

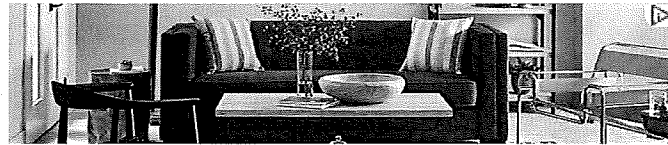


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*POLITICS*

# Progressive Boomers Are Making It Impossible For Cities To Fix The Housing Crisis

Residents of wealthy neighborhoods are taking extreme measures to block much-needed housing and transportation projects.

By Michael Hobbes

07/06/2019 07:00 am ET



ILLUSTRATION: HUFFPOST; PHOTOS: GETTY

SEATTLE — In May 2018, a public meeting in a wealthy enclave of one of America's most progressive cities devolved into a two-hour temper tantrum as longtime residents incensed about a proposed tax to fund homeless services shouted down its proponents.



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“Lies!” the crowd bellowed as an attendee explained that the tax would be levied on corporations, not citizens. “Shill!” “Plant!” “Phony!” they shouted as another supporter spoke. “Coward!” a man yelled at a homeless woman as she took the microphone.

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Kirsten Harris-Talley, the co-chair of Seattle’s Homelessness Task Force, had to pause to ask the increasingly unruly crowd to calm down: “Can I finish what I’m saying?”

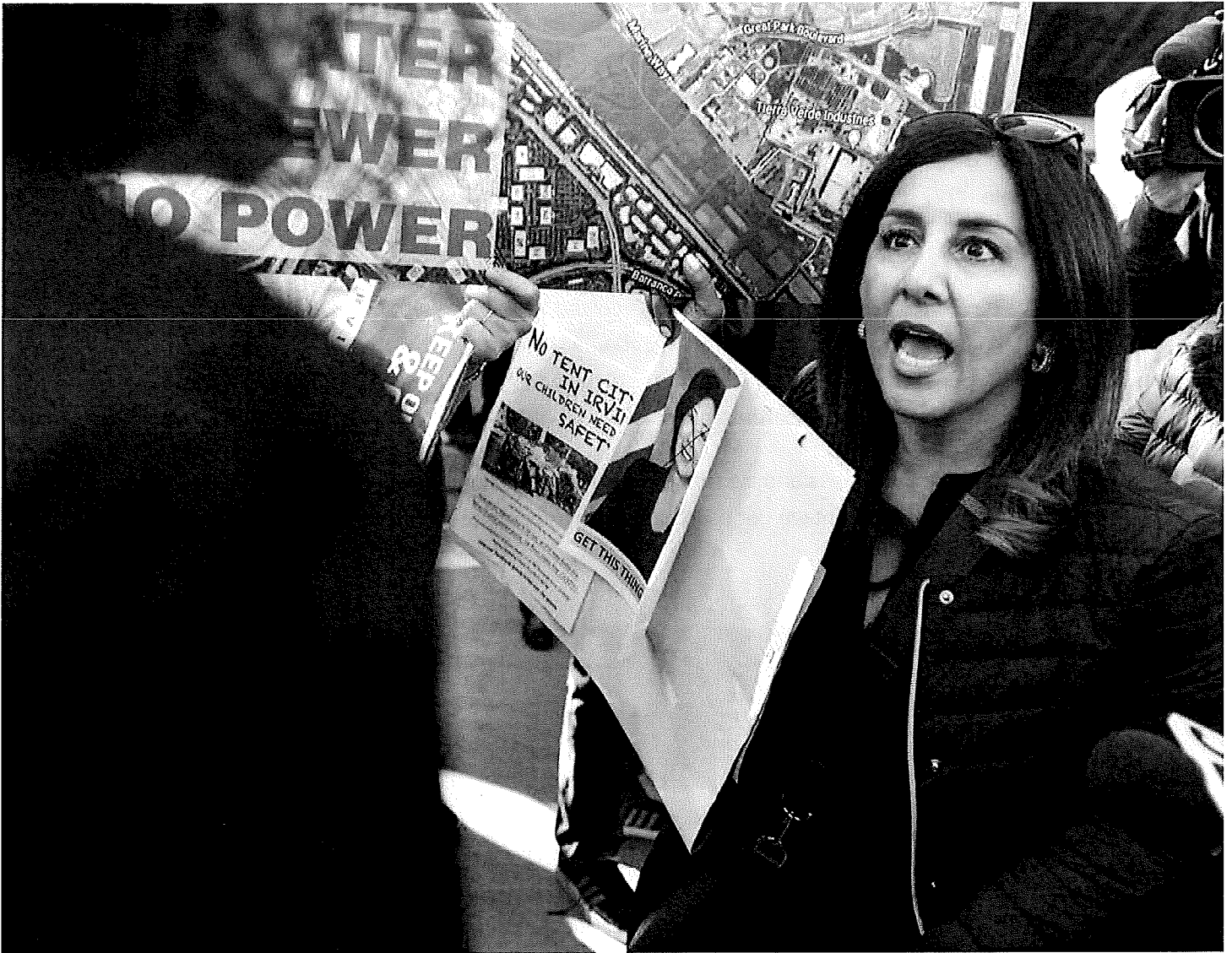
“No!” the audience chanted back.

