

Nolan Gray:

Howdy. I'm Nolan Gray, your friendly neighborhood city planner, research director at California YIMBY, and one of the co-leads of the new Metropolitan Abundance Project. Welcome back to the Abundance Podcast. In this episode, I chat with Colin Parent. Colin is a council member of the La Mesa City Council, and he's running for the California State Assembly 79th District down there in San Diego and surrounding areas. In this episode, we chat about his range of experiences in local government and at places like HCD, California's housing authority. We chat about being a pro-housing council member, interactions with the California Coastal Commission, as well as his vision for state housing policy. In this episode, we're joined by Aaron Eckhouse, California YIMBY, and Gloria Magallanes, who is the project manager for the Metropolitan Abundance Project. So, bringing in some new faces. As always, please like, subscribe, leave a review. We're particularly keen to hear from you all about who you want to hear in the future. With that, onto the show. Colin Parent, thanks for joining the Abundance Podcast.

Colin Parent:

Thanks for having me, Nolan.

Nolan Gray:

Where to even start? I feel like you're a little bit of a Johnny Appleseed around that California experience with housing. But, right now, you're serving on the city council of La Mesa, California. As YIMBYs, we're always hearing, oh, it's impossible for local elected officials to be pro-housing because it's all the crazy NIMBYs showing up at everything. And, yet, cool things seem to be happening down the coast. I'm in LA. Talk about that experience. What's it like being a pro-housing council member?

Colin Parent:

It definitely has its challenges. I'm a pro-housing person. I vote for all the housing as an elected official and have a pro-housing message when I talk to voters, in my prior elections to the city council and the current one that I'm running in for the 79th

Assembly district. I think most people are receptive to that. Most people want to hear that and think that there's a housing crisis and they actually want to see people do something about it. But it's also true that not everyone feels the same way. Having that perspective, and giving voice to that perspective in public life means you've got to endure a lot of pushback from people. Some of it's thoughtful and polite, but not all of it is. That can be tough because people can get very mean about this. I think the other biggest challenge is, even though I'm very committed to housing, it's very difficult to keep my colleagues in the city council equally committed when they're seeing the same pushback that I'm seeing.

Gloria Magallanes:

I'd like to hear more about that, about what it's like to try to keep your colleagues engaged like that.

Colin Parent:

It's tough. I think one of the biggest factors that's at play for especially small local elected officials is that there isn't a lot of feedback on the work that they're doing. There's not a big robust local media. There's not a big newspaper. Television stations don't cover our city council meetings the same way they do for the City of San Diego, or for the County of San Diego even. So, the feedback that local elected officials get is very limited to their own personal circles. It's limited to the few people who show up to a city council meeting and speak in public comment. And, it's to those people who decide to spend a lot of their time commenting on Nextdoor or on social media accounts. Those are just not that many people. And, I'm also describing a type of person who is unusual.

My city, La Mesa, has 60,000 people. We're about 10 miles east of downtown San Diego. There's probably 30 people who routinely communicate to the council about issues. We should appreciate their comments and listen to them as part of democracy. But, those are not representative. They're like a very unusual person who chooses to be very involved in this. Just as city council members are pretty unusual too. Most people don't choose to do this. So, given that it's very tempting to look at the people who show up who are often oppositional to housing, who are against change, who are

not as concerned about housing affordability as I am and as you are, to think that their views on these matters are representative of the broader public.

But, if you're being thoughtful and trying to look beyond that, you read the polling, you see what the news covers, you see what people talk to you about at the door when you're going door-to-door, housing affordability is actually really important. People really want you to do things on that. But if you're just passively taking in the limited feedback that you get as a local elected official, you might not see that. So, that's part of my challenge with my colleagues is to try to make sure that they understand that some of the stuff that they're hearing in a hearing room may not be representative of the public's perspective. It's just hard, and it doesn't always work.

Aaron Eckhouse:

I think this is interesting. You, in different capacities, spend a lot of time talking with people in different offices, your council colleagues, in advocacy life. What do you find to be most effective in swaying them?

Colin Parent:

The most effective thing is asking them to follow the State laws. This is, I think, why so much of the advocacy that is happening by California YIMBY, by organizations like the one that I run, on state legislation, is so important. Because some cities will oppose state law and will fight it tooth and nail and will litigate over it. We have some of that in San Diego. Encinitas has a history of that. Coronado is doing some of that even right now. And then you do have some other ones like the City of San Diego, City of Sacramento, that are really trying to go above and beyond and allow for more housing.

But, the vast majority of cities and local jurisdictions in California, I think of as really in this middle ground. And, this is true for the elected officials and what they choose to do too, is that maybe they have mixed feelings about housing. The people they know are mostly homeowners. The people they know are concerned about changes to their neighborhood. But, they understand conceptually that we need more housing. It's just it's hard to vote the right way.

But, they are willing to follow the law and they are not interested in getting sued by the Attorney General. They're not interested in having these big ugly fights about trying to

reimagine the structure of government in California. They're like, "Well, the law says we have to, this is a bonus project. It's building affordable units. We are obligated to vote for it. So, I guess we're going to hold our noses and vote for it." They're not necessarily excited about it. They may tell the members of the public that they wish they didn't have to do this. But, to their credit, they took an oath to uphold the constitution and to follow the laws of California and they're going to do it.

I found that the best way to get my colleagues to vote the right way is to have projects that are subject to the Housing Accountability Act or the State Density Bonus Law or some of these other provisions. And, to be able to say, "Listen, guys. I'm not asking you to like this. I'm not asking you to celebrate this. But, I am asking you to follow your obligations under the law and do the right thing." In my jurisdiction, almost all of my colleagues will do that. I think that's true in a lot of other places too. So, sometimes, you're trying to win hearts and minds. And, sometimes, it's really just trying to get people to... It's actually easier just to get them to agree to follow the law.

