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What Can Be Done to Speed Up Building Approval for Multifamily Housing in Transit-Accessible Locations?

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Issue

California's legislature has attempted to address the state's housing affordability crisis in recent years by adopting numerous laws encouraging new development in transit-accessible and/or jobs-rich areas, but the evidence concerning the impacts of these laws on housing development remains largely anecdotal. In particular, policymakers lack adequate information concerning: (1) the types of neighborhoods where developers are more likely to build; and (2) the causes of delays in approvals for proposed projects in jobs-rich and transit-accessible areas.

In new research, scholars from UC Irvine and UC Berkeley address this problem by drawing on a unique project-level dataset, the Comprehensive Assessment of Land Use Entitlements (CALES), to analyze development projects including five or more residential units that were approved for development from 2014 through 2017 in six cities: Inglewood, Long Beach, Los Angeles, Pasadena, Redondo Beach, and Santa Monica.

Key Research Findings

Approval times for discretionary projects varied substantially among the study cities. California land-use law provides for either discretionary or ministerial review of development proposals. A discretionary review process provides one or more government agencies with the authority to deny a development application, even

if the proposed project conforms to the density and use requirements imposed by the applicable zoning ordinance. If the required review is ministerial, then the application must be approved so long as it complies with applicable objective standards. Among the six cities studied, only Los Angeles allowed for ministerial review of multifamily projects. By far the fastest approval times for discretionary projects were in Redondo Beach; however, there may be many reasons for this. For example, projects in Redondo Beach were relatively small — the average number of units per discretionary project was 30, as compared with (for example) 78 units in Los Angeles and 96 units in Long Beach. Smaller projects might be relatively easy to develop as they are likely to have less impact on a neighborhood than larger projects, and therefore, engender less opposition.

The odds of a project's approval being extremely delayed (i.e., in the 80th percentile) increased by 326% if the project required a zoning or general plan amendment. Cities could expedite transit-accessible housing development by ensuring that general plans and zoning accommodate multifamily development near transit, and/or streamlining the approval process, such as Los Angeles's Transit Oriented Communities (TOC) program that allows transit-proximate projects to receive ministerial approvals coupled with density bonuses beyond what is allowed by the underlying zoning ordinance.

Among the cities with good transit access, projects of five units or more were concentrated in relatively transit-

accessible areas. This general pattern persists across all the study cities except for Redondo Beach, which had no neighborhoods near high-frequency bus or rail stops. As expected, new developments had generally higher transit accessibility in cities with greater bus and rail accessibility overall.

Multi-family housing developments tended to be in neighborhoods where most housing was relatively recently developed. For example, the odds of at least one project being permitted in a neighborhood where the median housing unit was built after 1999 were 541.6% higher than where the median housing unit was built before 1940.

Projects were less likely to be built in neighborhoods with higher rates of owner-occupied housing. Projects were more likely to be found in areas near wealthy neighborhoods, but not within those affluent neighborhoods.

More Information

This policy brief is drawn from the report Factors Affecting Development Decisions and the Approval Process for Housing Projects in Transit-Accessible and Jobs-Rich Areas in Southern California prepared by Nicholas J. Marantz, Doug Houston, Jae Hong Kim, Narae Lee with the University of California, Irvine; and Moira O'Neill, Eric Biber, and Giulia Gualco-Nelson with the University of California, Berkeley. The report can be found at www.ucits.org/research-project/2021-37. For more information about the findings presented in this brief, please contact Nicholas J. Marantz at nmarantz@uci.edu.

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