

In recent weeks, California has emerged as one center of the COVID-19 pandemic, but it continues to face challenges that existed long before the disease reached the state. Two serious ones: how California will meet its ever more stringent greenhouse gas emission reduction targets, and how the state will manage to provide affordable housing for residents who are increasingly finding housing costs [untenable](#). As my Legal Planet colleagues [Meredith Hankins](#) and [Ethan Elkind](#) and I have [written](#) before, transit-oriented development is one part of a solution to these problems. Siting dense development near transit in urban cores can both reduce the amount of time people spend in their cars (and thereby, greenhouse gas emissions) and bring more housing units online.

While state and local officials [work](#) to house homeless Californians in hotels and emergency shelters in an effort to protect against the spread of the coronavirus, any short-term solution doesn't diminish the need for more, and more affordable, housing. Yet, as Ethan [writes](#), longtime opponents of high-density development are [now pointing](#) to the pandemic as evidence that densification is a bad idea. But the coronavirus isn't a convincing reason to abandon state transit-oriented development proposals (or local ones with similar goals, like Los Angeles' Transit-Oriented Communities program).

As Ethan [explains](#), while density can contribute to the virus' spread, it has been government policies that have ultimately shaped the way the illness has moved through communities across the globe. But it's also worth noting that transit-oriented development proposals aren't designed to "Manhattanize" areas like Los Angeles. Instead, they're meant to add targeted density where it counts most. Taking Los Angeles as an example, even a modest upzoning boost would go a long way, since the City now contains a number of residents [nearly equivalent](#) to its current zoned capacity (and its zoned capacity has decreased as its number of residents has increased; 1960's Los Angeles could have housed over twice as many residents as today's can). Adding [duplexes, triplexes, and fourplexes](#)—buildings on the same scale as single-family homes—in residential neighborhoods would dramatically increase the City's capacity while promoting neighborhood diversity, and a mix of medium-density buildings close to transit and designed to be transit-supportive could [improve](#) affordability and sustainability outcomes.

And adding housing stock isn't necessarily a matter of inviting density—more housing is needed to appropriately support density that is already present. As of 2019, California's rate of [renter overcrowding](#) was more than double the national average, with nearly a quarter of Los Angeles County renters living in overcrowded conditions, and 4% of those renters living in severely overcrowded households. In other words, California's existing housing stock is already stretched thin and smart upzoning close to transit could offer housing to meet existing demand while promoting sustainability.

Transit-oriented development remains a powerful tool to increase housing availability and affordability and to meet climate change goals, battles California will continue to wage even after the coronavirus has been vanquished. This current crisis shouldn't be leveraged as an excuse to stymie efforts to thoughtfully densify.