

Assembly Bill 609

CEQA Exemption for Environmentally-Friendly Housing
Assemblymember Buffy Wicks (AD-14)

SUMMARY

AB 609 would create an exemption from the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) for environmentally-friendly housing projects that comply with local requirements. In doing so, it will make California more affordable and resilient to a changing climate.

ISSUE

California is facing an unprecedented housing crisis, with over 187,000 homeless individuals, rent that is unaffordable to 2/3 of our lower income households, and only one in six households able to afford to become homeowners. The State has determined that, to address this crisis, at least 300,000 new homes need to be constructed per year. Unfortunately, current production hovers around 100,000 homes per year.

CEQA is a major reason why housing production has fallen short of the State's targets. One issue is redundancy. Regional plans, housing elements, and local laws to establish local zoning and objective standards are all required to undertake CEQA. Yet, most individual housing projects that meet all of these local zoning and objective standards are *also* required to undertake CEQA. And while some projects may meet statutory or categorical exemptions from CEQA, those exemptions are often too subjective to be effective, or include labor standards that make the housing economically infeasible.

Additionally, while the CEQA process is good at stopping negative environmental impacts, it is not designed to facilitate projects that are inherently good for the environment. For example, infill housing projects close to jobs, schools, and amenities, which reduce greenhouse gas emissions per capita, need to go through the same process as housing projects that might require long commutes or industrial developments that create pollution.

SOLUTION

AB 609 would make it much easier to build environmentally-friendly housing in California. It would do so by exempting individual projects from CEQA if they are in an infill location and they are not located on environmentally sensitive or hazardous sites. Because the housing projects have to comply with the local general plan, zoning ordinance, and objective standards, they will have already been scrutinized by CEQA. To qualify, projects would have to meet minimum density thresholds (typically 15 units per acre in urban areas, 10 units per acre in suburban areas, and 5 units per acre in rural areas), and be less than 20 acres in size.

By removing a major obstacle to housing construction, AB 609 will help make California a more affordable place for all. And by ensuring these projects are on infill sites that are not environmentally sensitive or hazardous, this bill will help us meet our goals to reduce greenhouse gases while protecting our natural environment.

SUPPORT

Bay Area Council (Sponsor)
California YIMBY (Sponsor)

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