

Nolan Gray:

Howdy. I'm Nolan Gray, your friendly neighborhood city planner, Research and Legislative Director over here at California YIMBY, and one of the new co-leads of the Metropolitan Abundance Project. Welcome back to the Abundance Podcast. We've got a great episode for you. This week, I chat with Christian Solorio. He's a registered architect who's worked on all different types of affordable housing and has been a real leader on housing affordability issues in Arizona where he was the first registered architect in the Arizona State Legislature to serve in over 40 years. When he was in the legislature and in his time after, he's been an incredible champion for housing affordability and pro-housing zoning reforms in Arizona and a real leader in their local YIMBY movement.

So in this episode, we chat about the housing affordability situation in Phoenix as well as in Arizona, some of the prospects for reforms in that state going forward, and we draw a lot of the lessons that I think might be useful to folks doing housing advocacy all across the country. As always, a full transcript is available on our website, metroabundance.org. That's metroabundance.org. You can find us on all social media @MetroAbundance in whichever current version of Twitter you prefer. And please as always, like, subscribe, and leave a review. It helps us out. We're especially keen to hear who you want to hear from in the future. With that, thanks for joining us, onto the show.

Hi Christian, welcome to the Abundance Podcast.

Christian Solorio:

Hey, Nolan. It's good to be here.

Nolan Gray:

Cool. Well, so let's dive right into it. I think from a California perspective, the idea of Arizona having housing affordability problems is pretty weird, right? Maybe hundreds of thousands of Californians, that's been the housing safety valve. One of my colleagues, Kevin Erdman, who lives in Phoenix, likes to make the joke that California has a wildly successful housing affordability program. It's called Phoenix. If you want an affordable home, you just moved to Phoenix. But from the Arizona perspective, right, there's been

this incredible run-up in housing costs. So what's been the housing situation in Arizona and Phoenix in particular historically and then today?

Christian Solorio:

Yeah. I mean, historically this was an affordable place to live. I was originally born in California, Santa Rosa more specifically, and my dad worked as a dishwasher, my mom worked as a house cleaner and we just couldn't survive in California. We bounced around different parts of California. There was one point in my life where it was cheaper for me and my siblings to be in Mexico while my dad was working in the U.S., but that just wasn't a great living situation. Eventually we found our way to Phoenix because it granted us that level of affordability, given my parents' very limited, working, poor salaries. So we were able to establish our roots and buy a home. I think it was \$120,000 that my dad purchased, a three-bedroom home, which we then added an attached ADU and did a garage conversion to turn into a five-bedroom.

So that was the market. You can buy a starter home for 120,000 and that's what Arizona was known for. And it changed pretty rapidly. Coming out of the recession, Phoenix was one of the hardest-hit areas in the country. So you could buy a home in that ... still that low 100s in a well-located area at the time, and then from that kind of ... I would say 2012, 2014 up until the pandemic, we were seeing gradual rises in prices. We probably doubled the price between that span. Going to a medium household price, about 250,000, and then in that gap between 2020 and 2024 where we really saw just an astronomical rise, so we doubled that from that point. So we are at 450 and we don't necessarily have the salaries that folks do in California, so it's really put us in a bind because we don't really have the ... even though the 450 sounds affordable to a Californian or someone in New York or D.C., you're taking significant pay cut if you're moving into this market.

So there's definitely an imbalance there that has been putting us in a crisis level and a lot of the solutions for the housing crisis take years and years to implement, so we're definitely in catch up mode now.

Nolan Gray:

Yeah. Well, shout out to your folks, the original OG YIMBYs, actually putting some housing in their backyard. That's cool. You raised a really important point too, which is, often, these housing affordability discussions at a national level, it's people looking at

rents or home prices, and it's so important to keep in mind that variation in incomes is a major factor there. And really the best metric is what's the multiple of the median home price relative to household incomes. Florida, I think, struggles with this as well, where on paper it's like the prices are relatively low, but in many cases, salaries are quite low. And so I think it's a challenging thing for Californians, but I assume there's been this huge influx of folks who have been priced out of California and almost in many cases are exporting the crisis to Arizona to a certain extent, right?

Christian Solorio:

Yeah. Actually, the Turner Center did some research and they had some diagrams calling it kind of the fallout of the housing crisis in California and its radii as it impacted places like Boise and Denver, and then Phoenix was on there too. But there's been a huge influx of population over the last five years that has caused this pressure, this crunch in supply and increase in demand that's causing this dramatic imbalance in our housing market.

Nolan Gray:

I mean Phoenix has historically built a decent amount of housing, but I think when most people think of Phoenix, they probably think of sprawl, right? Building outward and outward. Can you talk a little bit about that history? Is Phoenix still growing outward? Why is that not the safety valve for housing production?

Christian Solorio:

Yeah, so that's what kind of got us into such a boom and bust situation during the recession in 2006. We were producing single-family homes at a much higher rate than we're producing them even today at that point. You saw what happened: we had near nationwide highs in foreclosures and a dramatic drop in house prices as a result of overbuilding, and there's been this hesitancy to do that. So the ramp up has been so slow that we've been under-producing for so long because so many developers and investors are kind of scarred from that process. The ramp-up still hasn't caught up to those 2006 levels of production, but what's different now is we were almost exclusively building single-family homes in that 2006-era and there was plenty of land, plenty of

cheap land, and we still had, I would say, room to grow in terms of using our existing resources as far as water is concerned.

And now we're at a point where that's no longer the case and we have particularly in the far West Valley and the Southeast Valley where we have some of our high growth areas, the question of water rights is really coming into question and putting pressure on the type of development that happens out there. We can go on another hour-long sidebar on water policy and how that impacts the housing market here in Arizona, but we basically have a loophole where single-family homes for homeownership need to show the water assurance for the next 100 years, but all rental properties do not. So apartments, town homes that are on rental models, and we have a lot of single-family homes that are for rent that are being produced under that model so that they can skirt our water policy. So those things are kind of forcing some of this more higher density development.

