

A portrait of housing NIMBY-ism in California

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As poll after poll finds that housing costs are driving Californians to pack up and move, a new survey paints a detailed portrait of the anti-growth mindset that has been widely blamed for the short supply of homes underlying the problem.

What the survey found surprised veteran pollster Mark Baldassare: Nearly two-thirds of adults in California — and 70 percent in the Bay Area — favor building in their cities to meet the need.

“Obviously we asked this question because Californians are so often associated with NIMBY-ism, Not in My Backyard, but maybe because we’re at such a crisis point with housing costs that so many people recognize that it’s a problem — and for so many people it is a problem for *them*,” said Baldassare, president and CEO of the nonpartisan Public Policy Institute of California, the San Francisco-based nonprofit that conducted the poll.

But some Californians are more willing than others to accept that new housing development down the road: Renters were far more likely than homeowners to favor growth — 73 percent versus 55 percent. The poll also found sharp political, economic and racial divides. Republicans, for instance, were more likely to oppose new local development than support it.

While the majority of white Californians — 53 percent — said they were in favor of more housing, they were less likely than any other racial or ethnic group to get behind local building. A similar difference surfaced between Californians over and under 55, with younger residents showing stronger support. And middle-income and affluent residents were less likely to approve of local development than the poor.

The statewide survey asked Californians about everything from single-payer health care to fears about a North Korean strike to immigration issues. But it also delved deeply into the affordable-housing crisis gripping the state and NIMBYism in California, finding that 49 percent of Bay Area residents and 44 percent of Californians statewide had “seriously” considered moving because of their housing costs. The poll also asked people of various regions, ages, household incomes, racial and political backgrounds whether they favor more housing in their neighborhoods to meet the need.

Tellingly, only 2 percent of those surveyed responded that the housing supply in their communities was adequate, and 64 percent of adults and 59 percent of likely voters said they would support building more homes.

The findings were based on a phone survey of 1,734 California adult residents — cell phones and land lines — from Sept. 10 to Sept. 19. Interviews were conducted in English or Spanish. The sampling error is plus or minus 3.1 percentage points for all adults and 3.8 percentage points for the likely voters.

Sonja Trauss, a San Francisco resident who last year co-founded the political nonprofit YIMBY (Yes In My Backyard) Action to promote housing density, noted that higher income, white and older residents are more likely to be homeowners — and therefore feel less urgency about new development than renters like her.

“It makes perfect sense,” she said. “If you’re a homeowner, you already have housing security. No one can make you move. More housing doesn’t benefit you. You already start out with ‘Why do I need this?’”

“This is why we have such a skewed process for building housing and we don’t build enough,” she added. “Homeowners are the people who write letters and make phone calls and show up at council meetings. And they’re the ones that run for office.”

Such frustrations spurred lawmakers this year to pass a number of bills to coax or force cities and counties to build their share of housing, in some cases adding teeth to existing law.

But Maureen Gilbert, a retired teacher who has lived in North San Jose for 25 years, said she has the opposite criticism of her city officials: She feels they are too eager to build without properly

accommodating the influx of new residents. She said traffic is miserable, even on the side streets near her condominium — and it seems that every patch of open space is being gobbled up by developers.

“I understand that there is a need for housing,” she said, “but it so disrupting the communities in which this high-rise development is happening.”

The poll also found Californians to be less than enthusiastic about a bill that the Legislature narrowly passed with a two-thirds vote this month and sent to Gov. Jerry Brown. Senate Bill 2, by Sen. Toni Atkins, D-San Diego, would create a permanent funding source for affordable housing, collecting roughly \$250 million per year on programs to alleviate homelessness and to build more below-market-rate homes. The money would come from a new fee of up to \$225 per transaction for certain real-estate documents, such as mortgage refinancing. The fee would not apply to home sales.

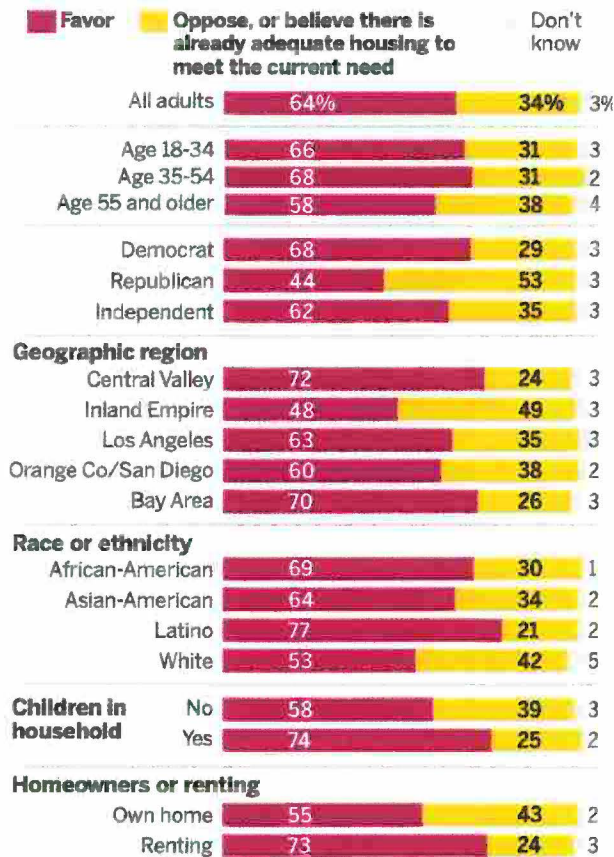
Less than half of the adults surveyed and just 44 percent of likely voters said they were in favor of such fees. Support was highest in the Bay Area, with 52 percent of those surveyed backing it.

“I think it speaks to the difficulty of crafting a solution out of Sacramento for affordable housing, raising questions about what can, realistically, state government do?” Baldassare said.

CALIFORNIANS AND THE HOUSING SHORTAGE

Two-thirds of adults would support more housing in their communities, but opinions vary by race, income and political party, a new poll finds.

“Do you favor or oppose building more housing in your city or community to meet the current need in your part of California?”



Note: Some numbers may not add up to 100 percent because of rounding.
 Source: Public Policy Institute of California, Californians & Their Government survey. The results are based on a phone survey of 1,734 California adult residents — cellphones and land lines — from September 10–19. Interviews were conducted in English or Spanish. The sampling error is +/- 3.1 percent for all adults and 3.8 percent for the likely voters.