

Scott Wiener on ‘the most consequential housing reform we’ve seen in modern history’

July 2, 2025 6:30 AM PT
July 2, 2025



(Josh Edelson/For The Times)

California leaders did something Monday many once considered impossible: They rolled back portions of a landmark environmental law to make it easier to win approval for housing and other large projects.

The California Environmental Quality Act — known informally by its initials “CEQA” — requires developers to publicly disclose and, if possible, lessen the environmental impacts of a project.

Proponents credit it with protecting the environment and public health. Critics say it has halted many developments with years of litigation and expensive environmental reports, even when they had no effect or even a positive effect on the environment.

A partial roll back of the law, long pushed by State Sen. Scott Wiener (D-San Francisco), passed Monday night after Gavin Newsom in June tied it to the state budget. The governor this week also signed a bill from Assemblywoman Buffy Wicks that exempts most urban housing projects from the law.

Newsom called the bills the “most consequential housing reform that we’ve seen in modern history in the state of California.”

Not everyone was thrilled. A coalition of more than 100 environmental organizations [released a letter](#) this week calling it “the worst anti-environmental bill in California in recent memory.”

Within hours, a Southern California land use lawyer said his clients were already scrambling to build. “There’s over 10 projects we’re going to push the go button on with this exemption probably Tuesday,” Dave Rand, who represents a number of developers, [told my colleagues](#).

Wiener, who has been pushing for new housing for years, talked with Essential California about what it might mean for the state. This conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

Why is this a big deal?

It’s going to make it easier and faster to do the things that we need to do to make life more affordable.

In California we have tied ourselves in knots for decades. There are so many things that we all agree we want and that we want more of, and yet we put rules in place that make it really hard or impossible to achieve those goals.

So are we tossing environmental protections?

CEQA was created in the early ’70s as an environmental law.

It does play a role in protecting the environment. We’re preserving that role.

But CEQA is also frequently used to delay, obstruct or kill projects for reasons having nothing to do with the environment. CEQA has become a tool for NIMBYs, a tool for businesses that want to undermine their competitors, a tool for the oil industry to stop the clean energy transition.

It’s a tool that can be used by anyone who has the resources to hire an attorney.

So anyone who doesn’t like a project for any reason can use CEQA to delay or even kill a project for reasons having literally nothing to do with the environment.

Do you have your own personal list of the wackiest CEQA lawsuits?

The oil industry suing [Los Angeles]. ... That was a real doozy.

Recently, there was a CEQA lawsuit against a food bank. There was a CEQA lawsuit against a proposed child-care center in Napa. There was a CEQA lawsuit that almost killed off San Francisco’s bike plan.

What else do you want people to understand about this?

A lot of times when people think about the housing crisis, they go right to homelessness. It’s so much deeper than that. So much of the housing crisis is just about pushing working-class people and middle-class people out of the state.

Any society that makes it hard for a middle class to exist is an unhealthy society.

We are making it harder and harder for the middle class because of the obscene cost of housing.

The cost of housing in California is a result of choices that we made as a state.

We value parking and views more than we value people having homes that they can afford. We value the look and feel of a neighborhood more than we value people having homes they can afford. We know the housing shortage pushes people into poverty.

This sends a very clear message that we are willing to touch sacred cows in order to solve California's problems and reduce the cost of living in California.

Here's more on the CEQA rollback:

- [Environmental groups are outraged after Newsom overhauls CEQA.](#)
- [How major new housing reform will affect homebuilding in California.](#)

You're reading the Essential California newsletter

The most important California stories and recommendations in your inbox every morning.

By continuing, you agree to our [Terms of Service](#), which include arbitration and a class action waiver. You agree that we and our third-party vendors may collect and use your information, including through cookies, pixels and similar technologies, for the purposes set forth in our [Privacy Policy](#) such as personalizing your experience and ads.

Today's top stories

Sens. Lisa Murkowski of Alaska and John Barrasso of Wyoming return to the Senate floor Tuesday morning.

