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POLITICS

# San Diego could OK far more high-rise homes and backyard apartments under a new city housing proposal



This is the backyard area and granny flat at a residence in Solana Beach, CA. (Eduardo Contreras / The San Diego Union-Tribune)

Incentives that allow more units based on location would shift the required proximity to transit from half a mile to within 1 mile, but they would also change how that distance is gauged.

BY DAVID GARRICK

JAN. 2, 2023 5 AM PT

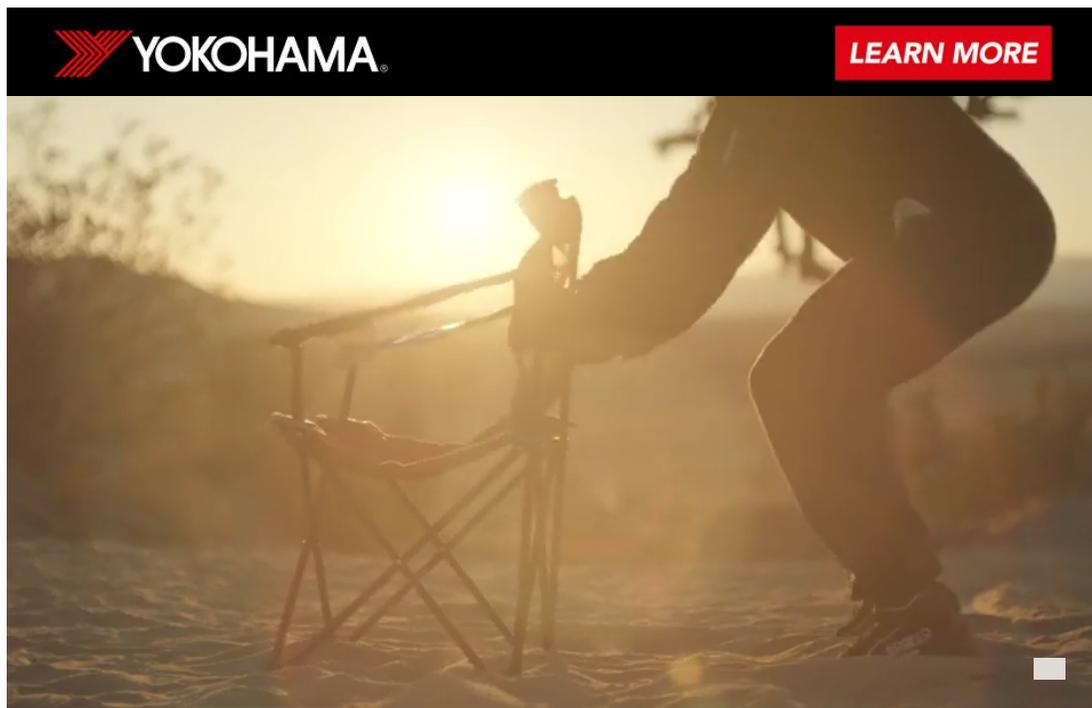


**SAN DIEGO** — A new San Diego proposal aims to jump-start production of high-rise housing and backyard apartments by loosening rules that govern where such homes can be built.

Rules that allow taller apartment buildings and more backyard units when a property is near mass transit would be softened to require the transit line be within 1 mile — rather than the current standard of half a mile.

The proposal also has incentives that encourage developers to build more lower-priced rental housing in prosperous neighborhoods where there are high-paying jobs and educational opportunities.

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The proposed rule changes would make an additional 5,224 acres close enough to transit to be eligible for developer density bonuses. The changes would also increase by 4,612 the acreage eligible for the backyard apartment “bonus” program.

City officials did not provide context for the change by noting either the existing acreage or the expected new one.

Density bonuses allow apartment builders to construct 50 percent more units than generally allowed by the zoning for a piece of land — and even more in some cases.



