

Would San Diego benefit from a Berkeley-style zoning change?

Berkeley is likely to pass a new law in October that would get rid of its single-family zoning law.

By Phillip Molnar

The first city in America to enshrine single-family zoning as the only housing type allowed is set to reverse course.

Berkeley is likely to pass a new law in October that would get rid of its previous zoning law, passed in 1916, and allow up to three story apartment buildings on single-family lots in most of the city. There are some density limits based on lot sizes — it's likely limited to two to seven units for the most typical lot sizes — and some neighborhoods were exempted because of fire safety concerns.

Berkeley lawmakers say the change is possible because residents have gradually opened up to the idea of increased density after decades of strict single-family zoning.

The proposed law wouldn't require approval for apartment buildings at City Council or some type of planning group. While communities in San Diego County have made efforts to increase density, nowhere in the region was there a law as aggressive as the Berkeley proposal. Roughly 80 percent of all residential land in San Diego County is zoned exclusively for single-family.

Question: Would communities in San Diego County benefit from a Berkeley-style zoning change?

Economists

Alan Gin, University of San Diego

YES: One of the reasons why housing prices are so high in places like San Diego is low supply due to the lack of developable land. Because of that, the only way to significantly increase the housing stock is through increased density. With 80 percent of residential land in San Diego zoned for single-family units, there is limited opportunity for that increased density. A plan similar to Berkeley's would limit the number of units, so big apartment complexes wouldn't be coming to those neighborhoods.

James Hamilton, UC San Diego

NO: There may be areas in San Diego where this makes sense. But this decision should be made at a local level with consent of the people who live there. Imposing it as a mandate across the entire region would be undemocratic and authoritarian. As we look for solutions to our pressing problems, it is more important than ever to proceed by consensus rather than allow people who think they know best to impose their solutions on everybody else.

Caroline Freund, UC San Diego School of Global Policy and Strategy

YES: Single-family zoning reduces housing supply, promotes segregation and creates urban sprawl. High-income people live in single-family homes, near good schools, parks and other amenities. Lower-income people are pushed to more densely populated, hotter and less green areas. Everyone has long commutes, adding to congestion and emissions. But reducing single-family zoning may not be enough to expand the housing supply. Other restrictions, such as height, floor-size and parking, should also be eased.

Kelly Cunningham, San Diego Institute for Economic Research

YES: Artificially limiting the supply of new housing increases prices for the benefit of existing landlords and homeowners. California's restrictive housing policies, especially in desirable coastal locations, weaponize prices to untenable levels. Denser housing does not make sense for all neighborhoods or situations without considering existing development or transportation access, but adding housing of any type improves affordability. The Berkeley effort still attempts to counter-productively micromanage housing development but is a step in the right direction.

Norm Miller, University of San Diego

YES: If the definition of "benefit" is to increase affordability. It will be opposed with the same mantra of "traffic, congestion, safety and ruining the character of the neighborhood" that we always hear. If the benefit we seek is simply to keep our home values as high as possible, then no, this is not beneficial. Large-scale projects like the Sports Arena, NAVWAR, Seaport could all do more to add housing, if they ever begin.

David Ely, San Diego State University

YES: Relaxing zoning rules would be one additional step toward creating more housing in the county. This would act to slow the growth of rents charged by landlords and improve housing affordability. Along with Berkeley, Arlington County has eased single-family zoning rules. To be successful, builders would need to acquire single-family lots and overcome the financial challenges of building middle housing, so the impact on the supply of housing is unlikely to be dramatic.

Ray Major, economist

NO: Sentiment toward upzoning is a reaction to the current housing crisis and immediate housing needs. Yet long-term forecasts show a decrease in the region's population and aging of residents, with over a third of the residents being more than 65 years old in the next 20 years. Planned communities with tax incentives that appeal to seniors would free up existing housing stock for larger families and provide the region with a better mix of housing in the long run.

Executives

Jamie Moraga, Franklin Revere

NO: Primarily, it would increase population density, reduce availability of public infrastructure services, and decrease property value for single family zoned properties. Additionally, is there (or will there be) sufficient infrastructure, including K-12 schools, parking, traffic, fire and law enforcement, water, electricity, sewer, roads and grocery stores? County communities could face overdevelopment by allowing high-density housing without sufficient planning and infrastructure. Quality of life and proper community planning should be a factor prior to allowing any aggressive zoning changes.

Phil Blair, Manpower

NO: San Diego is very large and has very diverse housing components. Infill of any type is appropriate when mass transit services, retail and education opportunities are reasonably close by. A carte blanche zoning of anything, anywhere is not appropriate for a city the size of San Diego. There are better options.

Gary London, London Moeder Advisors

YES: San Diego is a bustling, urban city unlike the sleepy coastal town of 100 years ago, which, incidentally, was when single-family homes and minimum lot sizes became a thing. Today, 80 percent of our community is still burdened by this vestigial classification. While Berkeley is different (most notably, San Diego is not a dominantly college town), we should be positioned to affirmatively meet the housing and density demands of our modern city.

Chris Van Gorder, Scripps Health

NO: As unpopular as this statement might be, I have a fundamental problem with unilaterally changing zoning laws without giving due consideration to community needs and the impact to residents, property owners and property valuations. While I do understand the need for more housing, I think we must consider the unique characteristics of communities throughout San Diego when making zoning decisions. However, that can't be done with blanket policies solely aimed at increasing density.