

Building Community Support for Housing: Santa Clara County

This brief is part of the Turner Center series “Statewide Goals, Local Tools: Case Studies in Affordable Housing Development in California.”

Perhaps no other region in California exemplifies the state’s housing crisis more than Silicon Valley.¹ The region is home to a thriving technology sector—anchored by giants including Google, Facebook, and Apple—that has fueled substantial wealth generation in recent years: if Silicon Valley were its own country, by some estimates its GDP would rank as the 6th largest in the world.² But while the region has amassed a growing number of jobs that attract workers from a global pool of talent, housing production has fallen far short of employment gains, exacerbating affordability challenges.

Boosting housing production could help alleviate affordability pressures in the region, but new development often encounters community resistance. “Not In My Back Yard” (NIMBY) arguments against new housing are often framed by existing residents as concerns that additional housing would negatively affect their home values, quality of life, or community character.³ Unlike other parts of the Bay Area, Silicon Valley and specifically Santa Clara County—home to cities including Palo Alto, San Jose, Mountain View, and Cupertino—historically lacked a local organization dedicated to advocating for affordable housing. In response to that institutional gap, a group of regional partners launched the nonprofit organization Silicon Valley at Home (SV@Home) in 2015. This case study details the evolution of SV@Home’s model, which draws on national best practices to help overcome entrenched community resistance and build a broad-based coalition that is supportive of meeting the region’s range of housing needs.

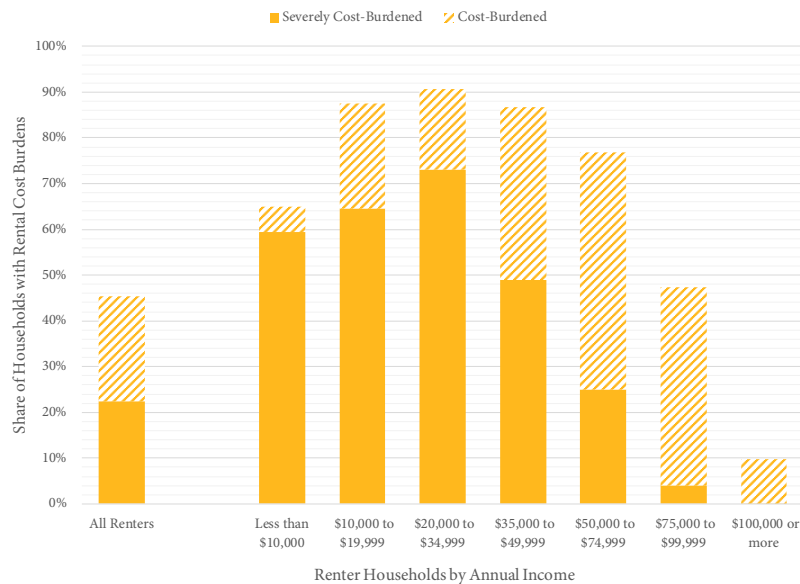
Background

Silicon Valley’s Santa Clara County saw its jobs base grow by 27 percent between 2010 and 2017, outpacing housing unit gains nearly five-fold.⁴ Put differently, the county added almost 229,000 jobs over that time period, but permitted just under 45,400 new housing units. That shortfall helped fuel climbing home prices. Between January of 2010 and January 2017, the median sales price for a home in Santa Clara County jumped by roughly 70 percent to reach \$874,000.⁵

While Santa Clara County ranks among the wealthiest in the country—the typical household income in Santa Clara County (\$119,035) was roughly twice that of the nation (\$60,336) in 2017—income growth has lagged far behind the rising cost of housing. And for all its wealth, the county is home to a more economically diverse population than its aggregate affluence would suggest. According to the state’s supplemental poverty measure, 16 percent of the county’s residents lived in poverty in 2016.⁶ And, as of 2017, Santa Clara County was home to 7,394 individuals experiencing homelessness, one of the highest numbers of any major metropolitan area in the country.⁷

As the housing crisis has intensified in Santa Clara County, housing-related costs have placed a growing burden on households across the income distribution. But it has hit lower- and middle-income households the hardest. Well over half of renter households earning less than \$75,000 a year reported a housing cost burden (i.e., spent more than 30 percent of income on housing-related expenses) in 2017 (Figure 1). And the majority of renters earning less than \$35,000 a year experienced a severe housing cost burden—meaning they were spending more than half of their income on housing.

Figure 1: Households with Rental Costs Burdens in Santa Clara County, 2017



Sources: Turner Center tabulations of 2017 American Community Survey data

Note: Very low-income renter households may often live in subsidized housing, which means they may have lower rent burdens.

Building more housing could help ameliorate the jobs-housing imbalance in Santa Clara County. However, a number of factors can impede housing production and make it difficult to reach the scale needed, from the cost of land and construction to restrictive local ordinances and regulations. Even when these factors can be overcome, a project can be scuttled by community opposition.

