

NIMBYism is a California thing, and it's wrecking cities. Consider Loomis

Special to CalMatters, by Bruce Maiman, published August 28, 2019

It isn't just the Bay Area where Nimbyism is exacerbating California's housing crisis.

Loomis' long-struggling downtown could've gotten a shot in the arm from a mixed-use development proposal on 66 vacant acres off Interstate 80 east of Sacramento. Instead, NIMBY-minded residents used California's referendum process to reject the project in a June special election. Too many people. Too much traffic, they said.

Except the Sacramento suburb is now stuck with the town's General Plan, which zones the acreage for 550 units. Developer Todd Lowell's Village project: 381 units.

"It was simply better than the town's own General Plan," Loomis Mayor Tim Onderko told me, explaining the town council's 4-1 vote approving the project in January.

Lowell even offered to pay \$14 million above minimum infrastructure requirements to help ease traffic congestion, plus another \$2 million to the school district for new classrooms, town documents show.

According to Lowell, the town had only \$194,000 in its general fund at election time.

True Life Companies, a development firm that partnered with Lowell, has since tried to market the acreage piecemeal.

No takers.

"If you're doing business in a town that can introduce a referendum to overturn your entitlements, is it a smart business decision to spend money in that jurisdiction?" True Life's Aidan Barry asked.

Bravo, Loomis! By sacking a project that could've energized your downtown you scared away other potential developers, too.

Since 2013, Nimbies have made the same myopic arguments in using local control tactics to foil mixed-used proposals in San Bruno, Davis, Del Mar, San Francisco, Los Angeles, San Diego, Napa, Palo Alto and Cupertino, costing developers millions and quashing restorative economic gain for communities, all while California's housing crisis worsens.

California lawmakers have begun pushing back against local development strangleholds. Gov. Gavin Newsom has threatened to sue municipalities that fail to meet state-mandated housing goals. The Legislature has introduced numerous housing bills — roughly 200 this year alone — from streamlining development procedures to easing zoning restrictions to allow for taller, denser housing near mass transit and job centers.

For now, though, local control means exclusionary zoning and housing obstructionism.

Loomis Town Manager Sean Rabé expects those 66 acres to be litigated.

"If the town does a zoning update to bring it into compliance with the General Plan, that's challengeable to another referendum," he said.

Commenters on the Loomis Facebook page think Costco will save the day. They're dreaming. With final approval expected in December, the store will sit on the town's western edge, hardly near downtown, but a stone's throw from a vast shopping complex in nearby Rocklin.

Costco shoppers, most of them regional, not local residents, will have little reason to drive to a downtown pockmarked by shuttered businesses. Indeed, several stores eventually

closed after the Rocklin locations opened. There simply wasn't enough local traffic to support them. "For lease" signs beckon in the empty storefront windows.

Downtowns need walkable density projects like Lowell's, which "can generate support for a block of Main Street retail far better than generic chain retail serving a larger, auto-dependent market," said nationally recognized urban planners Jason Beske and David Dixon in an email. Both are pioneers in the now flourishing movement to re-conceptualize suburban design.

"Most retailers need rooftops," said Barry." With rooftops come wallets. It's just that simple. If the retailer needs rooftops that are subject to a referendum process, that retailer is gonna think twice."

The lesson for Loomis: you reap what you sow.

Bruce Maiman is a longtime radio broadcaster and commentator living in Rocklin, bruceaiman@gmail.com. He wrote this commentary for CalMatters.