

## California Bill Boosting Low-Income Housing Production Passed

The California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) is designed to protect the environment from projects that cause pollution and threaten health. However, residents often use the act as a scapegoat to stall rezoning or development in their communities. Unfortunately, their intentions are often to prevent unhoused people from living in their neighborhoods, for fear that lower-income individuals and affordable housing projects may depreciate the real estate value of their land, among other concerns.

CEQA rules often impose lengthy and costly approval processes which unnecessarily impede efforts to build low-income housing. [It can take several years and millions of dollars](#) to resolve a lawsuit with appeals drawn out for months, if not longer. Rezoning attempts were subjected to an unlimited number of appeals, delaying most projects indefinitely. For example, the Santa Angelina Senior Community was [built in 18 months](#), but it took over six years to plan.

Several nonprofit institutions own large parcels of land that are currently unused. The greatest barriers to creating low-income housing are institutional funding and heavy legislative barriers restricting their ability to rezone property.

### Impact of law SB4 on the situation

To mitigate this issue, law SB4 was drafted and passed. Bill SB4, or the Affordable Housing on Faith-Based Lands Act, was signed into law by California Governor Gavin Newsom on October 11th, 2023. [Newsom claimed](#) that the bill was, “Simple math – California needs to build more housing and ensure the housing we have is affordable”. The law represents one of many solutions to the housing crisis, and as a result, unhoused people.

Senator Scott Weiner initially drafted [the bill](#) to help remove some red tape stopping nonprofit organizations from rezoning unused land to build low-income housing projects. SB 4 makes it legal for nonprofit organizations to build affordable, multi-family homes on lands they own by streamlining the permitting process and overriding local zoning restrictions.

The bill also guarantees “by-right” approval of new homes, as long as they are consistent with all objective building standards and comply with existing environmental protections. In zoning terms, “by right” approval is granted when a development project strictly conforms to the building code, and therefore does not need further inspection by a legal agency. This change aims to end the misuse of the California Environmental Quality Act, which is often invoked to block these types of homes.

One of the requirements outlined [in the bill](#) mandates that all the units be dedicated to low or moderate-income people for at least 55 years. Five percent of the units may be for staff of the organization that owns the land. The bill's provisions will end on Jan. 1, 2036.

## **Background**

Law SB4 paved the way for rapid action in the low-income housing sector, multiple religious institutions were encouraged by the law and are poised to begin their projects. By lowering the fiscal and legal barriers making it difficult to rezone land, the law is allowing more unhoused people to be housed at a quicker pace. This was one of the original reasons the law was proposed, as lawmakers seek solutions to an ever-growing homelessness crisis. In California alone, over a third of the United States' unhoused population resides. As a result, legislative decisions made in California will strongly affect policies in other places that seek to grapple with the homeless crisis.

Now, with the help of law SB4 and completed proof of concept, resistance is starting to dissipate toward creating affordable housing in residential areas. The Episcopal Diocese of Los Angeles is currently dedicating 25 percent of its land across six counties to low-income housing. Now that law SB4 has passed, they are hoping to expand their efforts across all of California.

Now, over [171,000 acres](#) of land can be rezoned to house more low-income and unhoused families. This will help to house 171,521 unhoused people, 115,491 of whom do not currently have shelter of any kind.

The [San Francisco InterFaith Council](#) praised the new law, calling it “a powerful new tool that harnesses the mission of our religious institutions and colleges to address the homebuilding needs of our state.” The law recognizes that faith-based institutions often own large amounts of land, and allows institutions to quickly rezone the land, helping address the housing crisis. In most cases, institutions are excited to implement new projects now that law SB4 has cleared the red tape.

The [Episcopal Diocese of Los Angeles](#) was particularly encouraged by the ruling. Through the development of the Santa Angelina Senior Center, they encountered the restrictions and opposition to affordable housing firsthand. After completing the project, community members and churchgoers were more excited about providing affordable housing. Most residential concerns with affordable housing are, after all, mostly related to neighborhood value and safety. Once both of these concerns are met, most objections fade.

## **Current housing projects**

In fact, in their work with the National CORE, the Diocese is sponsoring another community known as Orchard View Gardens. The facility is being constructed on land owned by St. Joseph's Episcopal Church, thanks to the new zoning agreements provided by law SB4. This project is catered towards seniors, with 8 of its units being reserved specifically for seniors who have been unhoused. Property amenities include a 3,000-square-foot community area, recreational areas, and laundry facilities. The development will be powered using solar panels to achieve net zero carbon emissions, an important goal for the National CORE.

National CORE, a housing nonprofit, is [currently developing nine affordable housing properties](#) in various parts of California. One community, called Ramona Street, is in its proposal phase of development. The nonprofit directly credits the impact of law SB4 for its ability to begin meeting the housing crisis as it collaborates with various local organizations to begin development.