Nolan Gray:

So, you're running for state assembly now. And, I think if you're successful, your success in policymaking is really going to depend on "how do we have state interventions that actually are effective?" I mean, one of the challenges with this space, which you're getting at, is that we pass these laws and they really do depend to a certain degree on local good-faith implementation. Yeah, you have your outstanding jurisdictions. You have your jurisdictions like Huntington Beach that are just like, "We are not following law. Period. Try us." But, you're exactly right. I think you have this large middle pack. As you think about how the state can be effective, and this is something we puzzle over at California YIMBY all the time, what are some heuristics or insights that you've gained from being a local elected official that would influence how you approach state policy?

Colin Parent:

Yeah, I think a big part of it is recognizing that not all of the jurisdictions in California are the City and County of San Francisco. I mean, the YIMBY movement started there and it's like a lot of the funding and leadership is there. I don't want to poo-poo their efforts.

Nolan Gray:

I think you're talking to an Angelino and a San Diego resident, right?

Colin Parent:

Right. Yes. Absolutely.

Nolan Gray:

Aaron, please turn your camera off.

Aaron Eckhouse:

Somebody should tell the good people of San Francisco that there's a world that exists outside their borders.

Colin Parent:

Right. They do actually have very distinct challenges. But, the solutions that may be the most useful in that very unusual, very extreme context may not be the ones that we need for other places. Most people in California live in a fairly suburban environment. Like my city, we're a suburb of the City of San Diego. We do have some taller buildings, but not too many. Our apartment buildings are four and five stories at the most, usually. That's true for lots of California, and that's true of where a lot of the market demand is. So, we should be looking toward policy changes that can have a positive impact in these kinds of areas that are relatively palatable for those places. We can not only get them through the legislature, but can imagine local elected officials being willing to implement them in good faith and not feeling like they have this historic fight that they have to take up to protect every element of their community.

So, yeah. Maybe the County of San Francisco needs some policy to allow for big 20-story buildings in lots of places where they're not allowed today. Okay, makes

sense. But, even if you allowed or required that in other contexts, no one would even build it. So, even if you were allowed to, it just doesn't make any financial sense. So, why are you trying to fight for that in places that it's not going to be used? I think some good counterexamples are the ADU policies that have been used a lot in my city and in the San Diego area, making sure that that's pretty relatively minor, but it can be used on a broad number of properties. Housing bonus programs that allow for a project to go from 30 units to 50 units or something like that. Those are relatively small. But, in the aggregate, if used across multiple projects over time, can make a big difference.

I think, not to say that we can't look at those hard cases like San Francisco or some of the hard challenges in the City of Los Angeles, but let's also not forget that most of California isn't those places and that we should come up with policies that are going to be useful in the broad majority of the state.

Nolan Gray:

You also bring to this work some experience working at HCD, which is also at the front lines of actually implementing some of this at the state level. Could you say more about that and the experience there? I mean, that was under Jerry Brown, right?

Colin Parent:

Yeah, yeah, yeah. I worked for Jerry Brown's gubernatorial campaign in 2010. So, I got appointed to work as his Director of External Affairs at the Department of Housing and Community Development for the first two years of his administration. Because Jerry Brown is extremely frugal, he also didn't appoint a communications director. So, I was the spokesperson for the department for a couple of years, and got to do some regulatory and housing policy stuff a little bit on the side, although it ended up taking up a lot of my time.

The modern YIMBY movement came after I served there. So, this might be a surprise to people, but, at the time, I joined in the July of his first year and he had just cut in half the housing development department, because he didn't like them, he didn't like housing element law, he thought he was being treated unfairly as the mayor of Oakland. He was not interested in housing, especially not in that division of the department. Fast forward to today, of course, that's the place with the most growth in

the department. The housing element process has been reinvigorated. There's a lot of the housing accountability stuff that's happening through the department, is through that division. So, it's changed a lot.

But, I will say, at the time, the first time I ever saw the term YIMBY was some handmade decorations that people had put on their cubicles in that housing development department. They were the original YIMBYs where they really felt like they were the vanguard of pro-housing and pro-housing supply. That's not always their reputation now. There's been some tension between the folks at HCD, some of the older line folks and some of the modern Yimby movement, on that housing supply question. But, back then, no one was for housing supply in a big real way except for them, even if it wasn't maybe as robust as we might think of the modern YIMBY movement. That was really interesting.

I think the other big thing is that, for me, I came to that department not because of my expertise on housing policy, but rather through my political relationships with Jerry Brown and his organization. So, I was able to learn a lot about the nuts and bolts of policymaking, and learn a lot about the mechanics of the department and state agencies. But, also, coming with a clear eye on the politics of it and understanding what was possible, what wasn't, what the governor cared about and didn't care about. I think that really helped me get a better sense of that interaction between policy and politics. We have all the great ideas about, if we could snap our fingers and change policy, the world would look a lot different. But, the reality is there's politics involved. And, I got a really strong view of that at the department.

Aaron Eckhouse:

That's a very interesting time. I mean, you have seen a very interesting evolution in the role of HCD. You pointed out there are a lot of political cross-pressures on the department now. YIMBs who want them to be stronger. Mayors like Jerry Brown who feel that HCD is being very hard on them. Do you think there's a role for the legislature in helping HCD navigate that to be more effective?

Colin Parent:

Yeah, absolutely. Honestly, I think the biggest thing is that I think the legislature should stand up for HCD. I think HCD, especially under this leadership and under the prior director, have done a really great job of bringing the department into a modern place, being advocates for more homes, helping to implement state legislation and challenging cities who are trying to get out of their obligations. Not that everything's perfect. That's fine. But, they're absolutely an ally.

