

L.A. mayor launches a new strategy to boost housing production

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Los Angeles Mayor Karen Bass, accompanied by her team in April, issued a new order aimed at boosting housing production, including some market-rate units.

(Irfan Khan/Los Angeles Times)

Good morning, and welcome to L.A. on the Record — our City Hall newsletter. It's David Zahniser, giving you the latest news and developments.

For nearly a year, Los Angeles Mayor **Karen Bass** has placed a huge emphasis on the need for low-cost housing, ordering city agencies to tear down bureaucratic hurdles that slow the approval of new, affordably priced apartments.

On Wednesday, Bass expanded that effort, signaling that she is also interested in lifting obstacles for at least some market-rate units — particularly if they are located within projects that include some affordable housing.

The proof of that shift was [Executive Directive 7](#), a mayoral order that calls for a fresh look at the city's "site plan review" process, which requires that developments with 50 or more net new market-rate housing units undergo an environmental analysis.

For real estate developers, site plan review is one of the more reviled elements of the city's planning process. In many cases, that review can be the difference between applying for over-the-counter permits at the Department of Building and Safety and going through a public process that consumes six months or more, said attorney Dave Rand, who has represented an array of developers at City Hall.

Rand said site plan review also can open the door to lengthy challenges from neighborhood groups, construction trade unions and others. That makes the mayor's push to rework the process "a big deal," he said.

"For years, it's been it's been a significant barrier to housing production," Rand said. "The mayor is making real moves to do something about it in a way that we have not seen before."

In her order, Bass instructed the city's planning department to report on the preparation of an ordinance that would increase the threshold needed to trigger site plan review. That raises the possibility that she could seek to raise the minimum to 75 units. Or 100. Or 150.

For now, Bass is not saying which number she would choose, if any, or whether such a change would apply to only certain types of projects. However, she has been offering a broader argument about the need for a larger supply of homes at all income levels.

"The high cost of housing obviously is most extreme in the 46,000 people who are on our streets every day," Bass said earlier this week. "But people who are housed or who are graduating college and want to live in the town they grew up in are consistently priced out."

Bass' executive order also calls for new research on other housing production strategies, such as the conversion of vacant office space into housing and the removal of barriers to the construction of for-sale homes. However, the proposal for redesigning site plan review is the first on the list of policy changes contained in the mayor's order — and builds on work that began in December, when Bass took office.

Bass first moved to exempt 100% affordable housing projects from site plan review in December, just as she declared a citywide emergency on homelessness. Seven months later, the City Council expanded on that effort, approving an ordinance that ensured that any affordable unit — including those found in mixed-income projects — would not be counted toward the 50-unit threshold.

Any effort to also exempt market-rate units from site plan review would require council approval. However, such a move could also spark opposition from neighborhood advocates, who say that site plan review plays an important role — ensuring that community members have a voice in the development process and are informed about the environmental impacts of a large-scale project.

"Shutting site plan review down is a way of saying they don't want to know at City Hall what the impacts will be, and how you might make it a better project," said Laura Lake, co-founder of Friends of Westwood.

Lake's organization [sued the city](#) in 1986 over a [proposed office tower](#) on Wilshire Boulevard and prevailed — a [legal victory](#) that led to the creation of the site plan review process under Mayor Tom Bradley.

Bass, for her part, said any changes pursued as a result of Executive Directive 7 will be carried out "in

partnership with our communities and with their input.”

State of play

— **ELECTION STAMPEDE:** More than 40 would-be candidates [have filed declarations of intent to run](#) for the seven City Council seats up for grabs in L.A.’s March election. The next task will be tougher: gathering the 500 valid voter signatures needed to qualify for the ballot.

— **CARRILLO IS IN:** Among those candidates was Assemblymember Wendy Carrillo (D-Los Angeles), who filed a declaration to run in the 14th District. Carrillo submitted her form [just three days](#) after being [arrested on suspicion of DUI](#), per the Daily News.

— **POLICE PAYOUT:** The City Council [voted to pay \\$1.8 million](#) to an LAPD officer who said he was sexually harassed by a high-level aide to former Mayor Eric Garcetti. City Atty. Hydee Feldstein Soto’s office had warned that there was a “high likelihood” that the city could have faced a \$5 million payout had the case gone to trial, according to a confidential memo reviewed by The Times.

— **STICKING WITH THE VALLEY:** Former Los Angeles City Council President Nury Martinez told The Times this week that she is [staying put](#) in the San Fernando Valley — and sticking with her registration as a Democrat. Martinez, who lives in L.A.’s Sun Valley neighborhood, put out that message to debunk a Los Angeles Magazine piece claiming she had registered with the GOP and relocated to Arizona.

— **BARKING OR BIKING:** A proposal for a new three-mile bicycle path in the Sepulveda Basin has [drawn opposition](#) from some dog owners, who say it will disrupt the activities at a popular dog park.

— **PARADIS LOST:** A judge sentenced attorney Paul Paradis, a key figure in the sprawling corruption scandal at the Department of Water and Power, to [nearly three years in prison](#) this week. The proceedings marked the final chapter in the federal criminal investigation into the DWP since it broke into public view in 2019.

— **LEE LAWSUIT FILED:** Councilmember John Lee has filed a lawsuit against the Ethics Commission over its investigation into his handling of gifts and gift disclosures, the L.A. Public Press [reports](#). Lee has been accused of repeatedly violating the city’s gift laws as a result of a 2017 trip to Las Vegas, among other things — allegations he denies.

— **MAYORS TAKE L.A.:** Bass convened about 20 mayors from around the country this week as part of the U.S. Conference of Mayors meeting in Los Angeles. The event focused heavily on homelessness and included a tour of Skid Row.

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QUICK HITS

- **Where did Inside Safe go?** The mayor’s signature program to address homelessness went into the district of Councilmember Eunisses Hernandez. Outreach workers focused on encampments in the city’s Westlake neighborhood, going to such locations as Wilshire Boulevard at Bonnie Brae Street and Beacon Avenue between 7th and 8th Streets. More than 60 people went indoors during the operation, per the mayor’s office.
- **On the docket for next week:** After a recent delay, the City Council is set to take up a proposal to allow a 4% increase for residents of rent stabilized apartment buildings — those built before October 1978. The increase, if approved, would reach 6% in units where the landlord pays for utilities.