

A [recent article in the SF Chronicle](#) highlighted how it has been easier for housing advocates to get upzoning reforms that facilitate housing production in Oregon – with the upzoning provisions in Oregon having significantly fewer exceptions and carveouts than comparable provisions in California. The result is that Portland has seen more movement in housing production than California has.

One point made at the end of the article is the role that Oregon’s urban growth boundary (UGB) system has played in housing politics there:

California environmentalists have often [opposed new housing](#), arguing that it contributes to pollution and habitat loss. Until Gov. Gavin Newsom [signed a law exempting](#) most infill housing from environmental review, the California Environmental Quality Act was for decades a potent tool to slow development down.

But Oregon never had an environmental law like CEQA. Instead, it has relied on “urban growth boundaries,” which limit how far outside urban areas cities can build. Instead of scrutinizing individual projects, Oregon’s environmental organizations tend not to oppose projects within those boundaries — and have largely [supported RIP](#).

UGB’s constrain development to urban areas, discouraging development beyond the boundary. UGB’s role in housing affordability has been disputed in the past – with some arguing that UGBs have caused reductions in housing production and increasing costs by reducing the areas available for housing production.

But as the article notes, in Oregon the UGB has played an important political role. Because of the UGB, environmental groups know that upzoning will primarily result in housing production in denser urban areas, or areas adjacent to urban areas, rather than development that might sprawl across agricultural or natural landscapes. And so those groups have been allies for housing upzoning, rather than opponents. In contrast, in California the relationship between environmental groups and housing upzoning has been more conflicted.

I raise this point because the [recently enacted SB 131](#) included a provision that calls for mapping urban areas in the state. As my co-authors and I [noted in this article](#), such a map could be the basis for a unified, simplified, and streamlined process for

upzoning and streamlining housing construction approvals in urban areas, while still retaining important protections for natural resources and reducing sprawl. We highlighted the policy benefits of our proposal, but the example of Oregon points out the political benefits of such a map, which would have important similarities with UGBs. And while UGBs that are poorly designed can cause housing affordability issues, if they are paired with significant upzoning within the UGB as well as inclusion of ample areas for expansion of the urban area on the edge of the UGB, they can provide for meaningful housing production.

The SB 131 map proposal is to be implemented by July 2026 - I hope that the state does move expeditiously on it, and use it for future upzoning reforms, not just because it is good policy, but also because it may be good politics.