And, there's going to be a temptation by members of the legislature to push back on them, to defend their jurisdictions in their own communities, in their own districts, which I understand. But, I don't think that's what the legislature's role should be. Instead, the legislature should say, "Listen, we're passing laws. We're trying to make things happen. HCD and the attorney general and some private litigants are really the backstop on those things. And, we need to be defending them, funding them, empowering them to be able to help the bills that the legislation passes actually result in more homes." That's going to be politically challenging sometimes. But, that's okay. I think that's what they ought to do.

Nolan Gray:

Totally not just fishing for bill ideas here, but in terms of stuff you're excited to work on on housing should you win in November, what's top of mind for you? What gets you up in the morning on housing?

Colin Parent:

I have a long list of ideas. And, every time I come up with an idea, I write it down in a little folder that I have and I try not to think about it until after the election. So, I'm focused-

Nolan Gray:

All good YIMBYs have the Google Doc somewhere where it's like, "This seems like a good idea."

Colin Parent:

Yeah, exactly. I have some concepts of a plan on some of these things as opposed to well-worked out issue papers. But, I'll give you a couple of examples of things that I want to work on. I've done a variety of things to help enhance the state housing bonus program. If you build a little bit of affordable units in your project, you can build a project that's a little bit bigger and cut through some of the other regulatory barriers. I think that's been really great. We expanded that in 2016 in San Diego, in 2020 statewide, and then again in 2023 with an even bigger enhancement. I think that's been really effective. We've got some good data that shows that it works. It's all pretty much focused on the shape and size of buildings and the entitlement certainty. And, it doesn't really address directly the pro formas except insofar as you can maybe build more units and offset costs.

One thing I'd like to do is figure out a way to, like we do in La Mesa, like they do in Sacramento, to exempt the affordable units from some of the development impact fees that they have there. Some of them are probably off-limits, like schools and that sort of stuff. But, some of them shouldn't be. I think what's great about that as a policy is that cities are actually not going to be harmed by this. They're actually going to end up getting more revenue than they otherwise would because these projects are bigger than what they planned for. So, they're actually going to generate more fees anyway. And, it addresses the pro formas of these projects. So, projects that otherwise wouldn't be feasible can now be feasible because they have less on their cost side.

I think that's something where I think a lot of what we've been doing is housing advocates have been really focused on the entitlement and the size of projects. But, I think we also need to take more into account the pro forma side of this equation and make sure that the financing of more of these projects is viable.

Nolan Gray:

The impact fee piece is so tough. I mean, it's something that we've been working on. And, of course, they're incredibly high. I think I'm actually on the end of the spectrum among YIMBYs where it's like I'm somewhat actually sympathetic. A lot of jurisdictions actually charge impact fees, and then allow housing. And, we've put local jurisdictions in a no-win scenario with things like Prop 13. But, it's so difficult... And then, you have the obvious bad actors of the \$75,000 parks fee, yada, yada, yada, where you're like,

"Guys, okay. We have a housing crisis, not a parks access crisis." And, getting the balance right-

Colin Parent:

Nolan, to that point, I'll just add. I raise that tension all the time with people when people talk about that. And, I say, "Listen, I've talked to a whole bunch of people who are planning to leave my city or leave the San Diego area because housing is too expensive. And, I really believe in parks and we should fund them. But, I've never met someone who says that they're going to leave the city because they don't have enough park access. That has never happened." So, parks absolutely are important. We need to fund them. But, I think we also need to be realistic about what priorities are for people.

Nolan Gray:

Yeah. Not to pick on that because I just like parks, but those are some of the craziest high fees. Of all the things we charge for, parks are like, yeah, cool. All right, let's do that. But, the costs are so high.

I want to pick your brain a little bit, maybe stepping back to a local level here, of all the cool things that are happening in San Diego County. It strikes me that of all the parts of the state where actually there's a lot of exciting local leadership, a lot of the cities in San Diego County seem to be leading on this, including San Diego and La Mesa. What's going on? What's exciting? What are some of the success stories that you would like to share?

Colin Parent:

I think one of the biggest things about why we've had successes in the San Diego region, both in the City of San Diego and in La Mesa, although maybe San Diego's I think been a bigger leader on this frankly, is there's been an embrace of citywide policies. In San Diego, we have this general plan that was adopted 20 years ago or something called the City of Villages Strategy. The idea was that we were going to allow for more housing and development near transportation infrastructure, and we

were just going to do that. We're going to do that, but we're going to do that through... Every couple of years, we'll do an updated community plan, of which there's about 50 in the city. And, we're going to update these, and then we're going to add more capacity. And, that's going to allow for more growth over time.

For the most part, that just didn't happen. They would update the plans. They would take forever to update the plans. When they updated the plans, they were mostly status quo and they didn't really make those changes. We had a similar thing in our climate action plan. The City of San Diego says, "Hey, we're going to achieve our climate reduction goals by allowing for more homes near transit. And, we're going to achieve that by updating our community plans on a periodic basis to allow for that." And then, a couple of years went by. The next couple of community plans didn't really do that. They were mostly status quo documents. There are some exceptions, and they've gotten a little better in the interim to their credit.

One of the things when we advocated for and successfully got the Affordable Homes Bonus Program, which is the local City of San Diego enhancement to the Density Bonus Law, they got it up from a 35% bonus to a 50% bonus. That was a citywide policy. We didn't pick and choose neighborhoods. We didn't have winners and losers. We just said, "We all agree that we need more housing. We all agree that we need more affordable units. We're going to apply this citywide. If anyone wants to build on multifamily zone property and they're willing to give some affordable units, they can build bigger."

