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**NEWS**

# How the Bay Area's Biggest City Wants to Overcome Its Sprawl

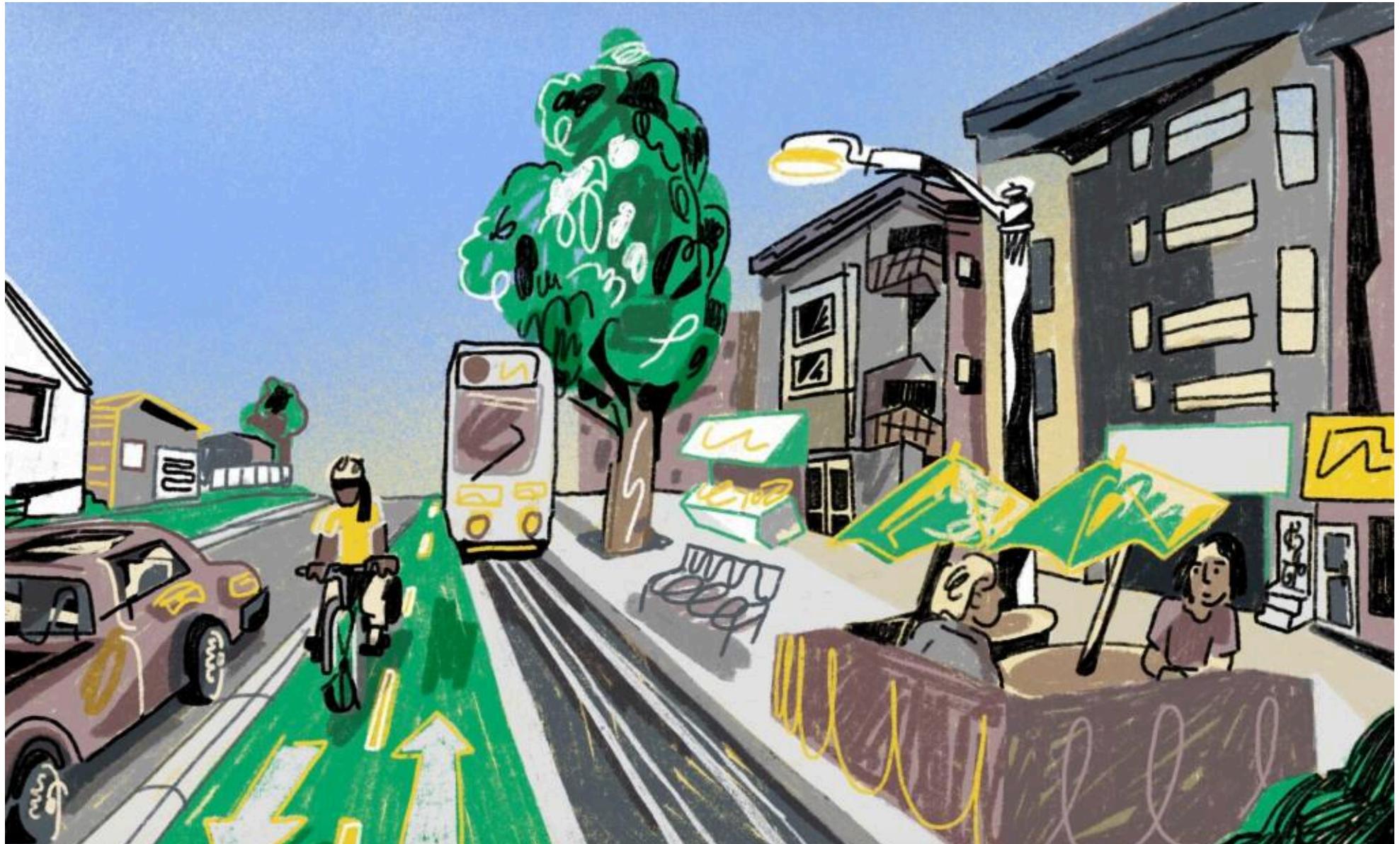
By Adhiti Bandlamudi  Nov 6, 2023

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Monika Rivera really enjoys her commute.

Even though she has to wake up at 5:30 a.m. and travel an hour and 15 minutes to get from her apartment in Hayward, a city east of San Francisco, to her job in San José, she's turned it into a routine. She pops in her earbuds, blasts Taylor Swift's *Maroon*, and rides her gray, Specialized bike to the train station for the rest of her commute.

Ditching her car has been liberating.

"It makes such a big difference in how you feel throughout the day. It makes you feel more connected to the community," she said.

