

# The San Diego Union-Tribune

OPINION

## Commentary: How embracing density increases housing for all San Diegans



This 2013 photo shows construction workers building homes in San Diego. Amid the current scarcity of homes, the city has increased height limits for some housing construction. (Reuters file photo)

By STEFANIE BENVENUTO AUG. 22, 2019 | 6:09 PM

The city of San Diego's Morena Specific Plan is symbolic. In its 280-acre footprint, it represents the totality of the housing debate that is occurring throughout the state and felt acutely here in San Diego. The question of housing has become much bigger than the four walls that comprise a home. How we address the housing issue — build more of it, some of it, just a little of it (depending on where you put it), and who gets it — is emerging as a defining feature of who we are in our communities.

For the San Diego Regional Chamber of Commerce, and the 2,500 businesses we represent and the estimated 300,000 jobs they create, the Morena Plan is a practical and meaningful step toward addressing our housing crisis. It's an example of what San Diego can and should do to ensure we have housing to accommodate our workforce, our growing population of seniors, and the future generations of San Diegans who are counting on us to get it right.

Within the business community, the overwhelming priority is addressing the crisis of too little housing for our population. And to be clear, it's our own natural, organic population growth — our kids and grandkids — that are ultimately faced with a growing housing shortage.

Last year, over 100 county businesses signed a letter from the chamber asking regional elected officials to embrace the opportunity to accept additional housing.

This message was well received. We've seen Mayor Kevin Faulconer and leaders from other cities prioritize housing and take steps to make building easier.

Our economy relies on a workforce whose members live in proximity to their work. It shouldn't surprise anyone that businesses who face high employee turnover due to lengthy commutes or disheartening kitchen table economics are worried about their long-term sustainability in San Diego.

The question of housing is much bigger than one home here or one community plan there.

The Morena Plan, put simply, allows for a dramatic increase in housing supply, appropriate given the current scarcity of homes. The previous plan allowed for about 1,300 homes, while the Morena Plan allows for just over 5,000.

It's important to remember that planning for increased home building doesn't mean homes will appear overnight. It means that, over the course of years, additional housing stock will be added to a community to help create opportunity and stability for future generations. It revitalizes Morena Boulevard, encouraging the influx of local businesses within the corridor to create a vibrant community that supports our goals of a live, work, play dynamic. Perhaps most importantly, it creates a community that can embrace new transit options. The trolley line, currently under construction, which will run parallel to Morena will allow those of us who want to, to let go of vehicle ownership, relieving traffic for everyone and helping us reach our Climate Action Plan goals. These are all major reasons the City Council voted unanimously to adopt the plan.

So what's the issue with adopting a plan that responsibly addresses our housing crisis while leveraging a \$2 billion investment into transit? The Morena Plan relies on two mechanisms to increase allowable housing: height and density increases. To accommodate the necessary housing for our population, we must build up and we must build more within the existing, and very expensive, land available.

San Diego does not have the luxury of large swaths of unbuilt land without neighbors or traffic. Rather, we have the unforgiving borders of an ocean, a military base and an international border. Density and height were always going to be the answer.

Adoption of the Morena Plan keeps our city moving forward, building on the momentum started with effective, broadly-supported policies like the affordable housing density bonus and parking reform. As

businesses continue to struggle with the tough decisions of location, and as their employees continue to dedicate increasing portions of their pay to housing, we must not fool ourselves into thinking status quo of undersupply is acceptable. It's not.

The good news is that our city will consider countless plans just like this one in the coming years, and will have many more opportunities to recommit to housing solutions that move our city forward.

So, yes, the Morena Plan is symbolic. It symbolizes the hope of housing for all San Diegans.

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