As an impact, we up-zoned the City of San Diego by 11% overnight, one vote. One vote. And, it had a lot of impact. People started using it and it was effective. But then, I think if you look at some of the things that came out from the prior mayor's administration and the current mayor's administration, their big housing policy efforts are these citywide policies. Whether they're making it easier to build ADUs, making it easier to build their complete communities program, some of the fee reforms, they've all been applied citywide and they've all happened at once as opposed to doing it neighborhood by neighborhood. I think that's been effective. It's been not only effective in terms of you're seeing more units being produced. You certainly are. But, also, it's a better political economy. It's actually easier to get those things adopted than doing these neighborhood-level ones. I think that's been a game-changer.

I know you guys had Bill Fulton on the pod. Bill's a friend and I know him from his time in San Diego. My theory on the citywide housing policy is born in-part because, through his experience, when he was the planning director in San Diego, he recognized

that our community plan update system wasn't working. So, his innovation was, "well, if the community plans are hard to update, why don't we just update the segment of the community plans near transit? It'll be smaller. We can get our hands around it and be able to get that done easier." But, the effect was actually the opposite. People came unglued when that was being proposed. I think it's a dynamic that you see commonly in land-use politics, and I think developers are very familiar with this, is that the smaller the geographic area around which you make a dispositive policy, the more difficult it gets because people get the more angry about it.

The best example is an individual project. That's where people are the most engaged and the most resistant. If that's the dynamic, then try to do it on a broader geography. Instead of doing a station area plan, do a community plan. Instead of doing a community plan, do it citywide. If you can do it through statewide legislation, that's even better. I think understanding that dynamic helps explain what we ought to be focused on as advocates, and policymakers for that matter, and I think is part of the explanation for why the City of San Diego and the San Diego region has been a leader on these issues.

Aaron Eckhouse:

That's some of the core logic that motivated California YIMBY in pursuing State legislation: This idea that the politics would be easier. I had somebody tell me once, "Well, every city in California has a clear consensus on where affordable housing should go, somewhere else." When you're talking at a small enough scale, there's a lot more somewhere else than there is here. As you get up to a larger scale, you run out of somewhere else's and the choice becomes a little clearer about, well, are we doing this or not?

Colin Parent:

I honestly think that this makes intuitive sense to voters too. You're telling people, "Hey, we're not singling you out. We're not picking on your neighborhood. We all agree." If you ask voters, they may prefer to have stuff happen in someone else's backyard. Sure, there's definitely plenty of that. But, even people who say that do tend to agree broadly that we need more homes. So, we say, "Listen, we need more homes. We are going to allow for it. But, you're not going to be singled out. Your

neighborhood's not going to be singled out." Yeah, there might be something that you might have some hesitation around, but, you don't have to feel like you're the only one carrying that burden, that we're all in this together and that we're going to try to solve this for everybody. I think that just has a lot more appeal to people, even people who are a little more concerned and skeptical about all this than otherwise.

Gloria Magallanes:

Were there any difficulties in making that shift? Because I really liked the article that you sent on this topic. And, in it, you mentioned how... or I guess the author mentioned how that approach was really different from how planning is typically done. Were there any challenges in shifting to that perspective or approach?

Colin Parent:

Oh yeah. I mean, people hadn't ever done that before, at least in San Diego or at least on such a scale. One of the big challenges, Gloria, I think was trying to get people to think that this was a possibility, that there was a different way to go about this. The way this all came out for the enhanced bonus program in the City of San Diego, I was then the director of policy at the San Diego Housing Commission, which is both the Public Housing Authority in the City of San Diego and more or less the Department of Housing for the city.

I was their policy director, and I convened a working group of the big players in housing in the region to try to talk to them about a policy idea about density bonus enhancement. A lot of these people have been at their jobs for a long time, and they had a way of doing things. And, their idea of what the fights were about were about this community plan updates. I was like, "Well, maybe this is really hard. It doesn't seem to be working. Why don't we try this other thing?" I think part of the challenge was just getting people to accept that there was even a possibility to engage in it. But, the more conversations we had, the more people said, "Okay, I guess we can do it."

The other thing that was really helpful about getting it across the finish line to address that issue too, is we had this really broad cross-partisan coalition. We had the Climate Action Campaign. My organization that I run, Circulate San Diego, pretty progressive-oriented, climate change concerned organizations. We were partnering

with the Building Industry Association and some of the realtor groups and the Chamber of Commerce. We had a couple of meetings where we would show up, all of our coalition partners would show up to meet with a city council member, and they thought we were punking them. They're like, "What are you guys doing here together? You guys are always fighting each other." I'm like, "Yeah, yeah. But, we all agree on this. We all need more housing and we all think it should include some affordable housing and all that." So, that was one of the ways we broke through that and tried to get people to realize this was something that could happen. And, there was political support for it as well.

Nolan Gray:

You run a group that we love at California YIMBY, Circulate San Diego, Circulate SD. You guys do a lot of good work on housing, but also on transit. I think most people listening to this are fully bought in that these are two sides of the same coin. But, you want to tell us a little bit about Circulate San Diego and what you guys do down there?

Colin Parent:

Yeah. Circulate, we're a small non-profit. We've got nine employees right now. We're actually celebrating our 25th year. We were the result of a merger of Move San Diego, which was primarily focused around transit, and Walk San Diego, which as you might imagine was pedestrian advocacy. With our forces combined, we are focused on public transit, safe streets, just like crosswalks, bike lanes, that sort of thing, Vision Zero, and sustainable growth. Which, for us, means housing abundance, affordable housing, transit-oriented development. If you Google us, the stuff that you'll find is the same stuff that California YIMBY knows about and engages with us on. It's our research, our public policy advocacy, bills that we sponsor. But, the bulk of our budget and staff is actually on fee-for-service engagement. So, we do safe routes of school plans, we do pedestrian master plans, we do community engagement for all sorts of different, almost exclusively public agencies.