Community members resistant to new housing typically cite a range of concerns—increased traffic, strain on schools, public safety impacts—that can ultimately stymie efforts to build. Homeowners may also have their own financial interests in mind. There is a direct link between higher home values and restrictions on building new housing, such as historic preservation ordinances and low-density zoning.⁸ For many homeowners, loosening of restrictions on housing production is associated with a potential reduction in their house values.⁹ All of these factors lead to opposition to new housing development.

Californians opposed to new development have a multitude of mechanisms through which to delay or prevent new housing, ranging from environmental protection laws to organizing vocal opposition in public meetings.¹⁰ This NIMBY behavior is observed even among renters where the cost of housing is extremely high.¹¹

Considerable support for new housing exists as well, but its proponents are often less vocal, less organized, or less politically powerful than homeowners. However, as the public has become increasingly aware of the roots of the housing crisis, a growing chorus of pro-development voices has coalesced to influence both housing development and housing policy, creating new coalitions of partners and stakeholders who have not always participated in these debates. The need for dedicated capacity to help build these broader coalitions around housing helped spur the creation of SV@Home in Santa Clara County.

Building Community Support for New Housing

Amid the growing housing crisis in Silicon Valley, leaders from Housing Trust Silicon Valley, the Silicon Valley Leadership Group, and the Non-Profit Housing Association of Northern California secured funding from the Silicon Valley Community Foundation and Enterprise Community Partners to explore whether communities in the South Bay would benefit from having a formal organization dedicated to housing issues in the area. That effort led to the creation of SV@Home in 2015. As a housing policy and advocacy nonprofit targeting Santa Clara County and its 15 cities, SV@Home's mandate is to focus on the housing needs of the wide range of residents affected by the housing crisis—"from those who are homeless, to those with fixed incomes, to those who work in [Santa Clara County's] service or manufacturing sectors, to those who work for [the county's] leading employers."¹² Its founding partners also tasked the organization with building a broad membership base, including for-profit and nonprofit entities, developers, government officials, business and tech leaders, and community members.

SV@Home's work exemplifies some of the best practices culled from nationwide action and research, in that the organization seeks to:

- » **Cast a wide net to build a broad base of support.** Unlike other similar organizations which often focus on the housing needs of a specific subset of individuals, SV@Home intentionally extends its focus beyond any one group. The organization advocates for better serving the needs of those who require subsidized housing, as well as those in the "missing middle" who do not qualify for housing subsidies but are still unable to afford market-rate housing in the area. SV@Home also advocates for the housing needs of entry-level workers of the

area's major employers. Their focus is expansive and inclusive in an area where most residents feel—to varying degrees—the impact of the housing shortage. The SV@Home model is broad and coalition-based, and organizational membership includes a wider range of entities than might be typical for a housing advocacy organization, such as both for-profit and non-profit developers and technology sector companies.

- » **Emphasize the link between housing affordability and broader social issues.** Housing affordability is intertwined with overall opportunity and economic mobility. Establishing linkages between housing and broader social issues such as education, economic outcomes, health, and others can strengthen support for equity in housing.¹³ Along with increasing the supply of affordable housing, education of community members is an explicit part of SV@Home's mission. To that end, SV@Home engages in activities designed to bring a higher level of awareness and understanding to the public. For example, in 2018, SV@Home hosted Santa Clara County's Affordable Housing Week, which consisted of a week's worth of activities designed to increase public awareness of the broad potential impacts of affordable housing. Activities included tours of affordable housing developments, informational lectures, community meetings, and light-hearted activities such as trivia night.
- » **Connect education and understanding to actionable outcomes.** There is value in situating current housing affordability challenges within the historic public policies that have created them, such as redlining and other discriminatory practices in the realm of housing, while at the same time focusing on actionable solutions. In short, effective framing provides evidence of historic place-based factors that underlie affordability challenges, while also emphasizing collective action towards effecting change.¹⁴ To complement their educational practices, SV@Home spearheads resident engagement by publicizing and facilitating attendance at public meetings relating to housing. The organization also encourages participation on the part of specific subsets of the population, for example by holding a roundtable discussion on how seniors might become engaged around housing issues that impact them. They also organize convenings for local elected officials, bringing in experts in the housing field who facilitate collaborative conversations around housing issues in which representatives of neighboring municipalities can learn from one another and share best practices when typically this opportunity would not arise. For example, in the fall of 2018, SV@Home hosted an event in Los Altos in collaboration with the Turner Center for Housing Innovation that walked attendees through the math behind housing development, and how various policies impact the feasibility of housing. SV@Home made this information public on their website, as well as a resource for the community at large.¹⁵
- » **Refine the use of language and reframe the issues with more accessible terminology.** For housing professionals, certain jargon such as “affordable housing” becomes rote shorthand for referring to parameters laid out in a range of housing

subsidy programs. But such terminology can have negative implications for those who are less familiar with the nuances of affordable housing policy. The word “home” holds a positive connotation for most people, while “affordable housing” might be generally associated with the negative aspects of subsidized housing.¹⁶ Often, community opposition to affordable housing stems from a stereotyped understanding of whom the housing will serve, and it can be valuable to show that new housing benefits, for example, young families who wish to return to their hometowns, retirees intending to downsize, and working-class people like nurses, firefighters, and law enforcement officers.¹⁷

