

Perspective – The Regional Housing Needs Assessment: Time to Go

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The Regional Housing Needs Assessment (RHNA) was introduced in 1969 during Ronald Reagan's first term as California's governor. It requires that every local jurisdiction ensure there will be enough sites appropriately zoned for affordable housing construction to accommodate projected growth as calculated by state bureaucracies every eight years.

This top-down, fair-share allocation of backroom calculated "need" looks like the "build, baby, build" growth policy that it is. The current shortage of affordable housing in dense suburbs within the metropolitan core is evidence of ineffective performance after 54 years of RHNA. RHNA's "accomplishments" are increased density and gentrification—not affordable housing.

RHNA may have been effective in the 1970s when economic expansion was driven by the growth of population and jobs, and especially land development to accommodate both. That party is over.

The worsening climate crisis now changes the priority to survival. NASA's Goddard Institute of Space announced summer of 2023 as Earth's hottest on record. Extreme heat brings public works and food harvesting to a stop; air conditioning threatens the grid; people die. No place in the world is safe from heat domes, forest fires, smoke, droughts, floods, water shortages or food insecurities.

When the United Nations declared that maintaining ecosystems hospitable to human habitat requires that institutions abandon "business as usual" and make sustainability (carbon reduction) and resilience (adaptations to extreme weather events) top priorities, it is directing Sacramento to scrap RHNA and replace it with housing and other policies that address the threat to human existence.

CORE PRIORITIES ARE:

- Housing proximity to destinations to cut greenhouse gas emissions.
- Planning dictated from the local level, not top down.
- Incentives for creating more compact local housing development patterns must replace mandates to indiscriminately build density at the developer's discretion.

HERE ARE SUGGESTIONS FOR STATE POLICIES:

- “Fair share” allocation should be scrapped immediately with 100% of housing construction directed to central business districts that need it: San Francisco, San Jose, Los Angeles, Sacramento and others, where the largest concentration of destinations and the best public transit service are located.
- Fund the assessment of whether there is enough water, open space, solid waste, etc. and potential climate threats in every subregion in California. Let that dictate what the growth areas can accommodate. As temperatures rise, portions of California will attract large numbers of climate migrants; locals need to know their region’s capacity.
- Invest in local planning capabilities to develop sustainable neighborhoods. State housing legislation has reduced local planning departments to arms of the state kept busy planning indiscriminate density. Centralized eight-year plans are incompatible with a turbulent future. Only locals can produce short-range plans essential for agility and adaptability.
- Offer models and incentives for developing “complete neighborhoods” and 20-minute subregions.* Incentivize mature suburban retrofits and construction of new outskirt communities. (*Regions that enable travel to any destination within 20 minutes)
- Fund robust “resilience centers” that offer digital hubs, mobility hubs and microgrids as an essential component of complete neighborhoods.
- Offer incentives for backyard gardens in single-family neighborhoods and community gardens on vacant parcels, public property and parking lots—food insecurity is around the corner.
- Incentivize short-range, inexpensive, small-battery electric personal mobility devices as the transportation component in complete neighborhoods.