I'm not a planner, but I employ a bunch of planners and do planning work, and run an organization that does a lot of planning work. What's great about that mix is that we have me and my policy counsel. We're kind of like these wonky lawyer guys, but we really don't know anything about planning, or at least we're trained formally and we get

to rely on our colleagues who are doing the day-to-day planning engagement work, talking to regular folks and bringing a valuable perspective to the work that we do. Some of the things that we're really focused on and known for is we put out pretty detailed, well-researched policy recommendations. And then, we fight very doggedly, especially in the press, to make sure that the people who are in charge of fixing the problems that we identify fix them. Even if they don't necessarily follow our recommendations, as long as they fix them. That's good.

I think we've developed a real strong reputation both locally and now statewide, that we're saying something, it matters, people ought to listen. And, that we're not just swinging at every pitch. And, that if we're making an ask for something, boy, it's not going to be our last ask. It's not going to be the last time you hear from us. It's been pretty effective. We've been getting the City of San Diego to build a lot more safe intersections, bike lanes, adopting a variety of housing policies. And, recently, in the last few years, sponsoring some pretty impactful legislation.

Nolan Gray:

I'd imagine a lot of people listening to this are involved in local YIMBY groups or housing or transportation advocacy groups. Looking at what you all have in San Diego and thinking, "Wow, that's the dream." What advice would you give for some of these more upstart, mostly probably volunteer groups, to actually grow into something professional and institutional in all the best ways and have the type of influence you all have down there?

Colin Parent:

Yeah. I mean, I think it's hard. The reality is that we're celebrating our 25th year. I've only been at the organization for 10. I think some of the most important things that we've done to institutionalize ourselves happened before me, and I can't take credit for that. Walk San Diego, for example, started out as just a couple of guys mad about some sidewalks. They held a press conference and said, "Hey, y'all should fix these sidewalks." People showed up and they're like, "Okay, I guess we're doing something." And then, a few years later, they were doing this volunteer advocacy. Someone at the County of San Diego said, "Hey, we actually have this grant program. Do you want to maybe get paid to do some of this stuff?" They said, "Okay, I guess." And then, they

ended up building up a portfolio of business to do this kind of work on behalf of local governments.

Our organization's history is not alone in that. There's actually a lot of the pedestrian advocacy and bike advocacy organizations nationwide who have that as a part of their funding model, where they've taken their expertise that they've developed as advocates and figured out a way to actually get paid for it as planners and engagement specialists. So, I think that's something that folks should think about when they're doing this work. It's probably easier to do it on the transportation side than the housing side because there's more funding available for those sorts of things. But, I would just encourage people not to shy away from it.

Some people I've talked to, people that are like, oh, they're afraid it's selling out, and that sort of stuff. I'm like, "Okay, I appreciate that. But, we wanted to advocate for, and my processors want to advocate for more crosswalks. If the county of San Diego wanted to give us some funding to advocate for more crosswalks, that sounds good to me." And, allowed us to be able to be more effective at that. So, I think figuring out that business model, the business model really does matter. It's very difficult to hire staff just on individual donations on your website. You have to figure out other sorts of things. I think also, related to that too, is to be open to working on several different related issue domains. If you're a housing group, but you're partnering all the time with your local bicycle coalition, I don't know, talk about maybe joining forces. Maybe there are ways to generate that scale so that you can do even more and more impressive work.

Nolan Gray:

Cool. Do we want to do lightning round? Yes. Cool. Okay, let's do it.

Colin Parent:

Sure.

Nolan Gray:

Where are the best fish tacos in San Diego County?

Colin Parent:

Ooh. There's no such thing as the best. There's only your favorite. But, I think my favorite right now is the Marisco's German truck that's right next to my campaign office in City Heights. I used to go to it when it was in a dirt lot in front of a liquor store. Now, it's in a paved lot next to a U-Haul truck storage facility. They have the smoked marlin taco, which is magnificent. If you come to San Diego, you've got to try it.

Gloria Magallanes:

I love city hikes. What's your favorite beach to go to?

Colin Parent:

Probably La Jolla Shores. But, I'm more of an inland guy. I have a T-shirt actually that says 'Barely see the beach' in it. It's a little clothing brand based out of Spring Valley that does that. I go to the beach. It's great. But, I'm mostly inland.

Nolan Gray:

Yeah, when you move to California, they make you decide are you going to be a beach person or a mountain person? Once you choose, you never go back.

Colin Parent:

That's right. Yeah.

Nolan Gray:

What's your favorite building in San Diego County?

Colin Parent:

It's got to be in La Mesa. It's probably my friend April's house that I've only seen from the outside. It's beautiful. She bought it a few years ago and, every time I walk by it, they're making new things to it. They've got like two ADUs in it now. Geisel Library is a good one too if you want to see something fun and interesting, that's findable on Google Maps. It's on the UCSC Campus.

Aaron Eckhouse:

Walk, bike, bus or train.

Colin Parent:

Yeah, I take the trolley. That's my go-to. Fortunately, I can walk to my trolley stop in the city of La Mesa. It lets me off a couple blocks away from my office downtown San Diego. I take the orange line, which conveniently runs through a large share of the 79th Assembly District.

Nolan Gray:

Favorite missing-middle typology?

Colin Parent:

Oh, that's a great question. Townhomes. Townhomes.

Nolan Gray:

As a fellow townhomes lover, could you say more please?