Also, there's been a significant investment in downtown redevelopment, almost like every city that had gone through decades of divestments in downtown and reinvested money there, and that has brought a boom of multifamily housing in the downtown area. But even relative to some cities that are smaller than us, like Austin—you go to Austin, you see dozens and dozens of cranes out there, and here we might have eight cranes at a time building these higher density multifamily housing. So we are producing, but definitely not at the rate that we needed to and it definitely looks a lot different today with a mixture of multifamily housing and single-family as opposed to almost exclusively single-family prior to the recession.

Nolan Gray:

We don't have an hour, but let's talk about the water thing a little bit because this is important. I mean, you hear about this constantly in LA and I can only imagine in Phoenix. I would imagine some folks saying, "Well, Phoenix, in many contexts all across Arizona, we just don't have enough water, so we can't be building more housing." What's your perspective on that? What needs to be solved with water in these contexts?

Christian Solorio:

Oh, man. Well, to give you some context on where Arizona stands in the water discussion, we built a canal all the way from the Colorado River that goes all the way down to Phoenix and Tucson. It's called the Central Arizona Project, and that was funded by the federal government. And in order for the federal funding to be granted, we,

as a state, agreed to move our water rights to be the most junior. So you have your upper basin states and your lower basin states, and out of all seven states that are sharing the water from the Colorado River Water Basin, we are seventh in water rights. We have the most junior water rights. So obviously this deal was cut over a hundred years ago. The people who made this deal probably knew that they never were going to have to deal with the consequences of making this deal.

So we're now kind of in this situation where you have the Colorado River, which allocates more water rights than there is physical water, which is causing these long-term shortages. So that affects us in different ways because we have different water portfolios. We're not 100% reliant on the Colorado River to sustain the entire state of Arizona. We also have the Salt River Basin, which is on the east side of Arizona, which feeds down to Phoenix, which is a very healthy water source, and we don't have reservoir shortages on that side, but only certain municipalities, Phoenix being one of them, has water rights to that. Then each city has different water portfolios. So you have the City of Scottsdale where 75% of their water portfolio is from Colorado River water. So they're investing a lot on recycling and reuse and using non-potable water and things like that that you don't necessarily see the municipalities that have more secure water rights not doing.

So as a state, we have a long way to go. I think Las Vegas serves as a good model of how to use water wisely. They invested tons of money on the water taps and all of that. I think essentially to solve this issue, everyone's going to have to move towards that model, and the question becomes who's paying for it, right? Because we're going to run out of water rights first here in Arizona, and a lot of the improvements can be done on the California end, right? But as a State, you guys aren't necessarily as motivated to make those huge investments, trillion-dollar investments in water infrastructure because you guys have the most senior rights.

So at one point in the negotiations, I think the State of California had sent a letter to the other six states that were renegotiating the water under federal mandate saying that... I think the gist of it was, "I don't know what you guys are doing negotiating water that isn't yours, because California has the most senior rights." They're like, "Hey, you're state number seven. Why are you trying to take some water from me at state number one?" Eventually, the rhetoric kind of toned down and California went to the negotiating table, and those discussions are ongoing, but basically what's caused is there's a lot of a shell game of water rights that's ongoing that is... everyone's using these inflated water numbers to justify development and justify growth and justify the investment, but the reality is that the water probably isn't going to be there in 100 years, and a lot of those discussions are going to be ongoing, and there's just so many people that benefit from

the current structure—almost just like housing—a lot of people benefit from housing policy being this way that it's almost impossible to change it.

So I think things are going to have to get pretty bad, just like the housing crisis in California got so bad that these ideas that seemed radical at the time needed to be implemented, the same thing's going to need to happen with water. Things are going to need to get so bad that someone turns on their faucet and water doesn't come out, like that bad, until I think the status quo is upended.

Nolan Gray:

California gets to keep all the water and the rest of the Mountain West has to take all of the people priced out of California. How does that sound for a deal?

Christian Solorio:

Yeah. Right?

Nolan Gray:

It's a tricky issue. I mean, as you can imagine here in California, there are a lot of historical injustices and difficult situations to work through. Another feature I think that is unique to Arizona, certainly to folks listening on the East Coast, is the amount of land that's federally owned or land that's within reservation lands. This has somewhat, commonly alleged to be a barrier for the city expanding the housing supply. You occasionally hear about this at the federal level of whether the federal government should release additional land for development. What's your perspective on that? To what extent is that an issue? To what extent should that be part of a federal agenda? I'm curious to get your thoughts.

Christian Solorio:

It's probably not that big of an issue here in Arizona as maybe as you would expect. We do have some tribes surrounding our large metros of Tucson and Phoenix, but there's so much room outside of that until we start hitting that state or the federally owned land. We have a lot of state-owned land that surrounds our municipalities and the state has

been more than willing to promote economic growth. Economic development has been releasing and relinquishing that land and historically has done that and will continue to do that. There's really only one municipality, which is Flagstaff, that is landlocked by federal land, and that's where we have our most severe housing crisis in the state. That's where the highest housing costs are, and on top of that, wages are even lower over there.

So you have a really bad incongruence, and you see that a lot in your Colorado mountain towns. That same kind of crisis that you see there is happening here. But outside of that, there's plenty of land to grow into. It's more water that's the restrictor than it is any kind of federal implementation or federal change in the way that they approach their land.

Nolan Gray:

Yeah. We're going to talk mainly about Phoenix, just given that this is the largest city in the state in the context that you're familiar with, but there are many fantastic cities in Arizona that are all wrestling with this issue. Tucson as well. I was down in Tucson and it's just as sort of relevant of an issue there as it is in many parts of California. So we have a little bit of context here. Arizona's dealing with the housing crisis, the housing shortage, really for maybe one of the first times in the state's modern history. There's been a rising YIMBY movement and more people have been interested in this as an issue. Do you want to say a little bit more about how folks started to get activated on this issue? What's the process like of going from a state of, "Okay, we have tons of housing, too much housing," to "Okay, now we have a severe housing shortage" to step three, which is where we're at now, "Let's do something about it, let's solve it."

