
A Vision of Urban Abundance

Since 2017, California YIMBY has been at the forefront of efforts to reform antiquated housing policies that have made California the least affordable and most exclusionary state in the United States. Those policies have had dire consequences: In addition to having the highest rates of poverty and homelessness in the United States, California is rapidly losing middle-income workers and families to other states.

The California YIMBY policy agenda focuses on pro-housing land use reforms that will put California back on the path to broad-based economic prosperity. But the benefits of a pro-housing agenda do not end with cheaper housing; housing abundance will also help create vibrant, livable, and inclusive communities where everyone can afford to live, work, and raise a family.

In just a few years, we've passed over a dozen state laws and made meaningful progress toward our goal of housing abundance. Beyond that goal lies one of the biggest questions confronting our state: Can California regain its footing and return to its roots as a place where anyone can pursue the California dream?

As an organization with the word "Yes" in its name, we think we know the answer. That answer must begin with housing, but it does not, and can not, end there.

The mission that has animated the YIMBY movement to date is ending the housing crisis. But the dreams that motivate the growing movement for urban abundance go beyond housing affordability to include great transportation systems, happy and healthy neighborhoods, and sustainable cities.

The California YIMBY Framework: Restoring the California Dream

What does victory look like for the urban abundance movement? And how do we get there? California YIMBY's policy framework is our attempt to answer that question.

With its natural splendor, temperate climate, rich agricultural lands, diverse cultures, tolerance and open-mindedness, and unrivaled economic power, California was once considered a paradise on earth. Generations of immigrants and native-born Californians alike have sought their own patch of utopia in the Golden State, all in the pursuit of the California Dream: the deeply held belief that California is one of the few places on the planet where anyone, regardless of background, ethnicity, identity, religion, or economic circumstance, can establish a decent life for themselves and their family in one of the most beautiful and dynamic places on earth.

The California Dream is the cornerstone of a distinctly Californian cultural tendency—one characterized by its optimism, egalitarianism, and orientation toward the future. Pursuit of the Dream drove generations of people, from across the United States and the planet, to the Golden State; California's ethic of tolerance and equality also helped make the state a safe haven for people fleeing intolerance elsewhere, whether from oppressive regimes overseas, or from political extremism in other states.

The California Dream's ability to attract a large, unusually diverse and tolerant population carried California through a series of major economic expansions, from the post-war building boom to the birth of Silicon Valley. And it led to a series of landmark progressive reforms, from the creation of a world-class public higher education system, to policies formalizing state tolerance and acceptance of people of all ethnicities and identities, to a more recent wave of groundbreaking climate and sustainability rules.

Over the decades, California's openness to newcomers, its economic prosperity, and its culture of solidarity have made the California Dream a reality for tens of millions of people. But the state has never fully lived up to its full potential. Its history is shot through with examples of segregation, racist violence, and rampant looting of the commons. For too many people, the dream has always been a promise that California failed to keep.

Where the Dream Falls Short

When the California Dream has fallen short of its promise, generations of Californians have worked to realize its full potential. The state is home to a rich lineage of protestors, organizers, and thinkers who have envisioned a day when the California Dream would be available to everyone. From the farmworkers who established basic rights for the laborers who grow and harvest our food, to the Black activists who continue to fight for racial equity and inclusion, to the environmental advocates who lead efforts to halt pollution and ecosystem degradation, Californians have shown they will not be satisfied until the Dream is accessible to all.

But today, we are far from achieving that goal. In fact, in some ways we are moving backwards. And the reasons why are all self-inflicted.

Out of control housing costs have plunged hundreds of thousands of people into homelessness and millions into perpetual housing insecurity. More than four million Californians live in poverty. Climate disasters have hammered the state, displacing thousands of people; wildfires have erased entire towns from the map. Broken transportation networks have locked most Californians into costly and polluting car dependency, while an epidemic of traffic violence claims the lives of thousands of Californians each year.

And political dysfunction has paralyzed much of California's public sector, making it impossible to implement desperately needed policy reforms, even in the face of overlapping crises. California is no longer a coveted destination for immigrants from other states and nations; for the first time in the post-war era, [the state's population is shrinking](#).

The California Dream is dying—but not of natural causes. Instead, all of the extant crises are the result of deliberate policy choices. These policy choices have benefited a small coterie of wealthy, entrenched interests, even as they have made life harder for everyone else.

The Problem

Take the housing crisis. To previous generations of Californians, land ownership represented security; homeowners could expect their property values to appreciate modestly over time, accruing into a nest egg they could pass on to their children. But over the past 50 years, cities and tony suburbs across the state have used public policy to block the creation of new homes, limiting access to homeownership and even housing itself. Their efforts helped turn housing from a low-risk investment to something very different: an asset that could yield eye-watering returns for anyone lucky enough to get in early.

