

## [Transcript] The Ezra Klein Show / Democrats: Pay Attention to What's Happening in California

So as I get ready to move to New York, I've been thinking a lot about the politics of California.

And particularly it's two dominant cities, Los Angeles and San Francisco, they have these dual reputations.

They're world leaders, right?

This is where the culture that everyone consumes is made and where the technology that everyone uses is made to play with the old William Gibson line.

The future is already here.

It's just in California.

And then California is also this bogeyman for the right and particularly L.A. and S.F.

It is often defined by its pathologies, homelessness and affordability and inequality and hypocrisy and disorder.

And you might think, if your experience of it is on Fox News, that that is all stuck.

But California's politics are really interesting.

Republicans are this non-force.

They don't hold a single statewide office.

They are non-entities in Los Angeles and San Francisco.

And so the confrontation here with what people in California don't like is a confrontation that has to happen within the Democratic Party and is happening within the Democratic Party.

You have these progressive movements rising inside a Democratic coalition, trying to balance their liberal commitments with a analysis of where liberalism has failed.

I don't think my focus on the supply side of progressive policy would be what it is now if I hadn't seen how much damage failing on the supply side of progressive policy had done in California.

I mean, this is a place where you sometimes have to net out what Republicans are doing nationally and realize that even where Democrats govern, they have not managed to create the progressive outcomes they want and then try to look at why that is.

One politician here has done that really successfully, Scott Wiener, the state senator from San Francisco.

And that's practically true on the central issue here, housing, where Wiener was for a very long time this lonely voice trying to radically expand housing supply only to lose on his biggest bills year after year after year.

But then slowly he began to win small bills, a couple more small bills, medium bills.

And now there's this torrent of both signatures on legislation and proposed legislation on how to make housing instruction easier if you look at what Governor Gavin Newsom is doing and what San Francisco Mayor London Breed is proposing and what L.A. Mayor Karen Bass is doing, you see a real push to make housing easier to build.

And that work isn't done yet and whether or not what is being done will be enough.

I mean, that's all to be seen, but really the plate tectonics of this issue have shifted and Wiener was a big reason for that and he was really early on that.

So I wanted to talk to him to get his view on the political workings of California, where the traditional labels around progressivism break down, what happens when Democrats have to sort of look at the failures of Democrats and can't look at Republicans, why the right

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is so interested in San Francisco and the unusual ways in which what makes this state great and what makes it very difficult and very challenging are braided together.

As always, my email as reclinedshow at nytimes.com Scott Wiener, welcome to the show.

Thanks for having me.

So tell me a bit about your path to politics.

How do you get here?

It was a really long and winding road.

No one in my family had ever been involved in politics before.

And when I was a teenager in New Jersey, I started interning for my member of Congress.

This is back in the 80s.

Who's who's your member?

Jim Florio, you might recall him.

He subsequently became governor of New Jersey and then was defeated for re-election because he had increased taxes, including extending the sales tax to toilet paper.

And that became like the rallying cry and he got tossed from office, which is sad because he was good.

So I interned for him, met some people through him and started volunteering on campaigns and just kept going through college.

And then when I came out to San Francisco, I decided I did not want to do politics anymore.

I wanted to do community work, LGBTQ community work and got sucked back in.

I could never quite get away and eventually decided, okay, I'm going to just go with this and ultimately decided to run.

How did you end up in San Francisco and maybe a sort of corollary of that?

Where are we in time here and what does San Francisco mean to you as a teenager growing up in New Jersey?

So as a gay kid in New Jersey, I admitted to myself that I was gay in 1987 when I was 17 years old and came out, started coming out when I was 20 in 1990.

And I was very lucky that I had queer people in my family, my aunt on one side was a lesbian cousin on another side who was a lesbian and so I had an amazing family.

But I also knew that in high school, it wasn't an option for me to come out.

I would have been physically unsafe in that period of time and suburban New Jersey.

And so I was closeted for high school and I always knew that San Francisco had something going on around LGBTQ people and so as a gay kid, I always thought about San Francisco and I thought I would go back to Philadelphia where my family is from, Philadelphia, New Jersey area.

But something inside told me to go to San Francisco like generations of queer people have gone to San Francisco.

And you came here as a lawyer?

Yeah, I graduated from law school in 1996 and then in 1997, I came out to start working for one of the big firms downtown and after five years went to the city attorney's office to do trial work.

How is San Francisco different than as a cultural space, what it meant to sort of live here and absorb what you might think of as its culture?

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And how is it different as a political space, the factions and the ideas it dominated? Yeah, as a cultural space, it is truly in so many ways a live and let live kind of place. People here are so mellow about who people are, what they're doing. And so it's an amazing place to live in that much less judgment just about what kind of life you're living.

San Francisco has been that way for a very long time and it's true for gay people and it's true for just people who may not fit in elsewhere, it's true for young tech workers who come here.

They could work in tech in a lot of places and they choose San Francisco because of what it represents.

Politically San Francisco is this weird combination of very progressive and quite conservative, very progressive in a lot of the ways that we would consider what is progressive in terms of having a strong minimum wage and supporting immigrants and supporting LGBTQ people and so forth and getting rid of plastics.

On the other hand, it's a city that is in recent decades been very afraid of change. And this city is all about change from the time that the city was colonized 170 plus years ago.

It's been in a constant state of flux, sometimes chaotic flux and people recently I feel like have gotten very scared of change.

I'm always interested in the way material realities end up shaping political ideas and cultures and factions and one thing I think about when you came is one, you didn't have the housing cost of today and I wonder how that changed who is here, who could vote, what was possible but the other is that something that has been very strange to me since coming here and I grew up in Southern California, I went to UC Santa Cruz but I only lived in first time I came to the Bay Area to live was in 2018 then I moved into SF itself two years later, much more so than anywhere else I've ever lived.