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The bonus program for backyard apartments, called “accessory dwelling units” by the city and often called “granny flats” by the public, allows property owners to build extra units if they agree to rent restrictions on at least one of them.

The proximity to transit is a factor because the number of extra units allowed is limited to one, unless the property is close to transit — within a half-mile radius under existing rules but within a 1-mile walk under the new proposal.



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If the property is close to transit, the number of extra units is unlimited.

The piece of the proposal that encourages developers to build more lower-priced rental housing in prosperous neighborhoods would rely on the state’s definition of “high-opportunity” areas, which focuses primarily on the presence of high-paying jobs and educational institutions.

More than 3,300 acres would be eligible for development under the high-opportunity incentives, city officials said.

The local development community and advocates for transit are praising the new transit proposal, but groups focused on preserving the existing character of single-family neighborhoods are criticizing it.



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The proposal was unanimously approved by the city's Planning Commission in early December. It's scheduled to be discussed by the City Council's Land Use and Housing Committee in January, and then by the full council in February.

The changes to the transit rules, which would replace the name "transit priority area" with "sustainable development area," are part of a large package of roughly 80 municipal code changes city planning officials are proposing.

Other proposed changes include prohibiting new storage facilities on prime industrial land, loosening rules for pool demolitions at historic homes and specifying that converted parking lots must be used for outdoor dining, not retail.

More than 30 of the proposed changes are specific to downtown, including new incentives to open child care facilities there and to build dense housing projects on surface parking lots.

The package of proposed municipal code changes is formally called the 2022 Land Development Code update.

San Diego is the only city in the region that updates its zoning code annually with a large batch of policy changes. Other cities handle such changes one at a time.



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City officials say comprehensively updating the zoning code each year allows them to quickly make small modifications that streamline regulations and adjust policies that have had contradictory or unintended consequences.

Critics say adjusting significant regulations in a large batch sometimes shields the changes from the scrutiny they might receive if the council debated them individually.

The proposal to loosen the transit proximity rules has gotten significant attention from Neighbors for a Better San Diego, an advocacy group for single-family homeowners that has aggressively fought looser rules for backyard apartments.

The group opposes the changes but is praising a concession by the city within the proposal to start using walking distance, instead of distance as a crow flies, to determine how far a property is from transit.

That change would reduce how many properties qualify for transit bonuses by eliminating properties that are geographically close to transit but separated from the transit line by a major road, a canyon or some other obstacle.



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“Unfortunately, this change is negated by the proposed overall expansion of walking distance from one-half mile to a full mile,” the group said in an email to its members.

“This expansion means more San Diego single-family neighborhoods will be targeted for overdevelopment.”

Neighbors for a Better San Diego has also criticized the city for deeming properties eligible even if a transit line doesn't yet exist. City rules make properties eligible for transit bonuses if they are near a transit line scheduled to be built by 2035.

The group contends city officials are overly optimistic that people living in new high-rise building and backyard apartments will commute by transit.

City officials say they expect a steadily greater share of San Diego residents to use transit as roads get more congested and as transit options improve.

The development community has endorsed that stance.

“The housing shortage is as serious as it has been and we really need to have as many opportunities as possible to build near transit,” said Matt Adams, a spokesperson for the local chapter of the Building Industry Association.



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Many residents are more skeptical.

“If the city wants to move towards a mass-transit, high-density model similar to Europe's great cities — or even our East Coast cities — there needs to be at a minimum a tenfold increase in existing bus and light-rail routes,” said Dana Olson.

Michael Magers was more blunt in his criticism.

“Increasing the walking distance to 1 mile so you can disregard current zoning laws is un-American,” he said.

Planning Commission Chairman Bill Hofman praised the proposal but expressed concern that making so much land eligible for transit bonuses could reduce the incentive developers have to build directly along transit lines.

“I want to make sure we still have motivation for developers to relocate higher density closer to transit areas,” Hofman said.