Christian Solorio:

It all happened pretty quickly. I would say in the year 2020, we weren't talking about it. I've been a lifelong housing advocate, so it's something I was talking about, but it didn't really go anywhere, and in 2020 was still the case. I think in 2021 is when things changed and those housing prices just skyrocketed and we had really high eviction rates. We had a really noticeable increase in homelessness. Our tenderloin of our city is right outside the capital, so you had this kind of very visual and visceral marker of how bad things were getting just outside the doorsteps of the capitol. And because of that, I think that's kind of what got all of this action started and I think it started at the state level through legislation that was introduced in 2022.

That was a huge omnibus SB50-style bill that really started the conversation. Until then, the conversation hadn't started. Even at the city-level, a lot of cities weren't acting on land use policy reform or zoning reform, and it wasn't until that bill was dropped. And it actually didn't even make it to committee. It was viewed as such a bombshell that they couldn't even get enough votes to hear it in committee. But that started the conversation and that was in 2022 and two years later, we've got some pretty significant wins. So the coalitions, there were various coalitions and they all kind of formed organically. So you had our YIMBY groups, we have Tucson YIMBY, Tempe YIMBY, West Valley YIMBY, all of those formed organically. There was no person or organization behind the inception of those organizations. They just happened because housing prices were rising and you had young people not looking at the prospects of ever owning a home and not seeing the pathway there.

You had people in Tucson, which was an even more affordable place than Phoenix, dealing with an affordability crisis. So you had that organic movement. And the umbrella that I wore was more on the housing justice and social justice side of trying to rid our built environment of these systems that are inherently unequal and keep us segregated on socioeconomic and racial status. So we had another kind of cohort that formed out of those principles, and then you had your development groups and your economic development groups start noticing that it's becoming harder to recruit companies to move here because we don't necessarily have the housing affordability that we used to be able to offer companies as far as an attractor. So all those three things all happened at the same time, around 2022, and started this pressure to start the movement. And that's kind of how it happened, yeah.

Nolan Gray:

So I think a similar thing was happening in a lot of places over the course of the pandemic as home prices went totally on a roller coaster. Let's start with that first kind of crazy bombshell bill because that was what first caught my attention and got me sort of paying attention to what you all were up to in Arizona. I believe it was introduced by Senator Steve Kaiser, who was a Republican. Say more about that. From the outside looking in, that looks a lot like the experience in California with SB 827 and SB 50 where we introduced these big bombshell bills that would've solved the problem, but kind of freaked everybody out, but then created a space for other conversations to follow.

Christian Solorio:

So the first one was in 2022, the one that didn't even make it out of committee. What ended up happening after that was the establishment of a study committee, very similar to what happened in Montana. So the study committee happened in the interim between '22 and '23, and then when it was revived, it came back as SB 1117. It was an omnibus. It maintained kind of the same principles as last year's iteration, but this year, the difference was when the movement was starting, when these coalitions were forming informally, in the interim, there was a lot of organizing done so that there was actually votes secured and that we knew it could move and we had the votes to move it.

So that bill included clauses for ADUs, clauses for single-room-occupancy, clauses for commercial by-right, clauses for manufactured housing by-right. It really had everything you'd ever want to pass. Small lot sizes, design review, expediting, permitting. You name it, it was in there. That really put a lot of people on their heels and people weren't expecting that bill to start moving forward. And when it did, it really caught a lot of people by surprise and people who were kind of, I would say non-committal on this policy area, were now looking at the prospect of hitting a green or a red button and having their vote publicly recorded on this issue.

A lot of people just hadn't done their homework. They were not taking this seriously because they were unaware of the organizing that happened in the background and the votes that were being secured that were allowing these bills to move forward. Eventually, the negotiations fell apart on that bill, but it was the bombshell. It was the one where there were tons of articles, tons of pushback, lots of news coverage, and everything that you need to get to that tipping point, which we eventually did the following year.

Nolan Gray:

It was a remarkable bill, and I'd encourage folks to just go read it. This is my abiding thing, and I think you agree with me on this. More people should just go read bills and actually just see what's in them. That's a superpower in policymaking that a lot of people don't have. But SB 1117, one of the things that had to happen early on is this issue had to be bipartisan in a state like Arizona. Even in a place like California, I think we have to work across the aisle sometimes to get votes in certain committees and just out of chambers. But this is doubly important in a state like Arizona and I love Arizona, but I think it's probably one of the most polarized, tense, political state environments I think I've ever waded into. So talk a little bit about the process of building a bipartisan coalition around this issue, and even though that initial bill was introduced by a

Republican, it quickly I think got some progressive democratic support. How did that happen?

Christian Solorio:

I did a lot of the organizing on the Left, so I'll kind of walk through that because the Right was organizing around property rights, around economic development, and you kind of had a tranche of Republicans that kind of stood by that. Because we have a split government, we have a one-vote majority of Republicans in both the Senate and the House, so just one vote. So the minute one Republican falls off, you need one Democrat to replace their vote to pass the legislation. We had about, at the time, between a half and two-thirds of the Republican caucus supporting, which means you needed to capture a third or a half of the Democratic caucus to make sure the bill moves forward. So basically what you had is on paper in 2022, you had a Republican lawmaker with the home builders and the multi-housing association standing behind him to push this policy.

Then from a left perspective, you're like, "Oh, hey, those are three groups that we're not friendly to, so why would we support you? Why would we support organizations that are preventing us from doing source of income discrimination, preventing us from doing any sort of rent stabilization or eviction prevention programs and tenants rights legislation? Those are the groups we're fighting against." They were the face of the bill in 2022. So how we were able to change that narrative was through a lot of grassroots education and it happened because it was being led by people of color, like myself and other allies. We were doing work not only organizing lawmakers, but organizing the organizations, the Left-leaning organizations, and getting them educated and ramped up and making the argument that you're upholding segregation, you're upholding inequity by maintaining the status quo.

It was pretty tough in 2023. It was a lot of pushback, but we were able to find our champions. We had two women of color, progressive, on the Left agree and run with it and be the champions on the Left side for this movement. What was great about the two sponsors, kind of leaders of this movement, that we found on the Left is that they were a hundred percent willing and able to work across the aisle even when we're fighting about big, polarizing issues like abortion and election integrity and things like that that we're fighting about. They're able to duke it out with their Republican counterparts and the minute those conversations switched to housing and land-use policy and zoning, that all kind of cleared the table and the negotiations were able to happen.

