

# Environmentalists Champion City's Housing Plan

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San Francisco needs to build more than 2,700 new housing units a year to keep up with population growth, according to the Association of Bay Area Governments. The big question for neighborhoods, environmental groups and government agencies is: Where will all that development go?

The city housing plan, released last spring, says that after Mission Bay, where as many as 6,000 new units could be built, the second-biggest chunk of new housing, at more than 5,700 units, ought to be added along what are called "transit corridors," or heavily-used bus and rail routes, such as Geary and Third Streets.

Environmentalists cheered the proposal, saying it will cut driving and auto pollution, save energy, and reduce sprawl.

"We support building up rather than out, and accommodating growth in existing areas," said Elizabeth Stampe, communications director for the Greenbelt Alliance. "People are a lot less car-dependent when they live in compact development served by transit. That ends up saving huge amounts of energy and keeping a lot of pollution out of the air and water."

Some neighborhood activists, though, lambasted the plan for not adequately accounting for the massive increases in parking demand higher density levels could trigger.

"I just think we need to stop lying to ourselves here, because people are going to own cars," said Barbara Meskunas, president of the Coalition for San Francisco Neighborhoods. "We are going to have more cars than the city streets can handle and we've got to figure out where to put them."

She suggested that Chicago, with its high-rise parking garages, could be a model for San Francisco. "You don't have to pave over more areas, you can make it go up," she said.

However, housing activists say requiring that every new residential unit come with a parking space, as suggested in the plan, limits people's choices. "Now, if you're buying a new condo in San Francisco, you basically have to buy a parking space, and even with some rentals, you have to rent the parking space," said Kate White, executive director of the Housing Action Coalition. "That's less choice for people who maybe want to choose not to buy the parking space."

On San Francisco's east side and along transit corridors, there's no reason to build a parking space for every unit, White said. She pointed to a 166-unit condominium development on New Montgomery Street that was recently completed with just one parking space for about every three units. "It sold out before they even finished construction," said White, "so obviously there's a huge demand for car-free housing."

Environmentalists say increasing housing density can reduce both driving and car ownership. "Auto ownership in areas that are really convenient is going down," said John Holtzclaw, chair of the Sierra Club's national Transportation Committee. He cited a study that found that between 2000 and 2003, the number of cars in Manhattan fell by three percent and, in Brooklyn, by about 10 percent.

In North Beach, where he lives, more than a third of households don't own cars, said Holtzclaw. "I had a car and I got rid of it because I wasn't using it so much and parking became tighter." The neighborhood, with 100 households per residential acre, is 33 times as dense as San Ramon, yet North Beach residents own a third as many cars per household and drive a quarter as much, he said.

Reducing driving lowers consumption of fossil fuels, decreases pollution and smog, and lowers emission of greenhouse gases, advocates say.

"Per capita, you burn a lot less energy if you're riding a subway than if you're driving a jeep," said Andrew Sullivan, spokesman for the transit riders' group Rescue Muni. "Expanded housing will mean more people can afford to live here, and expanded transit corridors means those people will be more likely to take transit than drive their cars."

Increasing density along transit corridors can also help reduce sprawl, environmentalists say. “If one accepts the fact that the population of California and the Bay Area is going to grow, then the question becomes: How do we find homes for the people that are going to live here in the future in a way that has the least impact to the environment,” said Tom Radulovich, executive director of Transportation for a Livable City, a nonprofit that advocates urban planning efforts that de-emphasize auto use.

Increasing density in the city instead of adding housing in outlying suburban areas reduces environmental impacts caused by sprawl, said Holtzclaw of the Sierra Club.

“If you have a large lawn and lots of cars to wash, you use a lot more water,” he said. Those lawns also prompt suburbanites to use more pesticides per acre than farms, degrading water quality, he said. And detached suburban houses use more energy to heat and cool than townhouses or apartment buildings with shared walls, as well as requiring more materials per unit, from foundation cement to roofing tiles to water pipes.

Adding housing in urban areas means “you don’t need to build more roads and more parks, and you don’t need to build more aqueducts and water systems and all that infrastructure, because it’s already there,” said Radulovich, who also serves on the BART board of directors. “It’s a real lost opportunity when you make a big investment in transit and then don’t build housing.”

Still, planning is key, he said. “Density can be good for existing neighborhoods and make life better for existing neighborhoods but only if it’s planned and only if you’ve really got a complete vision for the neighborhood,” he said, including creating attractive, walkable streets, managing parking well, ensuring there’s adequate infrastructure, open space, and facilities such as schools and libraries.

“The key to making it right is to design good walkable, attractive communities that are complete, where you have shopping, you have convenience retail, you have bars and restaurants within walking distance,” he said. “The good news out there is that you’ve already got it in the Geary Street corridor.”