The 29-year-old environmental services worker never thought she'd be a bike commuter. Now, she doesn't want to give it up. Biking and taking BART, the Bay Area's commuter train, to work has made Rivera happier. She exercises more often, and it makes her feel like she's doing her part for the environment, "knowing that I'm not putting all those pollutants into the air every day."

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"The small actions you can take can make a big difference, and just changing your lifestyle, making those habits, are really important," she continued.

**But she's willing to give up that lifestyle to become a homeowner, a lifelong goal she's been working for years to achieve. To do**

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**'At the end of the day, it's really a geometry problem. The amount of land you have in a city is finite, and if you use all of it for single-unit homes, you're going to quickly run out of land to house the people who want to live there.'**

—Matthew Lewis, communications director, California YIMBY.

A former agricultural city, Lathrop has a population that's grown 11% in the past year (PDF) as workers priced out of the Bay Area flocked to the area for its relatively affordable housing. But as they do, those workers commute farther into the cities for their jobs.

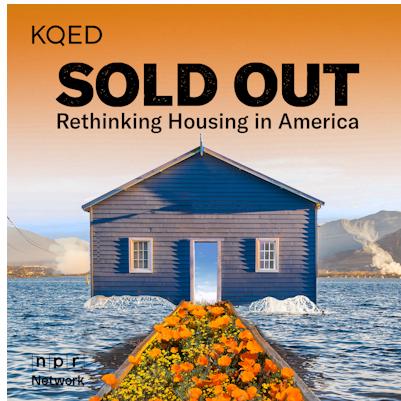
The Bay Area now has the largest share of super commuters nationwide, commuters who spend more than 90 minutes traveling to work or back each day, according to an Apartment List study. Transportation now accounts for nearly half of the state's carbon emissions.

California's housing and climate officials hope to combat these emissions by encouraging — or, in some cases, forcing — cities to allow more apartment buildings to be built near train stations and along major bus routes. In San José, a Silicon Valley city with sprawling single-family neighborhoods and highways that run through the middle, housing advocates and urban planners are trying to redesign its suburban streets into compact, walkable neighborhoods.

"At the end of the day, it's really a geometry problem," said Matthew Lewis, the communications director for the housing advocacy group California YIMBY. "The amount of land you have in a city is finite, and if you use all of it for single-unit homes, you're going to quickly run out of land to house the people who want to live there."

But the shift from suburban to urban hasn't been easy, partially because many of the city's policies favor sprawl and work against the changes planners want to see. Some argue the city's proposals are too ambitious and its development requirements are overly bureaucratic for apartments and commercial spaces to be built quickly and within budget. Housing advocates are pushing for gentler options, like adding smaller homes to existing single-family lots.

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SOLD OUT: Rethinking Housing in America  
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## The urban village plan

More than a decade ago, officials in San José adopted a plan to transform underused lots near train stations into thriving neighborhoods called “urban villages.” State officials say this kind of development is the way forward for California to meet its ambitious housing and climate goals to add 2.5 million new homes to the housing stock and to cut its carbon emissions in half by 2030.

“Given the persistent housing crisis California faces, we know that we’re not going to build our way out of that crisis by building single-family homes,” said Sam Assefa, director of the Governor’s Office for Planning and Research. “More compact, transit-oriented development is the sensible way to do it.”

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In 2011, the city council envisioned 60 of these urban villages spread across the city — tall apartment buildings with stores and restaurants on the ground floor, all built near train stations or along major bus routes. Two years after the city passed the plan, it partnered with local climate advocacy group The Greenbelt Alliance to release a [video](#) championing the idea.

"They promote community, the opportunity to enjoy an outdoor cafe in a public space, meet new people, engage in new conversations, and ultimately build relationships in the community," former mayor Sam Liccardo said in the video.

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But the 12-year-old plan has been slow to come to fruition. So far, only 12 of the 60 villages have been approved, and only a handful of those have been completed. According to a 2019 report from the housing advocacy group SPUR, **developers have admitted to actively avoiding urban village projects (PDF)** due to their cost and the complicated approval process.

"This kind of dense housing is more expensive to build, and the biggest barrier right now — not just for urban villages, but for anything — is the cost of construction," said Michael Brilliot, deputy director of citywide planning for San José. "Cost of construction continues to go up year after year. Interest rates have gone up, so these projects no longer pencil out [for developers]."

The Berryessa BART Urban Village, one of the most highly anticipated pieces of this plan, illustrates the many problems developers and city planners are running up against when trying to bring this urban village vision to life. Situated adjacent to the city's first BART station, which opened in 2020, the development is expected to add more than a thousand new homes and acres of retail space to the area.

