

YIMBYism is as progressive as it gets

Bilal Mahmood

Aug. 5, 2022



YIMBYism is one of the few policy platforms providing data and evidence-based solutions to advancing the human condition.

Jessica Christian/The Chronicle 2018

Pop quiz — which of these statements was made by a progressive?

Person A: “Ending single-family zoning ... is demolishing homes to put up rental units. (It’s just for) real estate developers to make more money.”

Person B: “What we need to know about our housing crisis, is that the reason why people are on the streets ... is because we’ve chosen not to build.”

If one solely followed San Francisco politics, you may think Person A was the progressive. In fact, it was Tucker Carlson.

Person B is an actual progressive — Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. And her brand of housing reform, progressive YIMBYism, is quickly spreading throughout our country.

Why? Because YIMBYism *is* progressive in its policy goals.

Progressivism is a movement to advance the human condition through social reform. Its policies are based on the idea that government should have a role in ensuring a social safety net — be it through tenant protections, guaranteed income or affordable housing. It asserts that wealth taxes are a sustainable mechanism to fund those objectives equitably. And it insists that fighting against climate change through government action is an imperative for ensuring an equitable habitat for future generations.

In other words, progressivism is about fighting inequality to protect the most vulnerable. And YIMBYism works in concert with that vision.

YIMBYism is a movement to advance more housing for all through a “yes in my backyard” approach to development. Its policies are centered around the fact that housing laws, such as exclusionary zoning and byzantine permitting processes, make it impossible to build housing. YIMBYism is saying “yes” to social reform that gets rid of the laws that benefit the wealthy and prejudice against historically marginalized communities by developing for future generations.

And while some may claim the movement is run by developer shills — with less empathy for tenants rights or rent stability — that assertion couldn’t be further from the truth.

Many progressive YIMBYs believe that housing policies have to work in concert with other progressive frameworks to achieve our vision of housing for all. We believe both market-rate and affordable housing are necessary to build what we need to support future generations. We understand that social housing — mixed-income development on government-owned land — is an effective model for

filling in a missing affordable supply. We believe rent control and eviction protection is necessary to help communities remain in their homes. We believe redesigning our cities to be denser and less reliant on cars is a powerful lever to fight climate change.

YIMBYism isn't opposed to tenant protections, public financing, community benefits and taxing the wealthy. These policies support our vision.

YIMBYism is thus not just a complement, but a necessary means, to achieve a progressive society.

Many urban cities like San Francisco claim to be bastions for progressive values. But if you don't build housing at all levels, working people can't live there. If they can't live where the economic opportunities are, other progressive values like abortion rights and marriage equality are de facto out of reach.

What good is a progressive society if no one can afford to live in it?

YIMBYism can help progressivism reach its ideals. It rightly notes that if you improve socioeconomic outcomes, you also improve socioeconomic and racial equality. YIMBYism is an example of "supply-side" progressivism — if you focus on increasing the supply of housing by ending restrictive and exclusionary zoning laws, you improve equitable outcomes through increased supply.

The data proves this. According to a UC Berkeley Turner Center study, cities with a standard deviation increase in zoned capacity saw a 30% increase in housing permits. Cities with new buildings saw a 5%-7% reduction in cost of rent. And cities with lower costs of rent saw a 300% comparative reduction in homelessness.

YIMBYism is one of the few policy platforms providing data and evidence-based solutions to advancing the human condition.

It's no wonder then that the next generation of BIPOC activists are increasingly progressive YIMBYs.

In fact, contrary to the belief that the movement is just for white men, the most prominent spokespersons of YIMBYism are actually Black activists like Darrell Owens, LatinX politicians like Sunnyvale Vice Mayor Alysa Cisneros and Assembly Member Rob Rivas, LGBTQ leaders like Laura Foote and state Sen. Scott Wiener, Asian American representatives like BART Director Janice Li and Assembly Member Alex Lee, and female leaders like Annie Fryman and Assembly Member Buffy Wicks.

