

## San Diego planners pitch a new definition for 'sustainable development'

By Andrew Bowen

The San Diego Planning Department is proposing a new definition to replace "transit priority areas," where the city aims to focus its future growth, after complaints from anti-density homeowners who say the current definition doesn't make sense.

Yet the department's proposal is not sitting well with those critics, while pro-housing advocates are mostly adopting a wait-and-see approach.

Properties in "transit priority areas" are eligible for incentive programs that allow for much more housing density than regulations would otherwise permit. The goal is to concentrate new homes and jobs in areas close to public transit so fewer people will depend on cars.

Currently, "transit priority areas" cover all land within a half-mile radius of a major public transit stop. The half-mile distance is measured as the crow flies, meaning barriers to accessing transit, like canyons or freeways, are not taken into account.

City planners propose replacing that relatively simple definition with a much more complex one. And while the change is tucked away in a long list of updates to the city's building regulations, it could have big implications for the city's ability to meet its housing goals. Experts say it might even violate state law.

### What would change?

"Transit priority areas" are already defined in state law. To avoid confusion, city planners propose creating a new category called "sustainable development areas" that would apply to local housing incentive programs.

Rather than a simple half-mile radius around a transit stop, "sustainable development areas" would extend up to a mile along pedestrian pathways like sidewalks and bridges. The circles that define transit priority areas would be replaced with amorphous blobs.

San Diego Planning Director Heidi Vonblum said the shift is meant to better align the city's housing and climate goals.

"There are examples of properties that are three to four miles away from transit, but they're falling within that half-mile bubble because they're across a canyon, across a freeway and down the street," Vonblum said.

The proposed changes were prompted by criticism from Neighbors for a Better San Diego, a group of mostly homeowners seeking to roll back San Diego's push for more housing in low-density

neighborhoods. But Vonblum said that group asked for changes that would have dramatically reduced the amount of land eligible for local housing incentives. The Planning Department's proposal, she said, is meant to strike a balance.

"That may look like moving the 'sustainable development areas' a little bit," Vonblum said. "It may involve removal of some areas with the addition of other areas."

### **How it's being received**

If city officials thought the changes would appease anti-density critics, they were wrong. Neighbors for a Better San Diego sent out an email after a city-led workshop Thursday calling the proposal a "bait and switch".

"You're just moving all of the problems we have now to a new definition that is in contradiction with state law," Geoffrey Hueter, a leader with Neighbors for a Better San Diego, said at the workshop.

Pro-housing groups, meanwhile, say they want more information before passing judgment.

"It's critical that the city analyzes whether this idea would result in a loss of potential housing units and whether we can still meet climate action plan goals," said Angeli Calinog, public affairs manager for the San Diego Regional Chamber of Commerce. "At a time when our region is still not keeping up with the need for more homes, we would be more supportive of a change that would increase housing opportunities in areas that would still allow us to reduce greenhouse gas emissions."

City planners say they are preparing a map that would compare the reach of the old transit priority areas with the new sustainable development areas. But it's unclear whether that will be ready before the issue goes to the City Council for a vote, which is scheduled for early December.

That's concerning to Brian Hanlon, CEO of California YIMBY, a group that advocates for increasing the state's housing supply. If the city's proposal results in less capacity for housing, Hanlon said, it could violate a 2019 law his group sponsored called SB 330. The law prohibits cities from reducing density limits unless that action is paired with a commensurate increase in density elsewhere.

Additionally, other state laws require cities to actively combat racial segregation in housing. That requirement extends to zoning decisions, which historically have blocked growth in rich, white-majority neighborhoods.

"If the rezoning lets wealthier and whiter areas off the hook for new homebuilding, then San Diego will be in trouble," Hanlon said.