Colin Parent:

Yeah. Obviously, we need more housing of all types, for sure. And, more rental. We need more in the low end, more in the high end. But, I think the thing that I hear the most frequently from such a diverse set of folks is people expressing a lot of concern that there isn't enough affordable for-sale product. I say this as someone who's done... Most of my career, I have been working on multifamily rental stuff, both at the housing commission, at the HCD, the density bonus policies that I've had a strong hand in, all on the rental side. Super important. Maybe even more important because it's the folks who have the most difficulty in the housing market.

But, where we haven't had enough real success is home-ownership opportunities that are affordable. So, fourplexes are great. Sure. But, we also need those townhomes so that more people are able to purchase something who wants to get into that. That's definitely one of the things I want to work on in the legislature. I know, Nolan, you and I have had some brief conversations about wanting to see some efforts on that. I'm not an expert on that like I am on some of these other policy issues. I'm going to have to lean on some experts, like folks on this call and your organization. But, I think that's the thing that I'm the most excited about right now in that missing middle space.

Aaron Eckhouse:

Might be your most controversial take on this podcast within the YIMBY space. Townhomes are a divisive topic in my experience.

Nolan Gray:

Only among the Bay Area lunatics. In real America, San Diego and LA, we love them.

Aaron Eckhouse:

That's fair. That's fair. Specifically, it's a Santa Clara County issue. There's a townhome fault line.

Nolan Gray:

Oh yeah, I know what you're talking about. Okay.

Colin Parent:

Well, I don't think I'm going to get redistricted into Santa Clara County. So, I think it's fine. It's fine.

Aaron Eckhouse:

It's going to be a really weird long ribbon.

Nolan Gray:

YIMBY gerrymandering. We'll get there someday. Cool. Do we want to talk a little bit about the Coastal Commission? You all have done some excellent work on the Coastal Commission. I think most people, everyone in California, loves the coast. Even if you are a mountain Californian, it's an incredible asset. But, as you all have pointed out, the California coast is incredibly expensive. The coastal designation has, in practice, been probably one of the most effective things we've done for pricing out folks from the coast. Of course, this has had a disparate racial impact as well. You all put out a report recently covering this. But, also covering I think some useful things that we could be doing to actually improve housing affordability and access to the coast. Do you want to talk a little bit about that and how you think about that issue?

Colin Parent:

Yeah. The organization I lead, Circulate San Diego, we put out a report earlier this year called a Better Coastal Commission. The premise is, like you say, Nolan, the coast is important and we all love it. We're Californians and we are environmentalists and we want to protect the coast. We don't want to get rid of the Coastal Commission. The Coastal Commission does a lot of important things. Protecting the coast is distinct. It is important. There probably ought to be some different rules around the coastal zones than in other places. Those things all make sense.

But, what we also need to recognize is the Coastal Commission, and through its actions in recent years, has been at crooked purposes to a lot of the state of California's stated goals around affordability, around inclusion, and around climate change. What we did in this report is we identified a variety of examples where the Coastal Commission was blocking or delaying affordable housing, where they were saying no to bicycle lanes, where they were requiring cities to expand roads and to increase traffic, while blocking and making it harder to build infill around transit.

Just stuff that just is, when you say all that out loud, it just sort of is like, "I'm sorry, what? In California?" This is the same state that's doing all these pro-climate things and exempting bikes from CEQA and all these other sorts of things? What is going on there? This is not just us grousing as advocates. We actually have some really concrete data from their own agenda documents that show what the staff's recommendations are on these things. They're really just out of step with modern environmentalism and modern thinking about planning.

Part of the reason that we put this report is that we had a bill last year that assembly member, David Alvarez, a supporter of mine for my race, we sponsored a bill with him to basically say to the Coastal Commission, "Hey, you need to approve housing bonus projects, projects that include affordable units. You need to approve them just like cities and counties have to." The Coastal Commission staff came to the legislature and said, "Totally unnecessary. We never cause any problems with those projects. We always approve them. Don't worry about that. This is bananas." But, we looked at the numbers, like this is just blatantly untrue. This is just wildly untrue. But, we didn't really have a-

Nolan Gray:

I mean, on this point too, you occasionally hear this from I think older guard planners. I'm a city planner. But, you hear this from older planners, "Oh, well, we don't need to lower the parking requirements because everybody's going to build the parking anyway." It's like, "Okay, cool. Then what's the problem with getting rid of the mandate?" Or, in this case, it's like, "Okay, if you never cause problems with these projects, why don't we just streamline the process?"

Colin Parent:

Yeah, absolutely. So, we were like, "Okay. Well, that's what they're saying. We better collect some information and make sure to be able to..." If we're going to do this policy again, which we have a bill this year, we tried to do that again this year. We need to make sure that we could show our work and point out that it wasn't true. But, Nolan, I want to pull back on something that you said. One of the things that I've really observed in this dialogue with Coastal Commission staff and some of the advocates who are big champions of the status quo there, is that talking to them does sound like talking to a planner 10, 15 years ago. It used to be that the American Planning Association in California opposed parking reforms, opposed density bonus law, while at the same time featuring Donald Shoup in their magazine.

It was just like, "What's going on here? This doesn't seem to be making sense." To their credit, that organization has changed their perspective and has come to embrace this just as a lot of professional planners have changed their perspective too, and said, "Okay, maybe a bespoke approach to every project isn't appropriate. We need to adopt actual plans and live by those plans." So, in a lot of ways, it does feel like the Coastal Commission is just... It's not that they're necessarily... They're distinct, but really what they are is they're just stuck in an older way of thinking that doesn't value non-car transportation, that doesn't believe in markets as contributors to housing affordability. So, I think a lot of this is just trying to wake up the commission as well as the legislature to understand that their older way of thinking is no longer what modern planners and modern environmentalists are thinking about land use and transportation.

