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Churches could be California's most important new housing developer

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6–8 minutes

On a sunny corner in North Berkeley, a new apartment building stands out among the bungalow courts, single-family Craftsman-style homes and multifamily complexes of the surrounding neighborhood. This building — containing 35 studio units for low-income seniors — is notable, not because of its architectural style, but because it was built by a church. Jordan Court is an affordable housing development built on land owned by All Souls Episcopal Parish, right next door to the church's sanctuary space.

Throughout California, faith-based organizations of all stripes are considering similar developments as they look to help solve what is perhaps the most pressing social justice issue of our time, the mounting affordable housing and homelessness crisis. California legislators have taken notice and just passed a bill, now headed to the governor's desk, that could open the door for more projects statewide like Jordan Court.

SB4 by state Sen. Scott Wiener of San Francisco would streamline the process of securing local governmental approval for new affordable housing built on land owned by faith-based organizations — in part by creating a set of minimum development

standards these organizations could rely on for housing projects. In practice, these new rules would allow faith-based organizations to bypass onerous discretionary approval processes and sidestep local land use rules or litigious neighbors that otherwise might stall worthwhile projects.

How much of a difference could this make in alleviating California's housing crisis?

Amid a significant statewide shortfall of affordable homes, SB4 not only has the potential to unlock meaningful amounts of new land for projects, but land in key places that would otherwise be difficult to build. Our [new research](#) by the Turner Center for Housing Innovation at UC Berkeley estimated that roughly 47,000 acres — around 1½ times the size of San Francisco — are owned by faith-based organizations in California, would be eligible for the incentives proposed under SB4 and are potentially well-suited for affordable housing development.

In San Francisco, there are about 100 acres of such land spread over 159 parcels, nearly all of which are located near high-quality transit options. With a state mandate to plan for about 50,000 new below-market-rate homes during the next eight years, supporting faith-based organizations interested in building should be an integral piece of San Francisco's strategy for reaching that target.

In many cases throughout California, these parcels are large enough to comfortably accommodate new housing. For example, the average parcel size in places such as Orange County, San Diego County and Sacramento County is 1½-acres. And just over half of the land we identified in our analysis is located in resource-rich neighborhoods — often single-family home communities with

little existing affordable housing — that offer jobs, high-quality schools and cleaner air. Siting new affordable homes in these communities is key to alleviating our housing supply shortage and affirmatively furthering our state's commitment to reversing California's legacy of exclusionary housing practices that have led to the concentration of most new affordable housing in already lower-income communities.

SB4 also extends streamlining benefits to affordable housing developments on land owned by nonprofit or public universities and colleges, adding another roughly 124,000 acres across the state, though a higher percentage of that land is likely less well-positioned for new housing (think of sports fields at UC Berkeley, the quad at Stanford or grazing land owned by more rural state schools with agricultural or forestry programs).

Even though SB4 would help to unlock significant amounts of land for housing, zoning and land use are not always the main barriers to faith-based organizations becoming involved in the development process. Our previous research found that while many faith-based organizations are interested in exploring housing on their land — to help stabilize their communities and align with their charitable missions — many lack experience with real estate finance and development processes. Navigating the complexities involved in building new housing can be an insurmountable barrier to entry.

Some philanthropic and nonprofit organizations are providing technical assistance to guide faith-based organizations and connect them with builders who can act as trustworthy partners to shepherd projects. State and federal agencies could support such efforts through grants to local community organizations that are also engaged in this work.

Philanthropy may also have a role to play by providing innovative financing options that faith-based organizations could use outside of the traditional (and oversubscribed) affordable housing tax credit system.

At the local level, planning departments can take a page from the success of accessory dwelling units by reducing fees, creating simplified application processes and dedicating staff to shepherd projects through what will likely remain a complex and time-consuming approval process, even with the streamlining proposed under SB4.

Jordan Court is the first affordable housing development in North Berkeley in 30 years, which seems unfathomable in a city that holds such progressive values. In many cases, however, local restrictions and a few neighborhood skeptics can be enough to stymie affordable developments.

More and more places of worship want to be like Jordan Court — a part of the solution — by creating housing for low-income families or supportive housing for people experiencing homelessness. Adding more certainty to the development process through legislation like SB4 is one key step to making more projects like Jordan Court possible throughout California.

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