

The Activist Group Suing the Suburbs for Bigger Buildings

A pro-development group in San Francisco at the forefront of the YIMBY movement (Yes In My Backyard) has a novel legal strategy to increase the local housing stock.

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Castro Street in San Francisco, Calif.

Photographer: David Paul Morris/Bloomberg

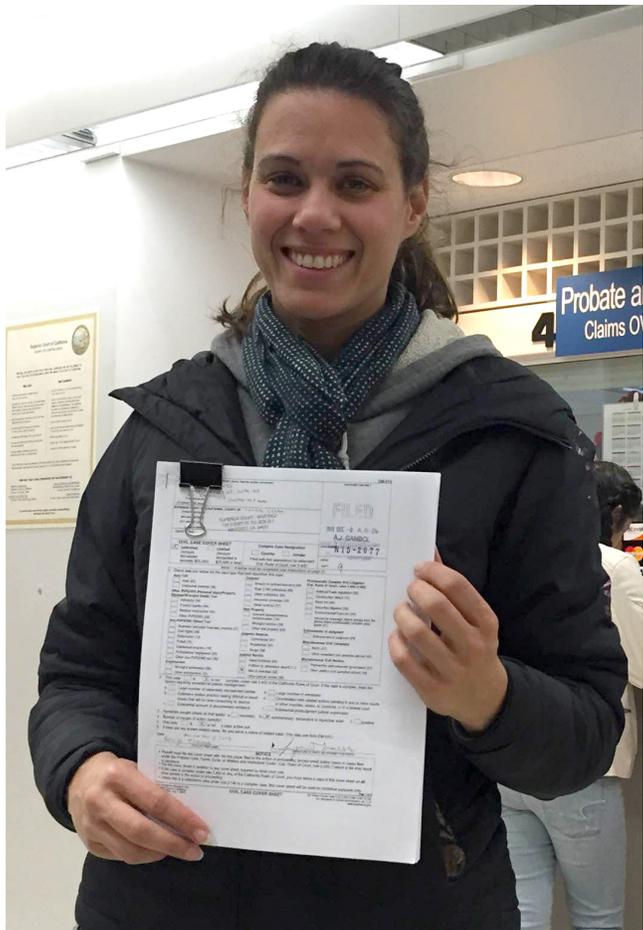
In a [speech](#) last month, Council of Economic Advisers Chairman Jason Furman blamed zoning restrictions—local land-use rules governing things like how tall buildings can grow—for the lack of affordable housing, lost economic productivity, and rising inequality across the U.S.

On Tuesday, a San Francisco activist named Sonja Trauss took Furman's argument to the streets, filing a lawsuit in Contra Costa County (Calif.) to fight what she sees as a lost opportunity to build more housing.

Trauss's organization, the San Francisco Bay Area Renters Federation (yes, SFBARF), is suing the City of Lafayette, a Bay Area suburb of about 25,000, to block plans to build 44 single-family homes on a plot of land once slated for a 315-unit apartment complex. Her argument relies on a three-decade-old California law intended to check local governments' ability to reduce the density of certain construction projects. Called the Housing Accountability Act, the law has been used successfully by developers of affordable housing who have had their projects blocked, Trauss said, but never by an advocacy group advocating for greater density as a public good.

"Everyone can agree that we should be building more," she said. "They just want it to be somewhere else."

Trauss, 34, is a former high school math teacher who launched SFBARF last year to advocate for residential development projects. In San Francisco, where the median rent for a two-bedroom apartment is approaching \$5,000 a month, there's a common-sense reason to oppose land-use laws—there's simply not enough housing, and it's driving up home prices and rents, especially for new arrivals. Earlier this year, she raised \$40,000—much of it from tech workers—so that she could quit her day job and run the organization full time.



Courtesy Sonja Trauss

The area's extreme housing situation has helped make SFBARF among the most visible of so-called YIMBY groups (Yes In My Backyard, a play on the better-known NIMBY, for Not In My Backyard) cropping up in places like Washington, D.C., and Austin, Texas. Those groups have often served as the grass-roots counterparts to more scholarly land-use skeptics. Those include economists like Enrico Moretti and Chang-Tai Hsieh, who estimated in a paper this year that normalizing zoning regulations in New York, San Francisco, and San Jose would increase U.S. economic output by 9.7 percent.

Trauss's mischievous personality has also helped her group grow. When I asked her for a photograph to accompany this article, she e-mailed a shot of herself holding a textbook on zoning law, and another in which she posed in a bikini. In one of the organization's stranger campaigns, it recruited more than 200 people to sign up for the San Francisco group in the Sierra Club's Bay area chapter, so that the SFBARF sympathizers could attempt a leadership coup. Trauss said she wanted to take over the environmental organization because it has sought to block development projects on the San Francisco waterfront.

While Trauss has raised enough money to pay herself a salary, the organization is run on a relative shoestring. She developed much of the theory behind the Lafayette lawsuit on her own, and has yet to hire a litigator to plead her case. Whether the suit is clever DIY lawyering or a minor provocation is an open question. "She's opening up another front in the growth wars, by asking smaller towns to step up and be part of the solution," said Gabriel Metcalf, chief executive at Spur, a group that promotes good planning in the San Francisco Bay area.

"There's a difference between indiscriminate development and intelligent development," Lafayette City Manager Steven Falk, who called the lawsuit misguided, and said that his city has sought to build higher-density housing near its public transportation hub. "Indiscriminate means housing is everywhere, and that's what [SFBARF] seems to represent."

These campaigns are highly local and often messy. [Critics](#) of SFBARF's Sierra Club campaign say the group is shilling for the real estate interests that benefit from new construction, a charge that Trauss denies. Controversy aside, the activities of the YIMBY groups are worth watching, because the decisions on how much housing can be built where are made at the local level.

Trauss said her next step will be encouraging her most active members to create small charter groups across the area, where they can seek to influence local decisions. "One of the things that's incredible about local politics is that it doesn't take a lot of people to make a difference," she said.

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