Implementation

With its deliberate and inclusive approach, SV@Home has already counted some marked successes since its launch in 2015. The organization's advocacy work helped to garner unanimous City Council approval of the North Bayshore Precise Plan, which included nearly 10,000 new housing units within the city of Mountain View's North Bayshore neighborhood.¹⁸ Twenty percent of the units will be affordable—with set asides for a mix of very low-, low-, and moderate-income households—which will nearly double Mountain View's affordable housing stock.¹⁹

The North Bayshore neighborhood is home to Google's headquarters. Both Google and the city are undertaking master planning processes for the mixed-use, “complete” neighborhoods envisioned in the approved Precise Plan. SV@Home remains engaged in both processes to ensure each retains the Precise Plan's commitment to affordability as they move into implementation.²⁰

SV@Home used a similar approach to advocate for redevelopment of Vallco, a defunct shopping mall, into several thousand units of housing across the freeway from Apple's headquarters in Cupertino. The developer applied to be among the first to use Senate Bill 35. Passed in 2017, SB 35 streamlines the approval of certain affordable housing developments in jurisdictions that have not built enough housing to meet their Regional Housing Needs Assessment allocation. In parallel, the city of Cupertino proposed a specific plan of its own, which has since encountered community resistance in the form of litigation and ballot initiatives. Unless that opposition is resolved, the developer will move ahead under SB 35, and has already started demolition on the project. SV@Home was involved in and supportive of both processes, in keeping with their goal of encouraging more housing and deeper affordability regardless of the framework within which the project is eventually carried out.²¹

This focus on increasing housing supply in Silicon Valley—without specific ideological preferences for how it is produced—underscores one reason SV@Home's approach has seen success. In Silicon Valley, where the housing shortage is acute for those at all income levels, SV@Home has tailored its advocacy and educational work to reflect this context and speak to the broad-based need.

Lessons Learned

- » **Adapt to the local context.** SV@Home’s organizational practices emulate the agility of a start-up and are responsive to the demands of the specific environment in which they work.
- » **Engage early and continuously.** SV@Home engages throughout the entire process of a project’s life-cycle. Instead of appearing at a City Council meeting to oppose or support a project, for example, SV@Home works with elected officials from the project’s origination to provide information and shape policy decisions collaboratively.
- » **Build broader coalitions that bring more than traditional supporters of housing to the table.** SV@Home’s work aims to increase the number and nature of those who are engaged in the complexities of addressing Silicon Valley’s housing needs, including partners who have not traditionally focused on housing policy. SV@Home works with a range of stakeholders and partners, from business and industry leaders to experts in the health, education, transportation, and environmental fields who recognize the intersections between their work and the region’s housing needs. Such broad-based coalitions sometimes mean the partners do not reach a consensus on every matter, given their different priorities and perspectives. But by engaging a wider range of stakeholders around common goals, SV@Home has helped to grow the number and types of partners voicing support for more housing at all levels of affordability.
- » **Treat education, information, and data as the foundation for ongoing policy and advocacy work.** Misinformation can dampen public support for affordable housing. Educating elected officials and the public about housing issues—using a variety of forums and tools accessible to a diversity of perspectives—is fundamental to SV@Home’s strategy. By grounding their policy and advocacy work in evidence and data, SV@Home not only provides policymakers with the information they need to make sound housing policy decisions, but also to support those decisions when they encounter opposition.

Useful Sources

- SV@Home Resource Hub
<https://siliconvalleyathome.org/resources/>
- How Housing Matters
<https://howhousingmatters.org/>
- You Don’t Have to Live Here: Why Housing Messages Are Backfiring and 10 Things We Can Do About It
<https://www.enterprisecommunity.org/resources/you-dont-have-to-live-here>
- Make Room
<https://www.makeroomusa.org/>
- Building Support for Affordable Homeownership and Rental Choices: A Summary of Research Findings on Public Opinion and Messaging on Affordable Housing
<https://www.nhc.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Building-Support-for-Affordable-Homeownership-and-Rental-Choices.pdf>
- The Minnesota Challenge to Lower the Cost of Affordable Housing
<https://www.enterprisecommunity.org/resources/mn-challenge-lower-cost-affordable-housing-19831>

Endnotes

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