(Bill Clark / CQ-Roll Call, Inc via Getty Images)

By a single vote, Trump's megabill passed the Senate

- Vice President JD Vance cast the tie-breaking vote on [President Trump's signature legislation](#) after three Republicans joined all Democrats in voting against it.
- The bill would expand tax cuts while cutting healthcare access to millions.
- The Senate and House must now reconcile differences between their budget bills.

- Elon Musk [threw the kitchen sink at his former boss](#) trying to prevent the bill's passage.
- The big budget bill will help Trump [jumpstart his immigration agenda](#).

Mayor Karen Bass says Trump is waging ‘an all-out assault’ against Los Angeles

- [The mayor's remarks](#) came one day after Trump's Department of Justice [sued the city over its sanctuary law](#).
- Bass said neither she nor other city leaders would be intimidated by the lawsuit.

California lawmakers struggle to find ways to hit back against Trump immigration raids

- With Newsom's challenge to Trump in limbo, California politicians are seemingly [powerless to fight back](#), from federal court to the state Legislature.
- They won't stop trying though as a [federal lawsuit](#) was filed this morning seeking to block the Trump administration's "ongoing pattern and practice of flouting the Constitution and federal law" during immigration raids in the L.A. area.
- Even some Orange County Republicans are [questioning Trump sweeps](#) targeting immigrant workers.

What else is going on

- [Paramount agrees to pay \\$16 million](#) to settle Trump's CBS "60 Minutes" lawsuit.
- Newsom calls on Trump to [boost wildfire preparedness and "make America rake again."](#)
- From Trump to Newsom, litigious politicians are [declaring open season](#) on news organizations.
- Jimmy Swaggart, a fire-and-brimstone Pentecostal preacher, has [died at 90](#).
- Jurors in the Sean "Diddy" Combs trial [have reached verdicts](#) on sex trafficking and prostitution, deliberating racketeering.
- Trump was winning with Latinos. [Now, his cruelty is derailing him](#), writes columnist **Gustavo Arellano**.
- Zohran Mamdani's victory in an NYC primary has [billionaires and Democrats in a panic](#), argues columnist **Michael Hiltzik**.
- John Cena and Idris Elba team up for [more action and less politics](#) in 'Heads of State,' writes columnist **Robert Lloyd**.
- There's a [potential fallout](#) to the feuding between President Trump and billionaire Elon Musk that is worrisome: The use of denaturalization against political enemies, writes columnist **Anita Chabria**.

This morning's must reads

Other must reads

- "I truly fell in love with Los Angeles:" Read [why René Redzepi chose L.A. for Noma's next pop-up](#).
- Faith leaders are [bearing witness](#) as migrants head to immigration court.

For your downtime

(Stephanie Jones / Los Angeles Times photo illustration)

Going out

- **Celebration:** Here are [51 L.A. places and secret spots to watch Fourth of July fireworks](#) and drone shows.
- **Dining:** Check out [the best places to eat and drink this month](#), according to our food writers.
- **Theater:** Grandparents play a larger role than usual in [Jake Brasch's "The Reservoir,"](#) which opened last week at the Geffen Playhouse. But it suffers from arrested character development, theater critic Charles McNulty writes.

Staying in

- **Books:** Whether you read outdoors or inside in air-conditioned comfort, [July's hot new releases](#) will help you stay cool. Happy reading!
- **Recipes:** Here's a recipe for [baked beans](#).
-  Get our free daily [crossword puzzle, sudoku, word search and arcade games](#).

A question for you: What is your favorite thing to do in California for the Fourth of July?

Email us at essentialcalifornia@latimes.com, and your response might appear in the newsletter this week.

And finally ... your photo of the day

California National Guard members stand outside the Santa Ana Federal Building.

(Allen J. Schaben/Los Angeles Times)

Today's great photo is from **Allen J. Schaben** at the Santa Ana Federal Building. In areas of Little Saigon, [news of federal immigration raids](#) has hit the community harder than ever before.

Have a great day, from the Essential California team

Izzy Nunes, homepage intern

Kevinisha Walker, multiplatform editor

Andrew Campa, Sunday writer

Karim Doumar, head of newsletters

How can we make this newsletter more useful? Send comments to essentialcalifornia@latimes.com. Check our [top stories](#), [topics](#) and the [latest articles](#) on latimes.com.