These YIMBYs are not “shills” for developers. In 2022 alone, YIMBY endorsed political candidates like Redwood City Mayor Giselle Hale were heavily attacked by a political action committee co-organized by the California Building Industry Association. Assembly Member Lee was infamously attacked by the same group for being “a socialist democrat who ‘lives with his mom.’” (As if that’s a bad thing!?)

So the next time you ask yourself whether you’re a progressive, I ask you to consider whether your housing platform sounds more like AOC or Carlson.

Because in cities where we need 66% approval to pass funding measures, where we need consensus to build more housing and more transit, we can’t build if we don’t unite. And if we don’t build, we won’t have housing that everyone can afford to live in. And if our most vulnerable can’t afford to live here, how will they enjoy our progressive freedoms?

YIMBYism is how we can ensure equitable access to that progressive future.

Bilal Mahmood is a civil servant and entrepreneur, and board member at SF YIMBY.

Conversation146 Comments

petalumapatt

5 August, 2022

YIMBY is misleading because most of the advocates are not talking about building large (250 - 400+ units) without adequate parking or access to nearby

grocery/laundry/etc. stores in THEIR backyard - they want it built in yours. These type of dwellings are hard to fill up and many units in similar buildings already built remain vacant. Yes, we need more moderate housing for mid level income workers such as teachers, nurses, and others. I support a more nuanced approach making sure size & location do not dwarf available resources or overwhelm neighborhoods where others are so anxious to build.

JustLooking

6 August, 2022

CA, YIMBY is the combined lobbying arm of SVLG & the love child of ABAG. It's as politically & money driven/backed group in this region as we've seen in a long while. (Think insurance lobby type muscle.) Between ABAG & Yimby upzoning policies (what a developer giveaway upzoning has been!) they have also managed to all but criminalize vehicle parking (well, vehicles, altogether) open space, infrastructure costs & who will be paying for them, water needs & city services in general... By the time most residents - who were not already actively involved with their city planning and/or following what was going on at the regional/state level with ABAG - it was basically too late to even try to get involved and have a say in how the policies were being formed & foisted upon us. And this is what we're left with...ABAG & SVLG driven YIMBY directing policy...

ilikeitwarm

5 August, 2022

Why do we need more moderate housing for mid level workers? Teachers and nurses and others are already here.

comandrcodpiece

6 August, 2022

"Scr* you I got mine."

brandonpowell

5 August, 2022

No, we want it in our back yards, too. The entire city should be upzoned.

mmmail2

22 August, 2022

It has been thanks to SB50. So has the entire state. BTW, after 24 years of drought, where are we supposed to get the water for all these new housing units? Why are we continuing to encourage migration to drought areas like CA?

ilikeitwarm

5 August, 2022

Why should the entire city be upzoned? It would destroy the quality of life some neighborhoods now enjoy.

onebeerhudson

5 August, 2022

Do you own a backyard?

brandonpowell

5 August, 2022

LOL. Nice try. Land use is relevant to everyone, whether they own or rent.

mmmail2

22 August, 2022

Replying to brandonpowell

Where are we to get the water? Don't say desalinization, b/c it would take at least ten years to meet current demand and the amount of energy necessary would require building several nuclear power plants and creating millions of acres of toxic waste dumps.

onebeerhudson

5 August, 2022

Replying to brandonpowell

Don't dodge my question. You can't put it in your backyard unless you own one. Obviously I and the others were right when we said you want to put it in somebody else's backyard.

brandonpowell

5 August, 2022

Replying to onebeerhudson

It's not a dodge. Your question is irrelevant and an attempt to frame land use policy as the sole domain of land owners. "Yes In My Back Yard" may mean literally one's back yard or simply near one's home. There is nothing in policies advocated by YIMBY which compels anyone to build anything in their literal back yard. But you shouldn't be able to tell someone they can't because you don't want to.

ilikeitwarm

5 August, 2022

Replying to brandonpowell

As a renter are you concerned you will be priced out of the City?

brandonpowell

5 August, 2022

Replying to ilikeitwarm

Again, nice try, but still not answering the question.

ilikeitwarm

6 August, 2022

Replying to brandonpowell

I will if you answer my question.