Seattle is not the only city where locals are losing their minds over issues related to housing, zoning and transportation. Ugly public meetings are becoming increasingly common in cities across the country as residents frustrated by worsening traffic, dwindling parking and rising homelessness take up fierce opposition.

Last September, a community hearing over a proposed homeless shelter in Los Angeles had to be cut short after boos and jeering repeatedly interrupted speakers. Throughout 2018, public meetings in Minneapolis to discuss changing the city’s residential zoning code erupted into shouts and insults from audience members. At a public meeting last August on homelessness in the Venice neighborhood of Los Angeles, audience members chanted, “Lock her up!” at a female representative of the mayor’s office.

These scenes are usually sparked by projects or policy changes intended to address America’s worsening housing crisis. More than 200 American cities now have median home values above \$1 million. The construction of new dwellings has lagged behind the number of new households eight years in a row. Both congestion and climate change are prompting many cities to explore expanding their public transportation networks.





JEFF GRITCHEN/DIGITAL FIRST MEDIA/ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER/GETTY IMAGES

An opponent of a proposed homeless shelter argues with a supporter in Irvine, California.

And yet, despite the urgency of the need and the expert consensus on solutions, individual efforts to increase density, improve transit or alleviate homelessness can spend years bogged down by local opposition. In March, neighborhood activists in Los Angeles threatened to sue the city over the installation of a 0.8-mile bike lane. Residents of Seattle's wealthiest neighborhood demand reserved seats on city buses and exemptions from road tolls in exchange for permitting a light-rail station. A crowd of more than 1,000 people booed a homeless man who got up to speak in support of a new shelter in Salt Lake City.

Rowdy public hearings are nothing new in city politics, of course. But campaigners and elected officials told HuffPost that the nature of local opposition has changed in recent years. Where protest movements and civil disobedience were once primarily the tools of the marginalized, they have now become a weapon of privilege — a way for older, wealthier, mostly white homeowners to drown out and intimidate anyone who challenges their



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“Most of the abuse I got came from older suburban or retired folks, and always from people who considered themselves progressive,” said Rob Johnson, a Seattle City Council member who retired in April after three years in office. During his tenure, he supported proposals to increase housing density, expand public transit and establish safe use sites for drug addicts.

Despite representing a constituency with bright-blue voting records on immigration, reproductive rights and LGBTQ equality, Johnson’s progressive positions on local issues provoked a large and organized backlash. In 2017, after supporting a plan to install bike lanes on a major thoroughfare, Johnson received a death threat on social media. Opponents posted his home address on Nextdoor. Eventually, he stopped visiting local businesses and even skipped events at his children’s school to avoid the increasingly frequent confrontations with other parents.

“Housing, homelessness and transit have always been controversial, but the kind of feedback and treatment we get has completely transformed in the last five years,” Johnson said.



ERIC RISBERG/AP

Despite the city’s worsening homelessness crisis, residents of San Francisco have organized strident opposition to the placement of new shelters.

## Increasing Tensions Between Old And Young Owners And



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While the extent and effect of homeowner advocacy are difficult to measure, tensions over density and growth in urban areas have been rising for years. Nearly every major city in America has seen skyrocketing housing costs push renters out into the exurbs while enriching longer-term residents who bought real estate before the boom.

Meanwhile, job growth in urban centers has worsened traffic, filled up parking spots and launched debates over cycling and scooters. Galloping inequality and a fraying safety net have made homelessness and poverty more visible.

According to Patrick Devine-Wright, a University of Exeter geographer who researches neighborhood activism, rapid growth can contribute to a sense of instability, a feeling among long-term residents that their cities are changing around them in ways they can't control.