We were able to do that over the course of '23. I remember sitting at the end of 2022 doing our whip count. We have 90 lawmakers. We did our whip count at the time, and we counted up to seven votes, seven deep democratic votes. And I was like, "Okay, well, we got a lot of work to do." By the end of 2023, we had secured just under half of the Democratic caucus. Then looking at 2024, when we got over the hump, we were able to secure more than half of the Democratic caucus on the legislation that moved forward.

Yeah, it was quite the battle. But I think what made us different is our movement has been and continues to be, on the Left, led by people of color, which I think is pretty unique. The loudest voices in our state are women of color and people of color, which hasn't traditionally been labeled with the YIMBY movement and the YIMBY umbrella. So it's something that I'm definitely proud of being a part of building that foundation, to be able to be in a position where we're in a purple state, and this movement is really being led by people who are currently experiencing housing insecurity, as our lawmakers make \$24,000 a year, and we're working with groups like Fuerte Arts Movement and Unemployed Workers United now called Worker Power. That's our coalition on the Left, and that's something that we're really, really proud of and got us to where we are today.

Nolan Gray:

Yeah, that's awesome. Senator Hernandez and Representative Ortiz were, I think, fantastic early believers who became champions for this. I think Representative Ortiz is running for another office now. Worth looking into. But I mean, it is remarkable. I want to stress that the first time I went to Arizona, I think it was maybe seven or so democratic votes, and then seeing some of these vote totals later on is a pretty remarkable turnaround. And I want to just elevate that because that took a huge amount of organizing work from you and other advocates.

I want to talk about some of the legislation that came after SB 1117. So the big omnibus bill that probably would've solved Arizona's housing crisis goes down, but then typical to the formula, a whole bunch of other smaller bills follow. So what followed SB 1117 and what sort of policies were being considered?

Christian Solorio:

We basically tore it apart and it was, I would say, 13 different policies baked into 1117. We ran 13 different bills. We actually ran more than that. I think we ran close to 20 bills, and we were filtering through which ones we were going to push through. We found it

pretty difficult to move parking, so we parked parking. But like many states, we are finding the path of least resistance in ADUs, in starter homes, and in that Missing Middle light touch density, gentle density housing typologies. So those are the ones that started to gain traction. But yeah, it was a blow up the bill and kind of overwhelm everyone. So it also helped in the education process because they were only learning one concept at a time versus the omnibus where they were learning everything all at once. Someone might've been supportive of three-fourths of it, but because of a quarter of it they might've not agreed with, they were going to vote no. So it kind of helped cut through that issue we were running into.

So that's what it became. So we moved three bills out of the legislature. That was our Arizona Starter Homes Act for small lot sizes and limited design review for single-family homes, and we also moved our ADU bill, which included a clause for bonus ADUs, akin to what's implemented in San Diego on a statewide basis. We also moved our Missing Middle bill to allow for up to four-plexes in single-family zone districts within commercial business districts. Two of those were signed by the governor and one of them was not, and we can go into that a little bit later, but we were proud of the work that we were able to do to get those three bills through the two chambers. Really threading the needle between the two parties, because there was a ton of message discipline to not scare away votes with leftist arguments and not scare away votes with conservative arguments and trying to make sure that everyone was focused and disciplined in what they could and couldn't say in certain spaces to keep all of our lawmakers united as we moved the bills forward.

Nolan Gray:

So let's talk about these three bills. I think two of them are probably pretty familiar to a lot of YIMBYs, ADUs and Missing Middle, and I don't want to downplay it. Those are huge wins, so congratulations on that. Those are huge lifts, and ADUs I think are especially cool because as your own family experience shows, this is the type of housing people are ready to build tomorrow, and that's been the experience in California and a few other states. Missing Middle, I'm excited to see how it plays out, but that's taking a little bit more time, I think, as our small-scale, local developers figure out, "Oh, okay, I can build two-plexes and four-plexes again." But a bill that was, I think, maybe unique to Arizona, at least so far, that I think was really exciting was the Starter Home Bill. Do you want to say more a bit about that, maybe of the salience of that as an issue and then what specifically the policy entailed?

Christian Solorio:

Yeah. I mean, just like much of the country because of exclusionary zoning, we're really only as an industry housing market only supporting two product types, which is high-density Class A housing or very large single-family homes on large lots. Arizona was built on your starter homes. The house I lived in, which was 1100 square feet, there's tons of homes in Arizona that are 900 square feet on these smaller lots. They're all illegal to build today. The foundation of what Phoenix was and became is illegal today. So it was about building a narrative of bringing that back. So bringing back the housing that we used to build and also the affordability we used to have. So those two come hand in hand together. It was just a movement of, we have municipalities that require HOAs. We have municipalities that require garages. You can't have a carport. We have municipalities that require certain types of light fixtures. We have municipalities that require material changes, which can be very expensive.

We have just a micromanagement of what can be built. I work a lot with our nonprofits, our nonprofit affordable housing developers that build housing for first-time home buyers, and there are certain municipalities where they flat out cannot make a pencil because there's so much tick-tacked on that they can't reach the 80% AMI, 60% AMI population that their mission is to provide housing for. And the minute that they cross that threshold, they're not going to build because they're not building for the population they're trying to serve. So you have all these cities where they couldn't enter at all and provide these housing opportunities for working families. Because of that, that's what we had the idea of calling it the Arizona Starter Homes Act to bring back that notion of these communities that were the foundation of Phoenix.

Nolan Gray:

It's such a great issue too and I think we spend a lot of time in YIMBY advocacy talking about getting more multifamily built and in high-opportunity places, and that's really, really important. Certainly, especially deed-restricted, affordable for folks who need the help. But there also is this large sort of segment of the population that's also a big challenge for housing affordability. They've just been locked out of home ownership, maybe in a way that they weren't 10, 20, 30 years ago. Those aren't necessarily households that need any kind of subsidy or income-restricted housing. They just need what used to be a vanilla, affordable starter home. I think home ownership is something that intuitively a lot of folks who don't think a lot about housing policy, they hear it and they get it. Homeownership gets you all sorts of stability that we try to get for renters on other margins, but if we can get back into a situation where it's like lower middle-class

families do have a path to home ownership, you start to solve a lot of those problems and you start to get people out of the vagaries of a difficult rental market.