Aaron Eckhouse:

Do you feel optimistic about this? I feel like the Coastal Commission in the last year has doubled down on "don't tell us what to do," which is I think an arc we saw to some degree from cities. And then, cities largely lost that political fight. Maybe that's what's going to happen with the Coastal Commission.

Colin Parent:

Yeah, I think that's what's happening here. I think there's going to be a change to the Coastal Commission. It's not going to happen overnight. It's going to be piecemeal. Part of that's going to be through legislative change, and part of that's going to be

attitudinal change. I think the next governor is going to think differently about who they appoint to the Coastal Commission based on this.

I'll tell you with my conversations with legislators, with legislative staff over the last couple of years about this issue, there's a growing frustration amongst decision-makers about the obstinacy from the Coastal Commission. Even folks who aren't willing to take the step of voting for the reforms that have been put before them so far, recognize that the system isn't working, that they're not following the rest of the state on climate and affordability issues and do want to see some change. So, I think it's just a matter of time. We've got to keep up the pressure, keep on advocating, keep on proposing good reform bills. But, I'm not deterred by the ferocity of their opposition. I think it's actually a signal that this is working and that the time for reform is in hand.

Nolan Gray:

Yeah, I think that's exactly right. I mean, we had some pretty bruising fights around this with SB423, which was essentially a streamlining bill for jurisdictions that were falling behind on their RHNA production goals. I think there was some frustration among a lot of policymakers in Sacramento of this idea of "why would we carve out the parts of the state where the housing crisis is most acute from this housing affordability streamlining law?" There's not really, frankly, a good answer. I mean, I think everybody would agree. Okay, natural areas of the coast, definitely. Don't touch that. Areas subject to flooding and sea level rise risk, those were all carved out of the bill. But, you're going to say a fully urbanized area, we're not going to extend streamlining provisions to those parts of the state, doesn't really sell well.

Colin Parent:

Yeah, no, exactly. Well, just to drill down a little bit on the specific example of the policy that the bill that we were proposing didn't make it through last year, didn't make it through this year, but made a lot of progress. It almost got there. All it was saying was that the coastal commission should approve projects that include affordable units on land that they had already approved for multifamily development.

We're not talking about stuff on the beach or stuff in marshlands or stuff where the coast might erode or any of that stuff. No. There are some parts, people don't know

this. Maybe people don't know this. There are parts of the coastal zones that are zoned for housing, zoned for multifamily housing. Multifamily housing does get built in the coastal zone, occasionally getting approved by the Coastal Commission. We're just saying, for that stuff that you guys have already signed off on for affordable multifamily housing, you should allow it. They were like, "No, we don't want to." It's so bonkers. I just don't think those... Arguments that don't have any basis don't last for too long. So, I am confident that there are going to be some changes. Maybe it'll be next year, maybe it'll be the year after, I don't know. But, I'm confident there are going to be some changes.

Nolan Gray:

A unique thing about this space, I think it's a good thing about this space, is a lot of folks are relatively new to this. A lot of YIMBY advocates, they hadn't been doing advocacy for years. A lot of people who are even active local YIMBY leaders or pro-housing or pro-transit leaders are, in many cases, fairly new to the space. I think you bring a valuable perspective in that you've been working on this for quite a while. Bigger picture, you're talking to folks who are entering the space and trying to think through housing affordability. What are some lessons that you think you've learned that you would impart to folks new to the space?

Colin Parent:

Yeah. I think the biggest one, and I've certainly experienced this as an elected official and as a candidate, is that you've got to remember, if you're a housing advocate, if you're listening to the Abundance Podcast, you are not normal. You are an unusual person and you have interests and values and perspectives that are not shared by everyone. So, I think it's really worth being humble about what policies we think we want to propose or champion. And, also, be realistic and sensitive and forgiving to people who may not share our perspectives about everything. I think we need dramatically more homes. We've got to make it much easier to build more homes. I think most people agree with me, but not everyone does. Even the people who agree with me may not agree with every solution that I think is valuable or that California YIMBY thinks is valuable. And, we need to take that into account.

I think California YIMBY has had a big experience with SB50, trying to solve all housing problems with one big vote. It got pretty far, actually. But, it also generated a lot of pushback. Arguably generated, catalyzed some of the statewide anti-housing organizations. I think that should be a lesson. Not that you can't swing through the fences ever. But, that backlash is real. Other people's perspectives are real. And, that we should take that into account when we figure out what we want to champion and what we want to make a priority. Also, how we talk about these things and how we talk about people, and talk about and with people who disagree with us. For example, I try not to call people NIMBYs ever. I try not to say that word. Now, I call them anti-housing activists if that's who they are. But, that's a concession to folks who feel like it's a pejorative and that doesn't necessarily describe them. Even if maybe I think it does, I try not to say that so that we can continue to be in dialogue without writing one another off.

Nolan Gray:

Could more pro-housing advocates run for office and, if so, how?

Colin Parent:

Oh, absolutely. Yeah, absolutely. You should totally do it. You should run for office. It is challenging and difficult and rewarding. You don't get to achieve everything that you want. You don't get to have everything that you want. You don't get all of your policies across the finish line. But, you get to be in a position to move the needle. I have a hard time getting my colleagues to adopt some of the more robust things that I want to do. But, there's plenty of things that I've been able to get done that, if I wasn't there, it just wouldn't have happened. That is a very fulfilling, rewarding thing.

If you do want to run for office as a YIMBY though, one thing that I would encourage everyone to understand is that, even if housing is by far the most important thing that you care about, that's not true for most voters. Most voters have a diversity of things that they care about. If you want to run as a pro-housing candidate, great. Don't shy away from that. But, also, engage with the other issue areas. Make sure you have thought through your position on these other areas. Make sure that you can articulate a set of policies that you want to support and champion that are on other domains.