In essence, restrictive zoning, discretionary permitting, and other anti-development instruments converted the California housing market into a cartel. Incumbent landowners in the most exclusive regions of the state would get fantastically rich, while younger households found themselves locked out of the housing market entirely.

The result has been a social and political disaster unlike anything the state has witnessed in generations. Hundreds of thousands of people go homeless each year. Wealth inequality is at Gilded Age levels. The state remains heavily segregated; millions of Black and Latino families are still being denied the opportunity to build generational wealth. Millions more have been barred from accessing job-rich areas where they could permanently raise their incomes—which in turn has constricted California's economic growth. And California's pattern of sprawling, low-rise development has kept most of the state reliant on private automobiles, with disastrous consequences for the climate.

Most Californians — including most home owning Californians — are appalled by this state of affairs and know there's a better way. They want economic opportunity for themselves and their children. They want to make the state carbon neutral and climate resilient. And they want to welcome new neighbors with open arms. Most Californians believe that the California Dream should be accessible to everyone.

But while the wealthy interests that favor the status quo are a minority, they're a powerful one. For decades, they've managed to block change. And so things deteriorated for decades, and more and more people found themselves on the losing end of a rotten bargain—until enough of them decided to do something about it.

The Solution

For nearly ten years, a countermovement has been taking shape in California and spreading across the country. In some ways — particularly in its use of new communications tools — this movement is a novel thing. But it is also part of that very long Californian tradition of protest and progressive organizing.

YIMBY organizations are one part of this movement. YIMBYism emerged in the middle of the last decade, when a small group of city dwellers, fed up with their ever swelling rent burdens, decided to

agitate for more housing in their cities. The idea spread, fueled the creation of new institutions, and soon led to real policy victories. Within a few years of its creation, California YIMBY had passed legislation leading to tens of thousands of new housing units being built in California; effectively repealed single-family-only zoning statewide; and inspired similar efforts across the English-speaking world.

But the movement has never been just about getting more homes built. YIMBY groups are partners in a broader effort to make California's cities the best they can be. This is the urban abundance movement.

Toward Urban Abundance

The urban abundance movement envisions cities where everyone has a place to live. Where green energy, green infrastructure, and pollution-free transportation networks have made it possible for California — and the world — to tame climate change. Where car ownership isn't a prerequisite for full citizenship, and residents can get anywhere they need to go by walking, biking, or taking high-quality public transit. Where all children go to great public schools, local businesses thrive, and good jobs are plentiful. The urban abundance movement envisions cities that embody the neighborliness, optimism, open-mindedness, entrepreneurialism, and social solidarity that lie at the heart of the California Dream.

Over the past few years, California has made significant progress toward making that vision a reality—more progress than once seemed possible. But we are nowhere near finished.

The abundance movement has proven that it can win meaningful victories. It has proven that its theory of policy change can work. Now that this is no longer up for debate, we are confronted with a very different set of questions. What does long-term victory look like? What sort of California are we trying to build, and how will we get there? How do we finally realize the California Dream for all?

Introducing Our Framework

Our framework represents our attempt to answer these questions. This project aims to provide a roadmap for navigating California's most intractable crises and achieving true urban abundance. In doing so, we hope to embody Golden State's best version of itself: optimistic, inclusive, and future-oriented. With the right set of policies guided by these values, California can once again become a place where we do big things; where public initiative and private entrepreneurialism work hand in hand to build a better tomorrow. And California can become the model of a sustainable, prosperous, multiracial democracy—where everyone can live a decent, dignified life, and where Californians again build great, world-improving things together.

Because housing affordability is core to what we do — and core, we believe, to achieving that vision — it will be at the center of the framework. But the framework will go a step beyond the areas that California YIMBY has engaged with before. Inside, you'll find recommendations related to bike and pedestrian safety, tenant relocation assistance, urban greenspace, and more. Even as we expand our scope, we will always connect it back to the core themes of our prior work.

Given the breadth of the framework, we do not expect to lead on every single policy area it covers; other groups and individuals are already doing essential work on many of the recommendations we will publish. Our intent is simply to articulate what we stand for. Our framework is a statement of principles, not a list of draft legislation.

The framework is a work in progress, and it will remain one for a long time to come. We will continue to add new sections over the coming months and update the entire framework over the coming years. As we conduct this work, we welcome everyone's participation; please send us your ideas, concerns, feedback, and corrections using [this form](#). Together, let's honor California's promise.