Christian Solorio:

Yeah. No, absolutely, and that's exactly what that legislation was seeking to address.

Nolan Gray:

The elephant in the room here a little bit on some of this ledge stuff is the relationship with the governor and some of the challenges there with the veto of the starter home bill, but then the signing of the ADUs and Missing Middle. Do you want to provide some context on what that was like and how that evolved?

Christian Solorio:

Yeah. This is probably one of the areas where I might get a little too candid, but essentially you're seeing split decisions on these bills because there are split opinions about the policy and its impact within the governor's office, in the governor's leadership and staff and trusted sources. And that's what's causing a lot of this kind of mixed bag of votes. Until the bills were on her desk, the coalition, we didn't really hear anything. We didn't hear what the issues were, what we needed to address, how can we turn these bills into something she would sign? We wouldn't hear it until they were at her desk and by then it was too late to make any adjustments. So basically the Starter Homes bill, with things at the Capitol, we don't have a full-time legislature, we have an end date to pass our budget and all that stuff.

So because of that, as a group, we made the decision that we couldn't miss an opportunity, and if our votes were there, we were going to move the bills forward. For Starter Homes, we had the votes there to go through a mirror process and skip the switching of the chambers because we passed two identical bills on both sides, and we did that maneuver and basically caught everyone off guard. But we knew we had the votes. We had the political willpower from leadership in both the House and the Senate to do that, and rammed this bill through. It was one of the first three bills that made it to the governor's desk. Considering how controversial this topic has been, it's pretty surprising to be able to pull that off. So basically we caught everyone off guard, the bill's prime opponent, the League of Cities and Towns, their lobbyist wasn't even in the

building when the vote happened and this maneuver happened. They weren't even there to try to whip some votes away from the bill as it passed the Senate and got moved over to and transmitted to the governor's desk.

So I think that's what caused a lot of the issues there, is that lack of communication. Fortunately, after the bill and the bill veto, there've been a lot of conversations with the Ninth Floor. We have a clearer idea. I can't say we have a clear idea of what the Ninth Floor needs to see in order to sign a bill. I think we'll be better positioned this next legislative session, but definitely no promises that we'll be able to do that because it's still going to be tough to negotiate a bill that can pass our Republican-controlled chambers and then be signed by a Democratic governor. So that's still going to present the same challenges it did last year, but at least we now have some semblance of what we need to do to get there.

Nolan Gray:

Yeah. I mean, it was funny to watch from afar. There was a whole strange episode with the Navy official issuing a letter opposing the bill. Is there any extra clarity on that?

Christian Solorio:

Yeah, I have a lot of speculation, and I hope ... I'm hearing there's going to be a report. A reporter has been digging into this and putting out a story about what happened. But rumor says a municipality that has a military base in or near their vicinity called in a favor. This municipality didn't want this bill to pass, so they did what they did, and they called in a favor to have this letter of opposition to be written. You also saw the fire marshals were another organization that chimed in. Even if you read the letter, it doesn't make a whole ton of sense because building codes and fire codes aren't changed by land use policy. That's not in the purview of zoning reform. So none of that was touched, but somehow they still had an opinion, even though the same life safety codes were applicable with or without this bill passing. So there were definitely some plays in the background about who was asking who to write what to provide justification for what ultimately became the veto.

Nolan Gray:

Yeah. I mean, you deal with so much misinformation on a lot of these bills, and it almost becomes a full-time job just managing misinformation. My pet theory for the Navy situation, I wonder if this person lived in Coronado, which is a major Navy city in California, probably one of our most NIMBY cities, but pure speculation. Stepping back a little bit with the legislative challenges, you mentioned this, the fiercest opposition to these bills was coming from the Arizona League of Cities, and I'm wondering, making arguments of, "Hey, this is just a local issue. You shouldn't be taking away local power to block things like ADUs or Missing Middle or starter homes", how did you all navigate that, especially given the unique politics of local control in a purple state like Arizona?

Christian Solorio:

Yeah. It was on multiple fronts. I think there were two moments I would say that we leveraged as a coalition to get the Left on board. One of them was mobile home park evictions. We had three very high-profile mobile park evictions that were happening in the City of Phoenix and our coalition, the third-leading racial justice, housing justice coalition, was really invested in that moment. So it wasn't that we were lending some of our political capital to support them. It was that we wanted to. We were willing to expand and were fighting for them in the most genuine way possible to prevent these evictions. There was a lot of back and forth with the city, and basically, we pulled in a lot of our Left-leaning state lawmakers into this discussion saying, "Hey, we need your support. We need you to apply pressure to the city to make sure they do the right thing."

Ultimately, they did not and ultimately what happened was the city of Phoenix ended up closing all public comment regarding these high-profile evictions, even though you had community members that, again, fighting for their homes, very low-income, taking time off of their day or work day, getting their kids out of school to try to fight for their homes. And you had that moment where the cities really had, from a public perception standpoint, they weren't the good guys. Traditionally, Democrats and Left-leaning people have supported local control, have supported the city, but they don't get everything. So we were able to use that as an example as ... they were there, some of our lawmakers testified, some of our lawmakers were in the audience listening, watching the city do what the city does, which is steamroll low-income communities for your more affluent community principles and things like that.

So that was one key moment that helped bring a lot of our progressive wing on board. Then what followed, the next key moment, was rather inaction. So you had all these cities telling their lawmakers, "Hey, we got this. We can solve this. This is in our purview. We're the ones best suited for this", and the cities proceeded to then do nothing. And

lawmakers are sitting there, it's like, "Oh, what's your plan? So tell me what's your plan?" They're like, "We have an ADU policy", and then the lawmakers are like, "But it's a really bad ADU policy. There's not a lot of ADUs being built. What are you doing?" And they're like, "Well, we've got to protect these neighborhoods. You want this neighborhood with these very large homes on very large lots, we can't disturb that", and you had democratic lawmakers saying, "Well, A, I don't represent that area of the city, and B, I'm here fighting for the working class. Why do I care that someone in an affluent neighborhood now has the property rights to build an ADU because the state came in and told them to do so?"