So, you're pro-housing, but you recognize that you need more parks in your community and you want to support a park bond. Great. That sounds great. Or, my city, we've got a lot of young families. We need more bike lanes right around schools. Those are things that I talk about. A lot of young couples come from downtown San Diego, they have dogs and small apartments. We need dog parks. At least, those are all things that we could do. Sometimes, you see the folks in the housing space who run for office and they only talk about housing, and that's the only thing they know about and the only thing they can speak confidently about. I'm into it. I donate to them. But, they don't always win elections. So, just encourage people to... Running a city, running for the legislature, it's a whole diversity of issues. Housing is very, very important. Maybe the most important, but it's definitely not the only one.

Aaron Eckhouse:

Yeah, you don't really have the option of opting out of certain issues when you're actually on city council. If it comes in front of you, you have to make your call.

Colin Parent:

Yep, absolutely. Yeah. Some stuff, a lot of it's land use. But, the budget, public safety, how do you feel about the police -- these are all things that people have to think through and have good answers for. It's important to know that. And, you have an obligation to think critically about those things. If you're going to serve in that office, you have to serve in the totality of that office. Housing may be where you spend most of your attention. Great. But, you got to do due diligence on that other stuff too, and represent your constituents honorably.

Gloria Magallanes:

One of the benefits of being in office is that you're able to push for things that maybe wouldn't happen if you weren't in the room. Is there any one action or program that you feel you're particularly proud of that wouldn't have happened if you were a part of that decision?

Colin Parent:

Yeah, I'll give you two examples. I think, one, we talked about the state density bonus law. We got one application in before we had a local implementation ordinance that we processed pretty uncontroversially, and that was good. Subsequently, we did an implementation ordinance, and I thought that was really important. I don't think the staff was going to do it. But, I thought it was really important to signal to folks in the housing development space that we were going to abide by that policy. So, we adopted that. Since then, I mean, almost every multifamily development in our city in the last six, seven years has included affordable units because of that. We don't even have an inclusionary obligation. But, we're generating literally a historic number of affordable units in our city because we were very clear with people that we were going to abide by this law.

I, actually, because of my background working on issues at the City of San Diego and at the housing commission, I actually brought in an example of a staff report from the City of San Diego that I thought clearly articulated what the council's obligations and constraints were. And, it got our staff to use that as a template so that my colleagues could see something that was clear and made sense so that they knew what they had to do in terms of approving eligible projects. That just wouldn't have happened if I wasn't on the council. It just wouldn't have happened.

Another example, we just broke ground last year on the first 100% affordable development in the city in 30 years. And, it's a former redevelopment successor agency site. We probably would've done... There would've been something done with that. But, I was very insistent that we actually put it up for RFP, request for proposals, and actually build something there. We had an option to sell the land and put the money somewhere else. I was like, "No, no, no. We have this land. It's right near the trolley. It's right near our commercial district. We should create units here and homes for people who otherwise couldn't afford to live here."

So, that was a piece. So, we did that. The other thing related to that same project, we paid for an analysis about what could happen there and all that. The analysts came back and said, "Listen, this can support 20% affordable, and there's no way we're going to get any tax credits. There's no way we're going to get any bond financing. 20% is really the max that you can expect." So, the initial draft of the request for proposals was asking for a mixed-income developer to build up to 20% affordable on that project. Because I have had some experience with affordable housing finance, which no one else in the city does, because we never hadn't done it within anyone's

living memory, I said, "No, no. Let's not cap the number of affordables here. Let's say at minimum 20%. And then, maybe some affordable housing developer will have some creative financial tool or know about some program that's not on our radar to be able to make up that gap, for that gap financing."

That's actually what happened. The proposal came in at 40% affordable. We awarded it for that. In the course of the negotiation, I think College FA made a new program, or they figured out how to get this new program to get in there. So, now, a hundred percent of those units are going to be deed-restricted. A lot of them at moderate income, but a broad diversity of income levels. That just would never have happened if anyone else in the city was elected because, literally, no one else -- I'm pretty sure I'm the only person who worked at the director's department, director's office at HCD in the city, in my entire city of La Mesa. So, I feel very proud of that. But, it's also a real substantive, I was able to bring my knowledge as a housing professional to bear on behalf of my constituents, on behalf of my community, on a very substantive policy decision. Soon, there's going to be hundreds of families who are going to benefit from it.

Nolan Gray:

Fantastic. Well, Colin, thanks so much for all the great work that you do and with your team at Circulate San Diego and down in La Mesa. We'll be excited to see what happens depending on how things go in November. I have a very happy memory. Between jobs, after I'd committed to go to UCLA for my PhD, I did a cross-country road trip from New Orleans to San Diego. And, the stars just aligned. As I'm coming down the eight through Alpine and La Mesa in San Diego, it was a beautiful, perfect day. It was the dream California experience of you've gone through a rough desert and you're coming into paradise. It's a beautiful region that's only going to get better with more housing. Where can folks follow you, stay in touch with you, get involved in whatever capacity they're interested in?

Colin Parent:

Folks can check out my website, [colinparent.org](http://colinparent.org). That's one L, and that's parent, like a mom or a dad. You can find out more about my platform, sign up to volunteer at a phone bank, make a donation, a very heavy, large donation, please. And then, you can

find me on all the social media platforms at @colinparent. I'm probably most active on Twitter, but certainly you can follow me everywhere else too.

Nolan Gray:

Colin Parent, thanks for joining the Abundance Podcast.

Colin Parent:

Yeah, thanks very much for having me guys.