

We can't afford our hometown

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When the next Housing Element cycle ends, I'll be 35 and most of my friends will be married, looking for a home to settle down in. Los Altos's next Housing Element will decide whether any of us can settle down in our hometown.

This town is where we grew up and became ourselves, and every corner evokes a memory, perhaps of a quick run to the Sweet Shop, a last song at a LAYC dance, mischief at Shoup Park, or extra innings at the Hillview baseball field. A hometown like Los Altos is more than just a town; it's an anchor and a place that always feels like home.

And yet, few of us born after 1990 can afford a home here. The city is cognizant of the high cost of living, and so every eight years, Los Altos has made a new plan—called a Housing Element—to permit more housing across the income spectrum. It only takes a few minutes on Zillow to see our previous plans have always fallen short.

The average home in Los Altos costs 3.4 million dollars. On the standard metric for affordability, this means the average home here is only affordable for a family making \$580,000 a year. The housing crisis spans the Bay Area, but Los Altos is truly exceptional in its unaffordability.

The high cost of living here affects all of us personally: it's why I rarely get to see my best friend who left for Oregon; it's why other friends moved back in with family; and it's why a generation of young Los Altans cannot afford a home in our hometown.

Exclusionary zoning is pushing us away from the town we grew up in. Almost everywhere in Los Altos, it is illegal to opt for modest home choices like townhomes or duplexes or small condos. That's because the city mandates that 90% of the town's land be exclusively reserved for single detached homes on large quarter-acre lots. Nothing is more expensive in Los Altos than land, and so this law amounts to a high price floor on housing.

Because of exclusionary zoning, in 90% of Los Altos, it's legal for a rich family to construct a large mansion, but illegal for two middle-class families to share a similarly sized duplex, even if that's all they can afford. The goal of this policy is to keep Los Altos small and exclusive, but exclusivity and exclusion are two sides of the same coin.

The 2023-2031 Housing Element is an opportunity to build a better future, an inclusive future. It's not just about making sure young adults can have a future in their hometown. The Housing Element is also a chance to create a more economically diverse town where local employees—like teachers, caregivers and first responders—can live in the community they serve.

The path forward is clear: in the Housing Element, Los Altos needs to commit to permitting taller apartments near transit, streamlining regulations that increase housing costs, and lifting the ban on building modest homes.

We have one more Housing Element cycle before my friends and I will settle down into our first homes. I hope we get this one right.