Those two things are what kind of helped bring the entire Left-wing along, or the bulk of the Left-wing along, just seeing the inaction from the city and seeing that not everything that they do is perfect and that they definitely have been historically a part of creating this inequitable built environment and they are still upholding that right now, and the state needs to come in and step in to do what needs to be done to create more equitable built environment for our working-class families.

Nolan Gray:

Absolutely. Yeah, it's the exact same dynamic in so many other states where local governments say, 'Hey, we're leading on this issue', and then nothing happens and state legislators slowly wise up. Do we want to do a quick lightning round here? Then we'll return to some of this stuff.

Christian Solorio:

Sure.

Nolan Gray:

So where should I go to get the best cheap eats in Phoenix?

Christian Solorio:

Oh, definitely tacos. In Phoenix, we have a ton of Northern Mexican population, so our best regional Mexican food is Northern Mexican food. There's this place called Ta

Carbon. There's two locations, one near the house I grew up in, and it's in an old Wendy's.

Nolan Gray:

You know it's legit then, right?

Christian Solorio:

Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. It's very good. That's the best spot to get some Northern Mexican carne asada tacos.

Nolan Gray:

What about Sonoran dogs?

Christian Solorio:

Oh, Sonoran dogs. Well, I got to do a shout-out to Tucson. As the Sonoran dog migrated north, it was in Tucson before it got to Phoenix. But again, I grew up in West Phoenix, so we have all sorts of hot dog carts. I go to the one on 27th Avenue and Thomas, and if you go there late at night, 1:00 A.M. 2:00 A.M. it is a full-on party over there. So definitely recommend experiencing that, grabbing some food, some really good Sonoran dogs and enjoying some lively nightlife out in a parking lot.

Nolan Gray:

Oh, I totally love that. Here in West LA just down the street from me, all the food vendors, especially on a Friday where it's a mixture of people who are done working for the week, making a bus transfer, and then people who are already starting to party, eating cheap tacos, and I love it. What's your favorite natural destination in Arizona?

Christian Solorio:

Ooh, my favorite natural destination in Arizona. This one's tough. This one's tough. I just went to Havasupai for the first time, which was wonderful. Crane Canyon's amazing. I'm going to go with Page in the Antelope Canyon and Horseshoe Bend. So Page Arizona near Four Corners. There are just some gorgeous slot canyons that they're just so picturesque, and I don't know anywhere else where you can get something like that.

Nolan Gray:

Yeah, I mean, there are so many options to pick from, so sorry. But no, just an incredibly beautiful state. What's your favorite street to walk down in Phoenix? Somebody's visiting Phoenix for the first time, ideally in the fall or the winter, what streets do they walk?

Christian Solorio:

Oh my God. I would say none. But honestly, it's really hard because we don't have very good streets or urban environments. This is the flip end. We had a lot of nature and great beautiful deserts, but I can't point to like, "Oh, this is the street you should walk. This is a great urban environment." I don't know that we have a lot of them. I would go up to Flagstaff, to be honest. I'd say go walk in downtown Flagstaff. I wouldn't even point you to Phoenix.

Nolan Gray:

Well, downtown Flagstaff is very, very beautiful. You've served in the legislature, and we'll talk about that in the second portion of this podcast, but what's your favorite political movie?

Christian Solorio:

Favorite political movie? Can I say political TV show?

Nolan Gray:

Sure.

Christian Solorio:

I say Parks and Rec.

Nolan Gray:

Friend of the podcast. Yes, Parks and Recreation. Yeah.

Christian Solorio:

Yeah, it is very real, but I still find some space in there to enjoy it. I feel like I didn't enjoy Veep because it was too, too real. It just made it hard because I was like, "Oh, no, that's what it's really, like that comical. It's that bad."

Nolan Gray:

Cool. Well, let's dive into a little bit of that. So you served in the Arizona state legislature. I'm curious, what was that experience like running for office and being in the legislature? And I'm especially curious, how did it change your perspective on this work that you do?

Christian Solorio:

Yeah, I was in office in 2021, 2022, and I had been a housing advocate since, I would say, 2018, where I was going down to the capitol, learning these issues, learning how to testify down there, following bills, sending out advocacy emails, and had done that from the periphery. I think the most surprising part was just how petty politics can be and how politics and personalities really get in the way of policy implementation. It was surprising to see how easy it was for outside influences to organize, invest a few bucks and get their laws passed versus how hard it is on the grassroots side to make that same movement happen. It was just, they could come in, pay a few lobbyists, and within two or three years it was done, and grassroots movements just took so much longer.

I came to learn how just short-staffed our legislatures were. So I was serving there, I had to share half a staff person with another lawmaker, and that was my only dedicated staff. So it's not like I had a whole ton of support. Then our Democratic caucus, so we

had 29 members in the House sharing our research staff, so we all shared these six staffers. So you had 29 people. We're outnumbering lawmakers to staff, four to one, three to one, and that was a huge surprise because a lot of it ended up falling on my shoulders, and there's just so much you're voting on. 400 plus bills a year, you're voting on every issue. I learned a lot about water policy, which is great, but I also learned a lot about things that I didn't necessarily care about, like funeral homes and marijuana taxes and things like that that aren't necessarily on the top of my list of issues I want to fight for in my district. I want to fight for housing-

Nolan Gray:

Well, all the funeral home operators are now hopping off the podcast, so nice job, Christian.

Christian Solorio:

Exactly. Exactly. So that was definitely a huge surprise, just the sheer quantity of work that was really on my shoulders. And I was working ... because it paid so little, I still worked part-time as an architect, and I had to manage that, manage a campaign, and manage my work as a legislator, which I took really seriously. So I did not miss ... I was one of four lawmakers that had perfect attendance because I did not miss any day that I needed to be there.

Nolan Gray:

Yeah. No, and that's another unique, I think, challenge. From the California perspective, we deal with a full-time professional legislature with a salary that at least vaguely covers the cost of living in California, and so many other states. It's a very different dynamic, and it's a big challenge, I think, to recruit and retain high-quality legislators and then find the resources for staffers. You mentioned that you've worked as an architect as well. How has that shaped your perspective on this issue? You've actually gotten in the trenches on building housing to a certain extent. Could you say more about that?

