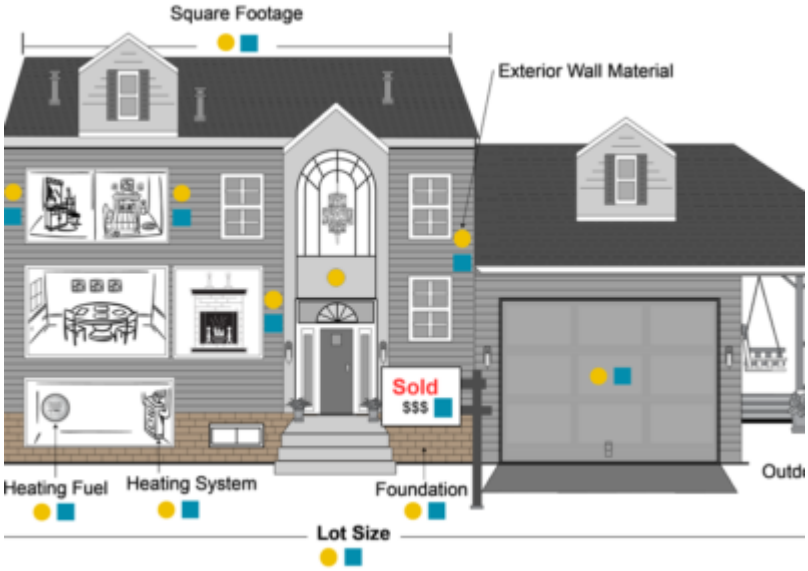


Single-Family House: Chop It Up

If there is one journalistic phrase I despise, it is “game-changer.” Everything seems to be a game-changer, no matter how small. [But amendments just approved by the California State Senate for SB 50], Scott Wiener’s controversial bill upzoning lots near transit could be, well, a game-changer:

> On Wednesday, a key committee signed off on Senate Bill 50 — San Francisco Sen. Scott Wiener’s bill to allow denser, taller housing around transit and in communities with lots of jobs. As part of the negotiations, Wiener agreed to merge his proposal with Senate Bill 4 by Sen. Mike McGuire (D-Healdsburg) and the result includes one very big change: Single-family houses could be converted to four-unit buildings, by right, anywhere in the state.
>
> That is, a property owner could subdivide or remodel a house to turn it into four apartments. Or a developer could build a fourplex on a vacant single-family lot. The proposal wouldn’t allow people to demolish a house and build a new fourplex on the property, however.

Put another way, if these amendments pass, then California will have just outlawed single-family housing throughout the state. And it points to a potential way out of the NIMBY/density problem.



Quadruplex: Not Scary

Neighbors dread the prospect of living next to, well, YUGE towers of apartments — they say they are concerned about privacy, and shadows, and “neighborhood character,” with all the classist and racial implications of that loaded phrase. But increasing density by turning a house into a quadruplex seems less…yuge. It doesn’t seem so out of scale. It doesn’t evoke images of the Robert Taylor Homes or Stateway Gardens complexes in Chicago. Little wonder that when, a few months ago, Minneapolis increased the density of its zoning code, it did so not by building up, but rather by allowing triplexes in formerly single-family zones. It was controversial, but far less so than building up.

SB 50 has a long way to go before it becomes law: Wiener and his supporters are engaged in intense negotiations just to get it through the Senate, and then it must go to the Assembly, etc. etc. You know the drill. Even in Minneapolis, the city council backed off allowing quadruplexes by right and went down to triplexes. But if just this provision passes, it would be the most significant land use reform in California since the enactment of CEQA. And that is yuge.