Nhantada

5 August, 2022

YIMBYS just support building homes, simple as that. Small, large, market rate, affordable, old people, young people, urban, rural. Just. Build. Homes.

Just-Jake

5 August, 2022

Wrong once again. Yimby political lobbyists are directly attacking cities, mayors, council members and communities statewide. Expect a 2024 ballot initiative to restore the authority for local land use.

comandrcodpiece

6 August, 2022

You wealthy homeowners who have shut out two generations from being able to afford California are no longer the majority. You will get crushed at the ballot.

Just-Jake

6 August, 2022

Replying to comandrcodpiece

Ah, you do have a sense of humor....

Nhantada

5 August, 2022

Bring it, NIMBYs

ilikeitwarm

5 August, 2022

As a construction professional no doubt you are in favor of building more homes.

onebeerhudson

5 August, 2022

YIMBY is misleading because few of them have backyards. They want to cram their housing into other people's backyards.

force2drinkswil

5 August, 2022

YIMBYs are rude -- they came out of the chute rude

Just-Jake

5 August, 2022

Someone is sounding quite defensive. This author tries so hard to ignore the huge developer funds propping up this group. (Scott Wiener is the TOP recipient of those astroturf bucks). And "build, build, build" - the known cheer of the gang, translates as "steamroll over local governance" to provide their top-down mandates to abolish zoning and disintegrate established neighborhoods. Don't fall for the trope, do your own thinking. Providing housing isn't the exclusive domain of yimbys, we've always been building housing in the Bay Area - it's the how and the where that matter. As opposed to this group that wants to rubber-stamp approval for big real estate aspirations.

Montana_Joe

5 August, 2022

It's not "defensive" to advocate for building more housing in a city and region suffering a housing crisis. It's common sense. What isn't common sense is your beloved "local control," which in practice means that corrupt supervisors and their patronage non-profits file pretextual CEQA suits or invoke discretionary review to extort cash payouts from groups that actually want to build housing in

a housing crisis. It's not "steamrolling" a neighborhood to build more housing. What is actually steamrolling neighborhoods is our decades-long practice of not allowing housing to be built, which prices families out of the city and results in the madness we all see every day on our streets.

- M

mmmail2

22 August, 2022

Nearly 150,000 affordable housing permits have been granted to developers. They have taken the money but are not building b/c they cannot be guaranteed the return they are legally able to demand.

ROBERT1286

5 August, 2022

What housing crisis? The only crisis I see is that there's too much already. Not everybody that wants to live here can.

ilikeitwarm

5 August, 2022

What housing crisis? How will we know when the crisis is over? Increasing density raises not lowers prices.

Just-Jake

5 August, 2022

Great example of selective reasoning.

Chaotrix

5 August, 2022

So build housing in Montana. See how many flock to your state.

ilikeitwarm

5 August, 2022

Makes sense. If housing causes people, then increasing the supply anywhere should work.

Chaotrix

5 August, 2022

Replying to ilikeitwarm

And Montana has lots of space for housing.

force2drinkswil

5 August, 2022

a-s-t-r-o-t-u-r-f

Nhantada

5 August, 2022

Nope, it's absolutely people under 40 who have been priced out of homeownership and are drowning in rental costs that are driving YIMBYism

ilikeitwarm

5 August, 2022

San Francisco is the least rent burdened county in the State. People under 40 have become home owners. The average age of first time buyers is under 40.

onebeerhudson

5 August, 2022

No. Their sound is very offensive.

taxpayer

5 August, 2022

Housing and jobs are both important. What is also important is on-going funding. We are the 2nd most densely populated city in the country. We are also losing both high net worth and middle class residents. How are we going to support the infrastructure for an even more densely populated city when there is not enough tax revenue and spending at small and large businesses? It is a very delicate balance that we seem to be making unbalanced. What will we look like in 15-20 years? Should we only incent the unfortunate or do we need to incent at least the middle class to stay to help pay for our future?

