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OPINION

The California dream has gone sour



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Few places have as much going for them as California. With a diverse and educated population, the biggest U.S. state is awash in budget surpluses as its innovation economy booms. While parts of the state may be dying for rain, its overall climate is to die for.

And yet, there is something dystopic about the Golden State. San Francisco and Los Angeles have an epic homelessness problem, and nowhere else in the United States suffer a crisis of homelessness, many of whom suffer from mental illness and drug addiction.



A homeless person lives in a tent next to a freeway exit in downtown Los Angeles on Jan. 22, 2020.

MIKE BLAKE/REUTERS

The latest estimates from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development say the number of homeless people in California surged 16 per cent in 2019 to 151,278. An acute shortage of affordable housing has forced thousands of people with jobs to sleep in cars or tents. Young people are leaving California in droves.

A state long accustomed to gaining brains is rapidly losing some of its brightest citizens. In the year to last July 1, California's population grew at its lowest rate in more than a century, increasing only 0.35 per cent, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. For the first time since 2010, more residents left California for other states than the other way around.

With statistics like these, you'd think California policy-makers would be busting their butts to facilitate new housing construction. Instead, it's become harder than ever to build new homes as local officials surrender to the selfish whims of their NIMBY voters.

Last week, a bill aimed at allowing higher-density housing around transit hubs and job centres failed to pass the California Senate for the third time in three years. By almost any measure, nothing was radical about the proposal to increase building height limits in certain areas. But opposition from suburbanites doomed the effort.

As much as California sees itself as a leader on the environment, defying (for now) President Donald Trump's bid to soften national vehicle emission standards, the California dream still invariably involves a large single-family house in the suburbs. The state's endless freeways are as clogged as ever – mostly by gas-guzzling SUVs, rather than Teslas.

Most Californians seem to prefer it that way. After all, they and their elected officials keep voting down measures aimed at freeing up land for new housing or easing zoning restrictions that limit new construction to single-family dwellings.

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SB50, the bill that failed to muster a Senate majority last week, would have done both of those things by overriding local zoning regulations to impose statewide rules favouring multi-unit buildings in certain areas.

Democratic Governor Gavin Newsom, a former mayor of San Francisco, came to office a year ago vowing a fivefold increase in the pace of new housing construction, with a goal of building 3.5 million new units by 2025. But he has made little progress toward that objective, and he failed to put the full weight of his office behind SB50. After all, suburban voters and their overwhelmingly Democratic representatives opposed the bill.

Mr. Newsom did get behind a separate (and successful) bill to end “downzoning” by preventing local councils from approving lower-density developments on land zoned for higher-density ones. But far more radical reforms are needed. As long as the supply of new housing is constrained by zoning laws aimed at protecting the property values and quality of life of existing homeowners, California will become increasingly unlivable for everyone else. That is not in anyone’s long-term interest.

Still, it’s not clear what it would take to bring about the needed changes. Proposition 13, the 1978 ballot initiative that capped property-tax increases in the state, remains a powerful symbol of the California dream of single-family home ownership. And those who have achieved the dream remain the most powerful political constituency in the state.

“Urban density is not as wonderful as its evangelists would have the public believe,” one letter-writer to the San Francisco Chronicle insisted last week. “Overcrowding is a setup for bad behaviour, collisions and the spread of disease. The urban Bay Area was developed around the automobile. Most existing public transit options are unpopular.”

No wonder most California politicians prefer to stick to less career-threatening topics. Last week, San Francisco became the first U.S. city to ban the sale of vaping products. No matter that the measure will do nothing to stop local teens from procuring e-cigarettes. It sure beats trying to take on the NIMBYs.

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