

Op-Ed

How to make Los Angeles more affordable and more livable



The L.A. River, with downtown Los Angeles rising behind it.

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By **GREGORY D. MORROW**

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There is no easy answer for the housing affordability crisis in Los Angeles. But embracing growth rather than fighting it can create a city for everyone, not just the most fortunate among us.

For much of the last 40 years, planning in Los Angeles has been guided by the idea that growth is bad, that more people mean more congestion, pollution and social ills. The city has emphasized “downzoning” — reducing the number of units allowed to be built on properties — to actively curb growth.

It hasn't worked. According to the city's 35 separate Community Plans and census data, since 1970, half a million more people have moved to Los Angeles than were planned for. Housing supply simply

has not kept pace with growth, so it should be no surprise that L.A. has become the least affordable city in the country — a city booming in gentrification (the rich displacing the poor) and busting in affordability (for everyone except the very well-off).

Despite L.A.'s image as a city of owner-occupied single-family houses, only a third of the city lives this way. The high cost of housing forces residents to double up. According to Affordability Matters, a 2008 UCLA-sponsored study, nearly 1 in 5 homes in L.A. is severely crowded, rising to more than 1 in 3 in some neighborhoods (such as Westlake, Southeast L.A. and Boyle Heights).

Downzoning has also widened disparities across the city. Affluent neighborhoods (Brentwood, Sherman Oaks and West L.A.) have been more successful at fighting density and change. That means the city's poorest areas assume most of the burden of growth, areas that aren't well equipped for it because they are already overcrowded, park poor and in many cases not near major employment centers or transit (Pacoima, Sun Valley and Mission Hills).

It's natural for homeowners to want to preserve their neighborhoods exactly as they are. But cities change whether we like it or not. Good planning accepts change and manages it to provide the greatest benefit with the fewest conflicts for the most people.

What would better planning look like in Los Angeles? To start, we would transform our busiest streets from a hodgepodge of mostly low-rise buildings and strip malls into genuine urban boulevards, with a lot more housing and local amenities closer to home.

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This is beginning to happen. For example, along Wilshire Boulevard in Koreatown and Sunset Boulevard in central Hollywood, more apartments, condos and mixed-use developments are going in, along with increased pedestrian, cycling and transit infrastructure. Not everyone likes these changes, but they absorb newcomers while preserving single-family neighborhoods, and they are beginning to make a dent in congestion.

It can be done with care. By limiting the height of buildings based on the width of the street, we can increase density without creating high-rise canyons. In Toronto, the rule is 80% of the street width, at the front of buildings. So smaller avenues, such as Normandie, could tolerate five stories along the street, stepping back to six stories maximum, while on larger boulevards, such as Sunset, buildings could be seven stories high along the street, stepping back to nine stories maximum.

Even within L.A.'s many single-family neighborhoods, we should not fear giving homeowners the choice to create small backyard units where space permits. The research shows that in most cases, such units will be used as multi-generational housing — an aging parent or a child living at home — but they could also support families by supplementing their income and creating affordable housing for long-term residents. Again, with good planning (controlling size, placement, parking and tenancy), this can enrich neighborhoods.

“Density bonuses” — in which builders set aside a percentage of units (say 20%) for lower- and moderate-income households in exchange for moderate increases in density — are another good tool. The common perception is that such bonuses are giveaways to developers, but they have been designed as a profit-neutral way of providing below-market-rate units. And research shows neighborhoods with mixed-income households provide the greatest opportunities for social mobility.

Cities function because all kinds of people, of all income levels, can live in multiple ways in them, and move in multiple ways through them. But the city has to plan for all that diversity, not fight it. Not everyone can afford low-density living; not everyone wants it. Expanding choice and increasing the supply of housing in Los Angeles is not an attack on homeowners. It's not either/or — it has to be both.

It's possible to create a more balanced, more livable and more affordable Los Angeles. It simply requires smarter planning and greater acceptance of our differences.

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