Christian Solorio:

Yeah. I would say there's a reason I got into politics and that's because I couldn't do my job as an architect. I had kind of talked about my background growing up in a low-income family and growing up in areas that were not equitable from a built environment standpoint. Because of that, I wanted to do something to fix that. So I, as a 16-year-old, 17-year-old, was like, "I think I can be an architect and I can make sure that we have high-quality buildings, high-quality schools, high-quality housing in low-income communities like mine." So that was the idealist in me. Then as I started, I went to school, graduated, got a job, and started working in affordable housing. So that's what I got to do. I got to build affordable housing throughout the state, throughout the spectrum of affordability, from shelters, permit supportive housing, and transitional housing to multifamily rental and housing for first-time home buyers.

And it was so tough, so frustrating, and I was like, "Why is this so hard? And then also, why are we not doing it in high opportunity areas?" We were shut out of a bunch of cities that just didn't want us and didn't want us there, even though I'm like ... I'm thinking of a city like Scottsdale. I'm like, "You guys have a ton ... you rely on tourism, you rely on your hotel workers, you rely on your waiters, your staff, your baristas, but you don't want to provide housing in which they could live." I was just so frustrated by it that that's when I began my advocacy journey and that kind of steamrolled into my public service on a school board and my planning committee and later in the legislature. So that kind of all steamrolled.

It was through that service in architecture through trying to just ... you're fighting tooth and nail to get these projects with fixed costs, you want the money to go to the right places, right? You don't want the money to be spent on parking spots you know are going to be empty. You don't want the money to be spent on, I would say, sidewalks to nowhere where sometimes that's what the city said, "You need to build this sidewalk to go here", but that doesn't ... who's that helping, right? Every time you spend a dollar on that, in the case of a parking stall, \$10,000 to \$30,000 on a parking stall, that means you had to take the money somewhere else out of the project from somewhere else. So we're trying to get the best mechanical systems to reduce energy costs, and we have to downgrade those because the money keeps disappearing where we have to downgrade our flooring finishes, our roofing, and the long-term longevity is compromised because the money's going to these places that I didn't feel like they needed to go.

So that was my background in architecture, and it was just so frustrating that I went into a place that was even more frustrating, which was politics.

Nolan Gray:

Yeah, very good. You're not the only architect who's, I think, come into these issues after having just tried to actually build some housing. There's a lot of conversation around building code stuff and other barriers beyond land-use and zoning that increase costs without any sort of commensurate safety benefits, things like single-stair, discussions around elevator requirements. I'm curious if you have a perspective on that as somebody who had to work those codes.

Christian Solorio:

No, I definitely think they are at a point where it's overkill. The building codes came up and were needed because entire cities used to burn down. Chicago burned down, San Francisco burned down. That doesn't happen anymore. How often is a new building or building built in the last 30, 40 years, how often is it burning to the ground and more importantly, how often are people dying? I think that's something that gets lost in translation is that the building code isn't meant to prevent fires. That's not its job. Its job is to make sure that everyone can get out of the building in time while the building burns, and that it burns slow enough and there's enough safety measures that that happens. We've been at that point for a few decades now, but our building codes have only gotten more and more stringent. That's not only the life safety from a fire standpoint, but that's also structural in these other elements where these buildings are just way more sturdy than they need to be.

A lot of that is driven by the ICC, and I don't think there's enough attention being paid to the processes that they have in place to make their building codes. It's just such a niche kind of area, and it's tough to get people excited about it. It's tough to get enough people excited about zoning. I think building codes are even worse. You really have to get really high technical expertise in that room to start advocating for changes there. But basically, I'm of the opinion that these building codes have gone too far, they're making our buildings too expensive and they're not ... the return on investment in terms of safety isn't there. We're increasing the price of the buildings, but they're not really getting any more safe.

Nolan Gray:

I mean, at least with a zoning code, you can theoretically go find it on your local government's website and you can basically make sense of what's happening. I mean, many of these building codes are proprietary and not even accessible to normal people, and then if you can get into them, they're just impossible to interpret. I think the process

stuff is really important as well too, is that there's really not a lot of consideration of, "Okay, yes, this will increase safety by .0001%, but it'll increase the cost of a project by 5,000, 10,000, \$20,000." There's no sort of, I think, consideration of the very real trade-offs, and especially in a context where we have a large and growing population of people who just can't afford a home at all, I think we have to actually take those trade-offs somewhat more seriously than we have in the past, I think to your point.

Christian Solorio:

And that's why there's some hesitancy in our rural communities to adopt the more modern or updated codes. You have rural municipalities that use the 2006 code and they're not moving. They're going to stay there as long as they can because they know if they move up to 2018 or 2024, the costs are going to jump up 15, 20% for the same building, and it's not any less safe. So they're holding ground on 2006 because they feel like that's as safe as they need to be, as energy efficient as they need to be, and to deliver housing in rural communities where you have low wages and high construction costs and be able to balance that. There's actually a lot of friction right now in the architectural community on the latest iteration of that IACC. Because as a profession, we want to do green sustainable building, but we also want to promote housing affordability and those things become incongruent when you have these sustainability mandates that are mandating close to top-shelf products inside buildings when you're trying to bring those costs down.

So there's a lot of friction there that we're still navigating and a lot of the cities are having those conversations about whether they are or not adopting the latest iteration of the IACC.

Nolan Gray:

Yeah, there's more conversation and hopefully research happening around building codes, so I'm excited about that as the next sort of frontier issue. Curious, beyond costs and supply, you have a lot of experience with housing on many different margins. I'm curious, what are some other policy priorities that you would maybe encourage folks who are more focused on the supply side of this issue to give some consideration to?

Christian Solorio:

I mean, we have no tenant's rights over here, so not asking for the whole shebang, but at least moving the needle in that direction would be very helpful, because it's much cheaper to keep people in their homes than it is to try to pick them up after they've been evicted. It makes sense from a dollars and cents standpoint to implement some tenant protection so that we're able to keep people housed. It's just a greater benefit to the residents themselves not having to deal with displacement and also the burden on housing support resources, which are already overtaxed.