"People invest themselves in the homes, communities and landscapes where they live," Devine-Wright said. "That investment creates a deep reservoir of emotional attachment that can become anxiety and psychological distress when something rears up and threatens it."

This same phenomenon — relatively privileged populations mobilizing against perceived threats — has appeared in cities throughout American history. In the 1970s, white parents mobilized to prevent racial minorities from attending their children's schools. In the 1990s, affluent voters organized in favor of tougher policing despite living in the neighborhoods with the lowest crime rates. Most of the existing density restrictions contributing to the housing crisis in cities were in fact put in place as a result of lobbying efforts by homeowners seeking to preserve their home values.

And just as previous generations of anti-change activists used procedural arguments ("states' rights," "local control") to oppose progressive policies, today's anti-growth advocates employ similar arguments about community participation and government processes.

"This isn't about a bus lane, this is about how much say communities have in government planning," said Arthur Schwartz, an attorney and a district leader for the Manhattan Democratic Party. For nearly two years now, Schwartz and his neighbors in Greenwich Village have been fighting against a proposed bus lane on 14th Street in Manhattan. Giving priority to buses on the crowded thoroughfare, they say, will push cars and trucks onto residential roads nearby, worsening pollution and increasing ground vibrations, which could harm the neighborhood's century-old buildings.

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**The people with the most privilege pack the**



Schwartz has filed three lawsuits against the plan, each time demanding that the city carry out an assessment of its environmental impacts. Though he refuses to be labeled a “not in my backyard” activist (“I’m a Bernie Sanders lawyer and a Cynthia Nixon lawyer and a union lawyer and I’m also a NIMBY lawyer? I don’t think so.”), the neighborhood advocacy group he represents has also demanded that the city cancel a pedestrian expansion and remove bike lanes that have already been built. Shortly after the cycling facilities were installed, someone spray-painted “Bring back our parking!” on one of them.

The neighborhood’s median income is \$148,000, and black and Latino residents make up just 2% and 6% of the population, respectively. But Schwartz said he isn’t working on behalf of its wealthy residents but rather the low-income tenants living in rent-controlled units nearby who may be affected by the increased car traffic.

“This isn’t about a bunch of rich people concerned about their idyllic community,” Schwartz said.

He also insisted that he wasn’t opposed to bus lanes in principle but suggested that they should be built on either 34th or 42nd street, neither of which have crosstown trains running underneath them.

“When I need to get somewhere quickly, I walk or I take the subway,” he said. “I don’t take the bus.”





LEONARD ORTIZ/DIGITAL FIRST MEDIA/ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER/GETTY IMAGES

In 2016, residents of Orange County, California, organized in opposition to the placement of a sober living facility.

Schwartz's arguments and tactics are familiar to advocates on the other side of the housing crisis. Alex Baca, a housing program organizer for the pro-density nonprofit Greater Greater Washington, said neighborhood opposition groups nearly always claim to support public transit and affordable housing in general but use technical arguments and procedural roadblocks to make sure such projects aren't built in their neighborhoods.

Examples of this can be found in nearly every city experiencing job and population growth. In San Francisco, residents of a wealthy neighborhood opposed the construction of low-income senior housing, citing concerns that it was seismically unstable. Seattle homeowners sued a homeless housing project over a technicality related to its permitting. In Boise, by some measures the fastest-growing city in the country, one of the arguments employed by residents fighting the construction of new townhomes is that they will reduce pedestrian safety.

"It's like playing Whac-a-Mole," Baca said. "No matter what you propose, they'll tell you that if it was just a little bit different, they could support it. But then you come back with the changes they asked for and they find a new reason to fight it."



Baca sees the increasing ugliness of public forums as a manifestation of the widening generation gap among progressives.

“The boomer generation came of age at a time when neighborhoods were fighting back against highway expansions and power plants,” Baca said. “To them, preserving their neighborhood *is* progressive.”

And it’s not just ideology fueling the baby boomer backlash; it’s also technology. Facebook groups and the hyper-local app Nextdoor have made it easier to get signatures on petitions and pack public meetings. GoFundMe allows neighborhood groups to raise six-figure trust funds for legal challenges. Video sharing encourages campaigners to turn public meeting testimony into deceptively edited viral clips.

All of this takes place against the backdrop of an increasingly tense political climate. Michelle Wu, a member of the Boston City Council since 2014, notice a tone shift after the 2016 election. Issues like housing and parking had always been emotional, but her feedback on social media and in her inbox suddenly took on a more threatening, racist and misogynistic tone.