Developers have built a 551-unit apartment complex with retail and restaurant space on the ground floor. But two years after the complex opened, the commercial space is mostly vacant, driven by lower demand for retail space since the pandemic.

"I hope to see more people, more entertainment areas, stores — I would hope to see that soon," said Juan Carlos Navarro, who has lived in this neighborhood for the past two decades. "This [block] was all empty before [the apartments were built]."

But, advocates for pedestrian-friendly design argue that the urban village is still too focused on cars. A large parking lot serving a strip mall with a Safeway, a Dunkin Donuts and a CVS next door to the apartment complex is rarely full, and the apartments' residents have to cross a busy, four-lane thoroughfare to get there.

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At the Berryessa BART Urban Village, for instance, developers are preparing to start construction on another section that promises 850 new homes along with commercial and retail space. But city law requires developers to build a row of single-family homes and townhomes to act as a buffer between the low- and high-density neighborhoods.

"I represent urban development, so I'd put a high-rise on every corner," said Erik Schoennauer, a land-use consultant working with developers on this project. "But it's not my decision. We are simply implementing what the city told us to do."

The city's urban village plan also requires developers to build office space along with housing. But even before the pandemic, demand for new offices declined, Schoennauer said. After the pandemic, that demand is even lower.

"It makes no financial sense to invest \$100 million in overall infrastructure for a new neighborhood, when half of the site has ~~no development potential as office~~," Schoennauer said.

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While these projects aim to serve environmentally conscious home-seekers like Rivera, the units aren't coming to the market fast enough. And Rivera is skeptical about whether those homes will be truly affordable for her.

"I find the areas of mostly any city that are affordable are always the ones far away from the nice restaurants or coffee shops," she said. "I always see new construction and condos going up close to BART. That's the selling point. And those are always the more pricey condos or apartments."

## Making the most out of San José's land

While the city focuses on increasing housing around transit, housing advocates argue it's missing another opportunity: adding smaller homes to existing single-family lots.

**More than 90%** of the city's residential land is zoned for single-family homes, which means for decades, only one home could be built on each lot.

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**'The resource we have [in San José] is big lots with a bunch of unusable parking [and] garages being used as storage containers. Turn that garage into an ADU, and we can double our housing stock.'**

—Kelly Snider, director, San José State Real Estate Development Certificate program

That changed around 2015 after state and local laws started to ease restrictions to build accessory dwelling units — often called granny flats, casitas or in-law units — which housing advocates say empower homeowners to make the most out of their single-family lots by renting out the backyard cottages or converted garages.

Their popularity soared after the state passed a series of laws over the past five years requiring cities to make it easier to build them. San José has embraced the concept, passing local measures that streamline the approval process.

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"The resource we have [in San José] is big lots with a bunch of unusable parking [and] garages being used as storage containers," Snider said. "Turn that garage into an ADU, and we can double our housing stock."

Because ADUs don't require a homeowner to purchase new land or pay for major new infrastructure, parking or elevators, they are often cheaper to build than apartments, [according to California's Department of Housing and Community Development](#).

The city has taken steps to make the permitting process easier. In 2021, San José officials created a process that allows homeowners to select a pre-approved ADU design and receive a permit the same day. This year, Gov. Gavin Newsom signed AB 1332, which takes that local initiative statewide.

Some argue that ADUs don't make a meaningful dent in the city's housing shortage because not all enter the rental market. But Snider argues they could still help create an influx of new housing San José has struggled to add over the past decade.

"If we build 30,000 [ADUs] and half of them are turned into home offices and gyms, that's still 15,000 more new homes," Snider said.

Two years ago, she partnered with Raul Lozano, a local food justice activist who was frustrated by the process of trying to split his San José home into two units.

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"I was introduced to Raul, and he was like, 'Yeah, whatever you can do, I would love it if other young families could live here,'" Snider said. "It was his dream that started it."

She bought Lozano's house in 2021 and built a two-bedroom ADU in the backyard where Lozano lived until he passed away in February. Two of his colleagues, who had previously been living in their cars, have moved into the ADU.

The main house has been converted into two apartments, one of which Snider rents out for \$1,500 a month, far below San José's **\$3,000 median rent**. She plans to turn the other apartment into a daycare center.

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"I'm just charging a rent that covers my costs," Snider said. "It is a revenue source for me, but I'm not charging the highest possible rents."

Inspired by her experience with Lozano, Snider started Inca Homes, a company that aims to help homeowners build ADUs and split their homes into separate units to add more housing in the city.

"The stuff San José has done to ease ADU restrictions is good," Snider said. "They can do that more and get more results. They know the knob, and they've already started twisting it. They just need to twist it further. We have to mine housing out of the resource we have."

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