaluating a slew of new bills to boost production.

Two of the most impactful bills discussed included 1) a [measure](#) to increase duplexes across the state (SB 677, Wiener) by relaxing a previously legislated owner-occupancy requirement so stringent that it has rendered the law almost [comically ineffective](#); and 2) a [bill](#) to upzone land in transit-rich areas across the state (SB 79, also Wiener), as a resurrection of earlier bills that died in [2018](#) and [2020](#).

As I [predicted](#) after the failure of that latter bill in 2018:

The defeat...means further exodus from the state of middle class residents, as well as the displacement to the fringe of megacities of working class residents. From these exurban areas, they'll continue "super-commuting" into job-rich city centers, spewing air pollution from their cars, congesting the freeways, and sprawling out in cheap housing over former farmland and open space.

So here we are in 2025 with the housing crisis and homelessness even worse, and California [hemorrhaging](#) both middle class residents and [electoral college votes](#) to "red" states that could swing the next presidential election.

Yet despite this urgency, a number of legislators in key positions on the [Senate Housing Committee](#) last week expressed hostility to market-rate development, decried state attempts to override the local restrictions that created the shortage in the first place, and repeated misinformation or misstated basic facts on housing. They ended up killing the duplex reform bill, but they ultimately allowed the transit-oriented development upzoning bill to pass, at least for now and over the objection of the new committee chair, Sen. Aisha Wahab.

The [committee hearing](#) had already started off on a bad foot when the bill analyses produced by committee staff under Sen. Wahab were riddled with errors and misstatements, as UC Davis law professor Chris Elmendorf [summarized](#) on Bluesky. Sen. Wahab had also previously [expressed skepticism](#) of reforms to boost market-rate development, stating

during a previous hearing:

All these giveaways to developers have also not translated to housing that has dignity, that people want to stay in and raise their families in.

Then as the hearing kicked off on the duplex bill, Sen. Wahab expressed outright opposition to any reforms to duplex law, without even proposing amendments. Instead, the senator issued a full-throated endorsement of the owner-occupancy requirement that has made new duplexes under the law virtually nonexistent:

Owner occupancy just does assure so many of us that this is not going to be just a give-me to developers to basically buy single family homes and upzone them significantly. This bill removes that safeguard.

But allowing single-family homeowners to create another unit on their property is hardly developers gone wild. It provides wealth generating opportunities for all types of homeowners, including low-income ones, and creates opportunities for mom-and-pop construction businesses to do these smaller jobs. And most importantly, it provides a way for more people to live in existing communities without paving over new land or engendering backlash from neighbors over larger projects. Finally, the senator's comment that developers would "upzone them significantly" is not how the process works, as she must know as a former city councilmember: local governments do the upzoning, and as we've seen in this state, they rarely do so, particularly in affluent areas.

Next up was committee co-chair [Sen. Kelly Seyarto](#), who spoke with some eloquence and personal experience about the exodus of people out of the state:

It's a little too late for my family. My kids left a month ago, both high-paying jobs in LA. They left because they could see that this was not going to be the type of environment that they want to raise their child in, my grandson. And it's sad. We have to fly now. We have to fly. And that's okay. I'll fly the two hours. I know I got Southwest miles.

But instead of blaming this exodus on high housing costs due to a shortage, which is the

[principal reason](#) people give for wanting to leave the state, he blamed two entirely incompatible factors: too much development, and yet too much state regulation on development that makes it hard to build. He took specific issue with state policies to urbanize existing communities:

Now, in our efforts to try to bolster housing in highly urbanized areas and applying a one size fits all to all of California, we are ruining those communities and their attractiveness. And when you do that, you lose your taxpayers.

Yet while decrying development that “ruins” communities on one hand, Sen. Seyarto then blamed state mandates for making it too hard to build in the state on the other, which was a particularly ironic point to make given that the purpose of the duplex bill was to *relax* state requirements on building!

This is a long-running compilation of state regulations that have made building anything really, really difficult. And so in this particular instance with housing, if we don't start doing something about the bigger process that the state has created for the cities to follow, instead of just piling a bunch of mandates on the communities to just try to implement and then deal with the aftermath, which is what some of them are doing now, and there's a tremendous amount of pushback for that.

The committee then voted to kill the duplex bill, for reasons that seemed to have nothing to do with the actual bill. The result is a serious blow for both homeowners who would like to split their lots and those who would like the opportunity to rent or buy an affordable duplex in existing neighborhoods.

But perhaps the most striking anti-development comment of the housing committee hearing came from Sen. Durazo, when the committee heard the second bill to upzone for apartments around high-quality transit. The senator expressed outright hostility to market-rate housing, which is badly needed in a state that is under-producing housing by hundreds of thousands of units *per year*.

My concern is that there would be more market rate [housing, with this bill]. It would open the door for more market rate, but at the expense of affordable

housing. And that's a very big concern.

But there is nothing wrong with adding more market-rate housing in California, as a general rule. This type of development meets an important market need, helps soak up demand to avoid the displacement and gentrification happening in existing low-income neighborhoods, and does not require state funds to build, all while generating tax revenues that can support basic services and subsidized units. Furthermore, this type of housing stock provides future affordable units for lower-income people as it ages, given that the [vast majority](#) of low-income residents live in older, less expensive market-rate housing.

But beyond that point, nothing about the bill would prioritize market-rate housing at the *expense of* affordable units, as the senator claimed. First, this upzoning would benefit 100% affordable projects as much as any market-rate development, given that affordable housing developers face the same zoning and permitting barriers that the bill would seek to limit, on top of the challenge of lining up funding and financing. Second, local governments under the bill are free to require affordable units in these new market-rate projects, as many currently do, meaning the bill would help unleash a slew of new subsidized units to go along with the market-rate ones. Given the paltry production of affordable units in the state under the status quo, plus the lack of public resources to subsidize the massive need, this bill would turbocharge affordable housing production along with production of all types of infill in transit-rich areas.

Ultimately the bill ended up passing the committee, but its fate seems quite uncertain given the level of confusion, ignorance, and ideological hostility in the legislature around this core 'abundance' issue, particularly among those who serve on the housing committee.

And just to provide a window into a slice of the nonprofit advocacy world that opposes these types of housing production measures if they benefit market-rate housing, the SB 79 opposition witness Anya Lawler from Public Interest Advocates made a number of demonstrably false claims in her testimony. Here's the first: "It's important to remember that the state does pretty well at producing market-rate housing, but seriously under produces affordable housing."

By no measure does California do "pretty well" at producing market-rate housing. In fact, the state has a massive housing shortage of all types (though to be sure the need is more severe for those at the lower end of the income spectrum), with [estimates](#) of a [cumulative housing production](#) shortfall ranging from about 1 to 3 million units. The [Statewide Housing Plan](#) alone calls for 2.5 million new homes to address this shortage. And the state is

presently nowhere on pace to meet these goals. For example, California produced only 80,000 units per year from 2015 and 2022, despite a [target](#) of 180,000 new units annually.

Then Lawler stated: "We know that market rate development in low income neighborhoods causes neighborhood-level displacement." This is not true, as a large and growing [body of evidence](#) actually reveals the opposite, that new multifamily developments lower rents overall, particularly when that development stems from [broad-based upzoning](#), as SB 79 would require.

Such is the state of the debate and political leadership in California at this time, on such a critical issue of basic human need that is now spilling over into national politics. Let's hope that this legislative session doesn't result in the same inaction we've seen over the years that has led California into what is fast becoming a humanitarian catastrophe.