“I started getting anonymous expressions of negativity in a way that didn’t happen before the election,” she said.







IRFAN KHAN/LOS ANGELES TIMES/GETTY IMAGES

In Los Angeles, debates over housing, public transportation and homelessness have become more strident in recent years.

## Homeowner Mobilization Will Probably Make Inequality Worse

The unanswered question of the boomer backlash is what it means for the future of cities.

In the short term, anti-growth activism is likely to increase urban inequality. Nearly three-quarters of the jobs created since the Great Recession were added in cities with populations over 1 million. As cities continue to swell with new workers, their inability to build dense housing and high-quality bus and train service will push low-income residents even farther away from jobs and schools.

“We have mountains of data showing that cities need more housing and better transit and shelters for homeless people,” said Matthew Lewis, the director of communications for California YIMBY, a pro-housing nonprofit. And yet cities often give in to neighborhood groups opposing this much-needed infrastructure. The proposed homeless shelter booted by Salt Lake City residents in 2017 was canceled the next day. Schwartz’s lawsuit has succeeded in delaying the bus lane on 14th Street. The tantrum-throwing Seattleites eventually won the repeal of the tax they were shouting about.



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**It's a pretty short leap from 'We don't want homeless people living here' to 'We don't want refugees' or 'We don't want immigrants.'**

These organized opposition groups could also, in the longer term, form a conservative coalition in cities and pull them to the right. This is already happening in cities with high rates of homelessness, where nominally progressive residents have formed [interest groups](#) that echo conservative talking points on personal responsibility and cracking down on drug users.

“This is not an anti-homeless march,” Barry Vince, an attorney, [told](#) reporters from the local television station as he participated in an “anti-crime march” in Long Beach, California. “We’re here to march against criminals, and we want the bad guys taken down.”

Lewis said he’s seen similar rhetoric begin to appear in public hearings over housing and transportation.

“It’s a pretty short leap from ‘We don’t want homeless people living here’ to ‘We don’t want refugees’ or ‘We don’t want immigrants,’” Lewis said. “I’ve seen lifelong hippies who drive electric vehicles stand up at these meetings and say, ‘There’s too many people here already.’ It’s like you’re at a Trump rally.”

Devine-Wright said one way for cities to counteract these forces is to get smarter about managing community input. In Britain, cities have begun to swap large town-hall meetings (“once one person starts shouting, so does everyone else”) for all-day, open house-style exhibitions that allow neighbors to interact with politicians one-on-one. The key, Devine-Wright said, is starting consultations early and providing more opportunities for citizen participation.

Cities can also redesign community outreach to encourage input from groups that have traditionally been excluded. According to a [2017 study](#), older male homeowners are more likely to participate in town hall meetings and other public participation processes than other demographic groups. [Another](#), published this month, found that becoming a property owner motivated individuals to participate in politics and to express their views on housing, traffic and development to elected leaders more often.

Wu, the Boston City Council member, said she has started holding public hearings during the



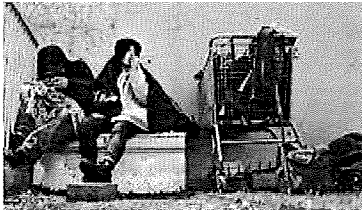
“The traditional model of public hearings is that you sign up, take time off work, come to a building that’s not fully accessible, wait for hours, then get two minutes to speak,” Wu said. “That leaves a lot of people out.”

While other cities have made similar updates to their community engagement procedures, it’s not clear if longer or more inclusive citizen engagement will lower the temperature of local debates over density and growth.

“We’ve had people participate in years-long consultations and then, when they don’t get exactly their way, they claim they were excluded from the process,” said Robert Getch, a Seattle housing activist. He fears that as rental costs, traffic and homelessness continue to increase in cities, opponents to any action to reduce them may become even more entrenched.

“The only thing that gives me hope is that the most radical voices don’t represent the will of the majority,” Getch said. “Most people want more homes and more transit and have compassion for the homeless. We just need politicians to stop listening to the people who are shouting the loudest.”

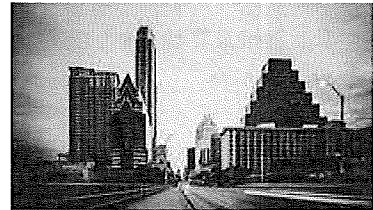
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