

Residential Real Estate Guest Opinion

Guest opinion: Drafting a blueprint for a better Bay Area

By Fred Blackwell – Leslye Corsiglia, and Michael Covarrubias
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Every day, the headlines bring more confirmation of the grim reality of California's housing crisis. Soaring rents and astronomical housing prices. Record-low homeownership rates. Long-time residents leaving the state — or strongly considering it. Poverty. Homelessness. The list goes on.

The recent approval of a major housing package by the California Legislature comes as welcome relief from this onslaught of bad news. With new funding for affordable housing and reforms aimed at sparking more housing production, the package represents a commitment from state legislators and the governor to push housing solutions that will work for all Californians.

These state actions, however, are just the start of the changes needed to address the housing crisis. Here in the Bay Area, we have all the problems that exist at the state level, but worse. More reform, more funding, more policy innovation will be needed to truly move the needle on our region's chronic housing affordability challenges. But how can the Bay Area build on the momentum created by the state? How can we produce more housing for all while protecting our most vulnerable residents — so that more people can continue to call the Bay Area “home” without undue financial hardship?

This is where our group comes in. Together, we are co-chairing a new initiative called CASA — The Committee to House the Bay Area. With support from the Metropolitan Transportation Commission (MTC), the nine-county Bay Area's transportation planning, financing and coordinating agency, CASA is bringing together nearly 50 leaders from across the region to, in plain terms, figure this thing out.

As an affordable-housing advocate, market-rate housing developer and philanthropist dedicated to racial and economic equity, each of us have our own perspective on how to move the region forward. The people serving on the committee also represent a diverse cross-section of stakeholders and constituencies: Elected officials, market-rate and affordable housing developers, non-profits, labor, business, social equity organizations,

environmental advocates, transportation providers and the technology industry. They all have their own reservoirs of deeply considered, and sometimes differing, ideas about getting the Bay Area on the right track out of this housing crisis.

This is because the Bay Area has not one but many crises – not nearly enough housing production, a “missing middle” of market-rate affordability, gentrification and displacement disproportionately affecting low-income residents and communities of color and not enough affordable housing for our most vulnerable neighbors, among others. Rather than minor policy changes, or limited funding infusions, we will be asking our CASA partners to propose bold, groundbreaking actions that will move the needle on these difficult, seemingly intractable problems.

Our perspective is that solutions must be forged through a consistent lens of meeting the region’s long-term needs and by participants being willing to compromise on behalf of the greater good. We hope that the support of the Metropolitan Transportation Commission, CASA’s hosts and conveners, will help us structure a big-picture, regional and long-term view. The ultimate hope is getting to a “Grand Bargain” amongst all the stakeholders at the table that will allow us to chart a path forward.

We will set a very high bar for agreement, such that only actions that enjoy near-total consensus amongst CASA participants will be approved. Getting to this level of consensus among so many different interests may seem like a tall order, but recent, similar efforts have seen some success, including the Housing Affordability and Livability Agenda (HALA) in Seattle. After a sometimes contentious process, a diverse, 28-member stakeholder group was ultimately able to approve 65 policy recommendations and a “Grand Bargain” around one of the Seattle’s thorniest issues: inclusionary zoning.

Ultimately, we hope to develop a suite of integrated legislative, financial, policy and regulatory recommendations that together will form a Regional Housing Implementation Strategy for the nine-county region, with a final report scheduled for release in late 2018.

CASA officially kicked off its efforts in September. Buckle your seatbelts.

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