Nhantada

5 August, 2022

The increased tax base and development fees afford the infrastructure. Same as it has always been.

mmmail2

22 August, 2022

Developers pay a small fine for not building affordable housing or they can say they will build in a less desirable area then never do it. Or they can build dangerous units. then shutter the shell company that built the units. Toll Bros. & Lennar who built all those affordable units over the toxic waste site in Hunters Point did just that. The affordable units in Mission Bay are sinking and there is no one to sue b/c the companies no longer exist.

ilikeitwarm

5 August, 2022

The Bay Area and the City appears to have stopped growing. Probably due to the infrastructure, especially the transportation infrastructure. Traffic is one of the top 3 reasons people gave for leaving the Bay Area. The problem is finding money to improve the infrastructure. Taxes was one of the other reasons for leaving.

Chaotrix

5 August, 2022

The pro-development crowd never brings up infrastructure.

onebeerhudson

5 August, 2022

Developers want existing residents to pay for their infrastructure i.e., their cost of doing business. Many cities have sewer rate ordinances that say that require the fees charged to existing residents shall be set high enough to pay for expansion of the sewer system.

Chaotrix

5 August, 2022

It's way more than that. You can't buy water or electricity that doesn't exist.

onebeerhudson

5 August, 2022

Replying to Chaotrix

Watch you electric bill go up to pay for more generation to meet the needs of developers.

onebeerhudson

5 August, 2022

The whole world cannot live in the United States. The entire United States cannot live in California (and apparently doesn't want to). All of California cannot live along the coast. California is a finite place with a finite amount of land, water, freeways, open space, etc. If you try to force ten gallons into a five gallon container the container will burst.

brandonpowell

5 August, 2022

Sure, but we are nowhere near that point. We have about two gallons in this five-gallon container.

ilikeitwarm

5 August, 2022

If traffic is an indicator we are well passed that point.

brandonpowell

5 August, 2022

Car culture is also a problem we'd like to address. Denser cities make non-car travel options more viable, reducing greenhouse gas emissions and other car-generate pollution.

onebeerhudson

5 August, 2022

Replying to brandonpowell

Car culture is not a problem. It is something most of us enjoy. It is freedom to go where you want, when you want, and with who you want. It is much safer than public transportation. Public transportation is like jail in that you have no control over who you are exposed to. The same can be said of ...**See more**

comandrcodpiece

6 August, 2022

Replying to onebeerhudson

You are far more likely to get hurt in a car than on public transportation. Freedom is being able to walk or bicycle. You are at the mercy of oil truant and the government. Sitting in line at the DMV is the opposite of freedom.

ilikeitwarm

5 August, 2022

Replying to brandonpowell

Cars are a blessing. They allow people live and work where they like. Most don't like to live in the urban core. Wouldn't electric vehicles address your concern?

comandrcodpiece

6 August, 2022

Replying to ilikeitwarm

I assume you don't intend to stick around long enough to deal with the mess global warming is making of the planet.

onebeerhudson

5 August, 2022

Only if you are willing to live like the Japanese. I am NOT! We have a water shortage now. Freeways are parking lots. It is almost impossible for a middle class white kid to get admitted to the University of California in part because developers pay no impact fees for services provided by the state such as higher education. Ditto for freeways and water projects.

brandonpowell

5 August, 2022

Dense urban living reduces per capita water usage, so if that's your concern, you should want greater density. And Prop 13 is responsible for the steady slide of educational opportunity in California. I'm up for its repeal, too.

Tulebox

5 August, 2022

Replying to brandonpowell

It's Magical thinking you yimbys are engaged in. Adding a lot of dense housing, which has been, and is currently being done in cities across the state, (seen a game to Oracle park lately?) adds to the overall amount of water being used by the state even if those users, on a per capita basis use less. This is the ultimate issue when it comes to water resources, how much overall water is used, not just per capita usage. Yimby's also disregard the fact that people don't want, and are not choosing to live in dense areas, but rather remote homes, with yards and garages...

onebeerhudson

5 August, 2022

Replying to brandonpowell

Nothing reduces the demand for water better than a lower population. As I said, I don't want to live at high density. Not only do I not want the deterioration in living conditions, the destruction of scenery, the crime, and the air pollution, but crowding creates Malthusian conditions that destroy cordiality among the people. I hate crowding.

ilikeitwarm

5 August, 2022

Replying to brandonpowell

That may be true, but most people don't want more density. It does not matter what One beer wants. Prop 13 has nothing to do with educational opportunity in California.

