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# Regional Ballot Measure Could Limit Rural Housing, Worsening California Shortage

Voters in 2020 to Weigh Lack of Housing, Need to Protect Back-Country Areas



A measure on the March 2020 ballot could effect housing development in unincorporated rural areas of San Diego County. (Getty Images)

Battle lines are forming on a March 2020 [San Diego County](#) ballot measure that would require large housing projects in unincorporated rural areas to win final approval from voters, a



move opponents say could worsen an already [serious regional and statewide shortage](#) of affordable housing.

The issue has implications for all types of development in the region because multifamily, retail, office and other types of projects often follow large single-family developments, which have long sparked political disputes in San Diego's rural areas. Denser housing projects tend to be more affordable to build, but density remains a thorny issue in places like the North County region, where residents want to preserve the rural, back-country character of certain areas.

Ballot proponents want the focus placed on developing more infill housing in existing neighborhoods throughout the San Diego region, with rural areas kept limited to lower-density projects like those spelled out in current county regulations.

"San Diego County already has a good plan that identifies the most appropriate places to build up more housing throughout the backcountry," said Susan Baldwin, president of San Diegans for Managed Growth, the group that spearheaded the ballot initiative. "In fact, there are tens of thousands of units that could be built without making any changes to the general plan."

After backers gathered required signatures, county officials recently placed on the March ballot a citizens' measure called Safeguard Our San Diego Countryside, supported by a campaign calling itself Yes on SOS. Supporters say the measure is needed to head off new burdens on local roadways and other infrastructure,

protect agricultural lands, and prevent wildfire destruction similar to what's been seen statewide in recent years after homes were built close to forested areas.

The ballot measure calls for any significant amendment or variance to the county's existing general plan – often sought by developers to increase the allowable building density for particularly large single-family housing projects in rural areas – to be approved by voters rather than the San Diego County Board of Supervisors, which currently has the power to greenlight all development projects in unincorporated locations.

However, opponents contend the measure could significantly slow production of needed new housing in a region that already has long timelines for project completions, because of factors including local building regulations and residents' frequent opposition to large new projects in their neighborhoods.

"We are dealing with a serious housing shortage in this region and we should all be supporting new housing production, not putting up roadblocks," said Chula Vista Mayor Mary Casillas Salas, at a recent news conference held by a group opposing the ballot measure, called No on SOS. "If the SOS initiative passes, it will shut down housing production in the county's unincorporated areas. That's the wrong approach."

## Developer Opposition

The ballot measure is also opposed by developers and groups including San Diego Regional Chamber of Commerce, San Diego County Taxpayers Association, and local labor and public safety organizations.

Supporters include environmental advocacy groups such as the Sierra Club and San Diego Audubon Society, the League of Women Voters, and urban planning advocates including Citizens Coordinate for Century 3.

The San Diego region in recent years has seen several project-oriented measures on the ballot, with voters generally siding against large developments. Other development-related matters set for the March 2020 ballot in county and city elections include a disputed coastal bluff resort project in the city of Del Mar, and a 2,135-home residential project north of Escondido, proposed by developer Newland Communities.

Opponents of the latest countywide ballot proposal measure contend that putting such decisions in voters' hands could take away control from local officials and residents who are ultimately most impacted by projects. San Diego real estate consultant Gary London said he opposes the SOS initiative and the concept of "ballot box planning" in general.

"Ballot box planning has no place in land use decision making," said London, senior principal with London Moeder Advisors, in an email to CoStar News. "Moreover, it redlines the unincorporated areas, some of which hug freeways and are near major

employment centers and could and should accommodate housing."

Supporters of the SOS measure contend the county's general plan already allows for more than 60,000 new homes to be built in areas that are not in back-country and are already close to existing homes, jobs, schools and public safety services.

The San Diego Housing Federation, an industry group that includes developers of affordable housing, has estimated that the region has an affordable housing deficit of nearly 140,000 units, in the face of continued underproduction, rising building costs and accelerating rents and home prices over the past 20 years.