The other one, I mean, I'm looking at Montgomery County, Maryland and their social housing model, government-owned public housing, whatever you want to call it, definitely can't call it social housing here in Arizona, but looking at that model of getting the government involved as a developer and leveraging its resources and access to lower cost housing or financing access to land that they might already own to start providing these types of housing developments that, unlike their predecessors in public housing, can't really support themselves financially. So I think that model's really promising, seeing more and more people take that up and take it seriously as a model that we should start engaging our governments more. And I'm like, "Hey, if a local government wants some local control, please go ahead and implement a program like that." Right?

Nolan Gray:

Totally. Yeah. So what's next? I mean, you guys had some huge wins this year, some huge hard-fought wins. I feel like you sort of crossed the Rubicon in some way on this issue. Bills got passed and then signed. What's next on pro-housing reform in Arizona in coming sessions?

Christian Solorio:

I think we got about half of our bills passed last year through the legislature, so I think we're going to go on try two on the rest of them. We had some streamlining bills. We had third-party inspections. We had our Starter Home bill, and trying to bring that back I think is our top priority, whatever Starter Homes 2.0 is going to look like. We are going to have new lawmakers there this next session, so trying to get them ramped up ahead of time so that they're ready to hit the ground running and making some tough votes, but getting them on our side early is kind of our top priority right now. But yeah, long-term, where we're seeing more resistance is on TOD type or TOC type legislation. We're increasing density along transit. We're just from the majority party seeing some

resistance to that high density. There are some conspiracy theories about how density is going to make Arizona turn blue faster. So fighting some of that is a little tougher.

Parking has been a tremendous challenge, but it's still a very high priority for us, and there are narratives on the Left and the Right that don't make any sense that we're having a hard time overcoming. So I think we're going to continue the education on that front before we more seriously move those types of legislation forward again. But yeah, that's what's on our plate. We have a full plate of things to move forward next year.

Nolan Gray:

That's super exciting. Yeah, I mean, I didn't even realize you guys actually had a third-party permit review and inspection bill. That's something that's been up for discussion here in California as well. We talked so much about laws to just legalize the housing in the first place, which is important, but then can you actually get a permit and get a COO, a certificate of occupancy, in a reasonable timeframe? It's important for all housing projects, but it's especially important for smaller projects where you have small local builders and then any sort of affordability component because that's got a complicated financing stack. So the streamlining stuff, I think it's cool that you all are working on that. It's funny, I think almost in a way you guys are working in reverse, where here in California we made a lot of progress on streamlining and we're going back and working on the zoning stuff a little bit, where you guys, the opening salvo was some cool zoning reform and now we'll get some streamlining.

Christian Solorio:

Yeah. We prioritize it because there was a bigger impact there, and right now the path as far as path to feasibility, it's right there for those streamlining stuff, so we're pushing that forward.

Nolan Gray:

Cool. And what's next for you? You've got a lot of stuff that you're working on, including some projects you've told me about. I don't know how much you want to say about anything. What are you working on?

Christian Solorio:

Yeah. Of course, we're expanding our local kind of pro-housing organization, Arizona Neighborhood Project. It actually didn't exist in 2022. It only existed in the 2023 legislative cycle, so we've only gone as an organization one year. We're hoping to expand that, to expand our brand, to really start making a name for ourselves down at the capital. I feel like some people assumed that it was the home builders or it was the multifamily association that was pushing the laws, but I was like, "No, it was the Neighborhood Project. It was us." So that's a big thing that we're going to be working on. But I've also, like you, have written a book and it's basically, if you unpacked everything that I said today, you throw that in a book. It's kind of a mixture of that lived experience of housing security that I grew up in and historically the housing security people of color have faced as a result of current issues.

It goes through my experience working as an architect and just the backwards decision-making and the backdoor deals to kill affordable housing that was happening. It goes into my experience in politics, in really learning how that works and pulling the curtain back on how to get things done there. And again, just how things are more backwards than you think they are when you have all these special interests going up against each other. And then kind of painting the path forward and how we have these areas in Phoenix particularly, and that's kind of where the book mostly revolves around, that, in my opinion, they're going to gentrify, there's going to be displacement because the systems are built the way that they are, and since things aren't changing and changing fast enough, we're going to see this community be uprooted over the course of the next 10 to 20 years, and there's nothing anyone can do because the train's left the station. The metaphorical train has left the station for this community in particular, and all the work that we're doing now is helping future communities from being impacted by these types of economic pressures that are forcing these displacements to happen. So all of that is unpacked in a nice 200-word book and we'll see when I get it done, but hoping in 2025 it's out on some bookshelves.

Nolan Gray:

Cool. Well, I can't wait to have you back on to discuss it once it's out. You mentioned the Arizona Neighborhood Project. Folks in Arizona want to get involved in housing advocacy and organizing, what should they do?

Christian Solorio:

Yeah, reach out to our Twitter. We have our project there. We just brought on our executive director, so we're kind of building up the framework to be able to do some capacity building. But definitely reach out to us. Reach out to me as well. You can find me on Twitter @Solorio4Housing, that's the number four, and we'll get you plugged in. There's definitely lots of support that we need, and the bigger the tent, the more successful a movement that we can build.

Nolan Gray:

Awesome. Well, Christian, I think from the outside looking in, people read about these exciting bills passing, and it just seems like they just sort of happen on their own, but of course they happen because of the dedicated advocacy of people like you and so many other people, I think, working behind the scenes. So thanks for all the work that you do. Arizona is very lucky to have you, and I'm excited. I think this is just the beginning of a really, really cool reform agenda, and you guys have put in the work and are building the alliances and coalitions that are going to allow for some much bigger things to happen down the road.

Christian Solorio:

Yeah. No, absolutely. We're equally excited. Coming from seven votes on a whip sheet to where we are today, I think the world is our oyster. We'll be able to tackle some big things in the coming years.

Nolan Gray:

Christian Solorio, thanks for joining the Abundance Podcast.

Christian Solorio:

Yeah, thank you.