Just-Jake

5 August, 2022

Replying to brandonpowell

Stay up to date: Californias educational spending recently went thru the roof. And we should stop growing almonds long before we use water as an excuse for your stack & pack dreams.

ilikeitwarm

5 August, 2022

Most Japanese live in single-family homes. Japan stopped growing some time ago.

onebeerhudson

5 August, 2022

Replying to ilikeitwarm

On very small lots with very small rooms because the population of Japan has grossly exceeded the comfort level. Japanese hotel rooms are very "efficient". But I do love sushi, sashimi, and tempura.

ilikeitwarm

5 August, 2022

Replying to onebeerhudson

The average size of an owned housing unit is 1,300 square feet ranging from 980 to 1,920.

onebeerhudson

5 August, 2022

Replying to ilikeitwarm

What per cent of single family homes are owner occupied in Japan? You didn't say anything about lot size. I imagine they are much like SF where houses are built so close together that nobody can walk between them.

ilikeitwarm

5 August, 2022

Replying to onebeerhudson

I don't know but 60% live in a single-family home. I have seen detached, or semi detached like in SF. It depends where. From the train it looked like most single-family homes on the outskirts of Tokyo were semi detached like the Sunset in San Francisco. But in Tokyo I saw actual detached homes with landscaped front yards.

ilikeitwarm

5 August, 2022

Replying to onebeerhudson

It depends where in Japan. My hotel room in Tokyo had barely enough room to turn around. Japan's population stopped growing.

Just-Jake

5 August, 2022

... because stack&pack, right? Put it to a vote perhaps, then we can put that nonsense to rest.

onebeerhudson

5 August, 2022

Actually, Article XXXIV of the California Constitution requires a vote of the people in any local jurisdiction that proposes to build subsidized housing.

comandrcodpiece

6 August, 2022

I sure hope someone invents a way to put one house on top of another house. We could call them apartments and use stairs and elevators to move between them.

onebeerhudson

6 August, 2022

Now you have to invent people who want to live in them; invent water to shower in; invent space on freeways; invent some recreational land, invent space at public universities; invent some farmland to feed them; etc.

Nhantada

5 August, 2022

We aren't building enough housing for our own kids, let alone the rest of the US. SF is the most childless city because housing costs too much to raise a family here. NIMBYism is anti-family.

ilikeitwarm

5 August, 2022

There is no relationship between families with children and income. Families with children are found in single-family neighborhoods. There is a relationship between lower density and more children. In any case, building more housing as not and will not make it more affordable.

comandrcodpiece

5 August, 2022

Where will the next generation of San Franciscans live? We are creating and exclusionary and wealthy city by blocking new housing construction and contributing to sprawl. There is a moral and environmental reason to build more housing now, at all income levels. Billal is right and so are the YIMBYs.

ilikeitwarm

5 August, 2022

The next generation will live in SF. Adding more housing will not eliminate sprawl. We are not blocking housing. There are approved projects that have not broken ground. They can't find investors. In the past 20 years, 60K units have been approved and 53K actually built. In any case SF appears to have stopped growing.

Nhantada

5 August, 2022

It's so hypocritical that the Sierra club doesn't support urban housing. It's better for the environment in every single way. The Sierra Club has been captured by old wealthy landowners who want to keep out "those people".

YahooThom

5 August, 2022

The next generation of San Franciscan will be wealthier, so they can afford to live there. The Poor need to leave. It really is that simple. Where are the next generation of Carmel, Bel-Air, Beverly Hills, Orinda, Lafayette, San Ramon, Stinson Beach, San Rafael, Mill Valley going to live??? LOL

ilikeitwarm

5 August, 2022

That is the trend. Younger people in SF have more education than older people. That trend started 60 years ago.