Commissioner Matthew Boomhower said the key is adding more housing whenever and wherever possible.

“We need more housing of all types at all price points in every neighborhood in San Diego,” he said.

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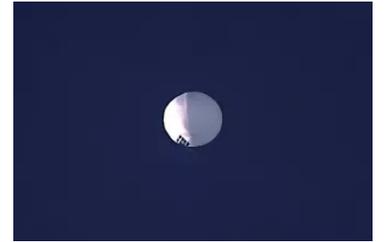


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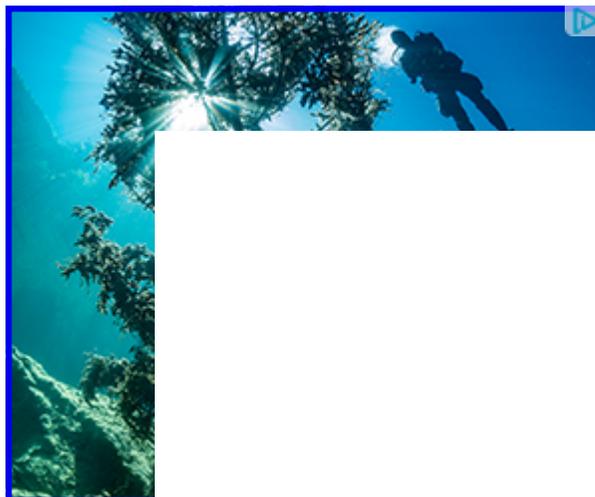
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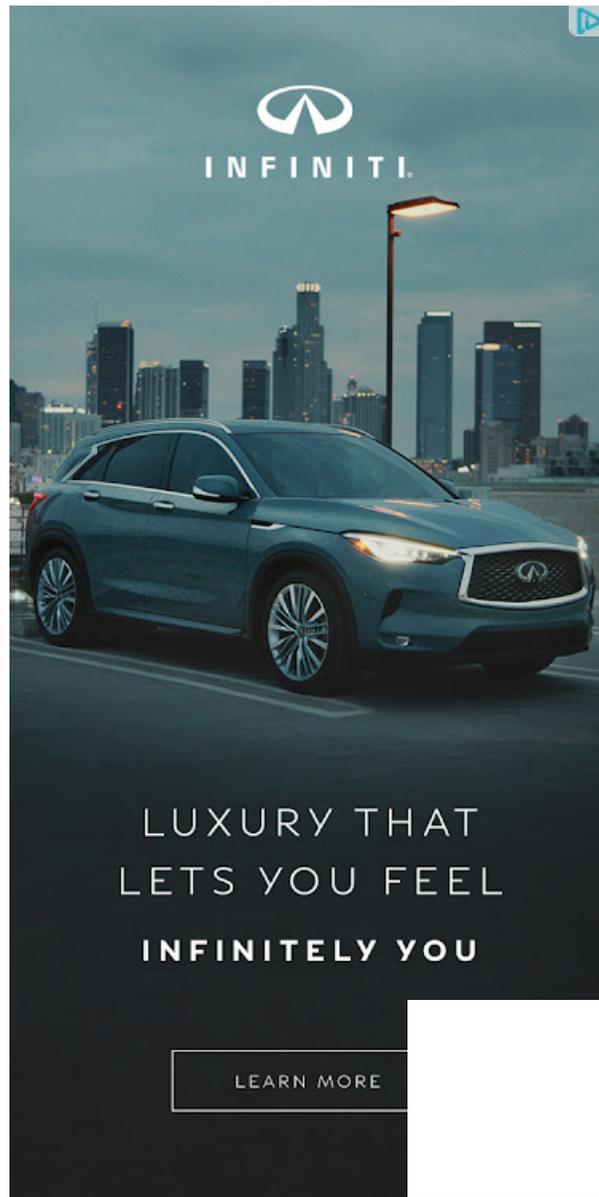
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