Chaotrix

5 August, 2022

First off, no one thinks person A is progressive. Second, whether you realize it or not, you **are** shills for developers. And finally, YIMBY isn't "Yes in my back yard" it's really "Yes in **your** back yard". Progressive would gladly force everyone else to follow their misguided policies.

comandrcodpiece

6 August, 2022

Building housing for people who need it is as progressive as you can get. Getting rich off the housing shortage you created and the suffering of others is the definition of greed.

Nhantada

5 August, 2022

NIMBYS are just shills for landlords.

ilikeitwarm

5 August, 2022

Are there any examples in California of mixed income development on government owned land? That could work if taxpayers are willing to pay. Will people vote to increase their taxes? In any case, how has affordable housing benefited the City? We have had affordable housing for many years. Any positive results?

urbanist2

5 August, 2022

There are several successful mixed-income developments that have been built recently in California. Hunters View in San Francisco is rebuilding a former public housing project into a new neighborhood, increasing the density and adding both affordable and market rate housing. The +750-unit development is now managed by the John Stewart Company and is half way to completion. The same is true at Jordan Downs in Watts, Los Angeles. There a previously all public housing 100-acre 700-unit site is being rebuilt into a mixed-income neighborhood with as many as 1,500 dwellings, both public housing and

affordable without any displacement. This development on land owned by the Housing Authority of the City of Los Angeles (HACLA) is being managed by a partnership between BRIDGE and The Michaels Company. Both sites had empty parcels available to allow the initial phases to be built and occupied before any demolition took place so that the communities were able to remain in place.

ilikeitwarm

5 August, 2022

I am aware there are maybe around 30,000 government subsidized housing unit in SF. Is that what social housing means. How is success of these projects measured? Hunter's view is mixed-income? How many high income people live there? What do the market rate units rent for?

Just-Jake

5 August, 2022

Hunters Point housing is not on government land. Nothing was built until it became private land.

WatchingPaintDry

5 August, 2022

It bears frequent repeating. YIMBY is the wrong term. It should be YIYBY-Yes In Your Backyard.

mmmail2

22 August, 2022

YIMBYS fail to look at the main reason housing prices are rising: income disparity. According to FInCen and a host of studies, the main drivers on housing

costs are luxury housing, real estate speculation, and international investment vehicles. A rich guy comes into a neighborhood of \$1m houses, pays \$2m for a house, now all the houses are worth \$2m. Nothing has changed except the amount of money available. The power of money overrides everything. Tech & Finance now account for nearly 30% of all jobs in the SF Bay Area followed by janitorial staff. The difference income between those two jobs is staggering. A tech or finance worker is likely to be in the 35% of multi-millionaires who reside in SF, but work on the peninsula. Meanwhile, the janitorial staff comes in on a bus or drives in from Antioch. This creates the dreaded sprawl this density is supposed to fix. The population of San Francisco has only grown by 100,000 in the last 50 years, but housing prices have increased by 2850%. A house in SF in 1950 cost \$61,000 in current dollars; median home price now is \$1.8m. The population has not increased, wealth disparity has.

ilikeitwarm

5 August, 2022

The private sector won't increase the supply unless there is a demand. How will increasing the supply improve socioeconomic and racial equality?

brandonpowell

5 August, 2022

The price of housing is incontrovertible evidence of the demand.

ilikeitwarm

5 August, 2022

I suppose so. As it is now, or was before new construction has come to a halt, developers built for demand created by high wage workers competing for housing closer to work. It looks like these high wage workers are now competing for homes in the suburbs. The market appears to be cooling. More units on the market longer, and a decline in overbidding. That approved projects in SF have

not broken ground because they can't find investors may be evidence of a reduced demand. We shall see.

brandonpowell

5 August, 2022

The cost of housing is baked into the cost of building more housing, too. The tradespeople have to live here, so the price of their labor goes up with housing costs and/or they get priced out and we get a shortage of labor to build more housing. Add in the burdensome planning approval process which...**See more**

ilikeitwarm

5 August, 2022

Replying to brandonpowell

I am not following. If you eliminate high-wage workers, housing will be more affordable? I agree, construction costs are variable and determine price. If more construction workers lived in SF construction cost would come down? You get more construction workers by streamlining the process? In any case, it is a myth that if you streamline the process, you can build until prices come down. That is not the way financing works.