It's like a city without a middle class, which is not to say they're literally is not one but there are people who are very, very rich, there are people who are very, very poor and compared to other places I've been or spent a lot of time DC or Los Angeles or New York, it feels to me like that middle has really shrunk.

You see many fewer kids here because it's so expensive to raise a family here and that does take a profound pressure on the politics.

One, I'm curious if that feels right to you and two, then what it's been like to see that evolve because it wasn't like that when you came.

Well, it was on its way in that direction when I arrived in 1997 because our bad housing policies and bad approaches to housing or anti-housing policies had started decades before and when I arrived in San Francisco, I remember I arrived on a Friday night, stayed with a friend of mine in the sunset and then Saturday morning started my apartment hunting and I thought I would do it the old fashioned way like I did in Philadelphia and Boston, everywhere else you just go and find an apartment, you sign a lease and you're done. Such a sweet naive boy.

I was naive.

I showed up at my first open house.

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It was in the heat on a Saturday morning and there was a line down the block and when I finally got in people were trying to bribe the landlord to give them the lease and I wondered to myself what on earth is going on here and that was my first entree into housing in San Francisco.

I learned a lot.

I learned the reasons why after that, but it has definitely been on that trajectory for a while where you look like a neighborhood where I've been in the Castro for 26 years.

It used to be in the Castro, you could be a working class family raising three or four kids and just have a house there.

That now doesn't work.

I mean, a home, a decent size family size home in the Castro single family would be probably two, two and a half million dollars, even a large condo would probably be 1.5 million.

It is definitely increasingly a city where it's harder and harder to be middle class, particularly raising a family.

There is still a middle class here.

There are people who are so committed to the city and they make it work and I'm in all of them because we do not make it easy.

One of the things that I began to realize here after a bit is that it's just very strange to live in a place where to own a home means to be making one of two statements about yourself.

One is I've been here a long time or the other is in some way or another, I'm wealthy.

That is not how it works in every place.

Yeah, home ownership is a whole different thing here.

I'm very lucky.

I was able to in 2004 really stretch and purchase a 500 square foot condo and that's where I live and so I've been for almost 20 years.

I would not be able to afford that condo today and so I consider myself very lucky.

I have friends who will say that they know that they're never going to own in San Francisco and we have more long-term renters here and that's fine.

Renting can be a great thing but it does create more instability to people and that's why there's so much fear of being evicted.

The number of people who will say to me, if I lose my apartment for whatever reason, I will have to leave San Francisco because there is just no way I will find something that I can afford and that's a really tragic and unhealthy dynamic in any city.

There's this term, I heard it all the time growing up, you hear it if you

listen to any coverage of the Bay Area which is Bay Area Liberalism

and one of the things you really get a clear sense of living here is that should really be plural.

There are all these Bay Area Liberalisms that are in competition, they're often in conflict.

How would you describe the different Bay Area Liberalisms?

How would you categorize the factions?

I don't like to use the labels because they're very misleading.

Like when we say progressive in San Francisco people mean various things

and there are some strains of quote-unquote progressivism in San Francisco that are actually quite conservative because they are opposed to all sorts of positive change because they want

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to freeze frame everything the way it is and just freeze it in amber.

When you say liberalism, I assume you mean writ large, there's sort of the radical, I don't say radical in a pejorative way but more hard left socialist, that's a real undercurrent here in San Francisco but also in the East Bay and people who are very much along the Bernie Sanders, we need to just radically restructure the whole system and that is a very real undercurrent here.

You have also people who are described themselves as progressive but they came up during a time period where there was anything that was changed was viewed as dangerous and terrible and it came

out of the 40s, 50s, 60s when we were bulldozing entire neighborhoods in the name of progress and trying to build freeways in the middle of Golden Gate Park in the name of progress and so people who came up during that time period came to view any kind of change, development, building anything as harmful and destructive and so they consider themselves liberals or progressives but they oppose new housing, they oppose physical changes to improve public transportation, that attitude has harmed San Francisco. It came out of a reasonable place, we don't want to bulldoze neighborhoods anymore but it turned into this opposition to all change.

They are classified as often progressives or liberals in San Francisco and the Bay Area, I don't think that that's a very progressive approach. Then there are, for lack of a better word, yimbs or abundance liberals or progressives and people who are very liberal and they have the opposite point of view around change that we need to make it easier to create good things whether new homes or new bus lines or new clean energy or whatever the case may be and so those are some

of the big strains. How about the strains that are emerging out of tech and I put that a little bit differently because it's never clear to me how many votes some of the very loud voices in the VC class actually command or represent or what that looks like behind them but how would you describe the sort of faction that I think emerges and is powerful on Twitter right now but that is a place where a lot of people now get their political understanding of San Francisco. In terms of tech, tech is obviously very diverse and I remember 15 years ago, this is when I was sort of getting ready for my first run for the board of supervisors and we were starting to see a tech run up which could see it coming and I remember there were people in politics saying to me, tech is going to is starting to explode in San Francisco. It's going to completely change the politics, make it more middle of the road. It's going to be a whole different ballgame. That turned out to be completely untrue because as I mentioned a little earlier, tech workers can often work anywhere. There are a lot of different places in the U.S. where you can be a tech worker and if you're in the Bay Area, when you think about like the battles we had over the Google buses and Apple buses, all the tech shuttles that were taking San Francisco residents down to Mountain View or Menlo Park or Cupertino to work at one of the big mega tech firms, I don't care how nice that bus was, that was still like a two to three hour bus ride round trip every day. Those workers were choosing that long commute to live in San Francisco because they believed in San Francisco and its values. It turned out that the tech workers who were moving to San Francisco were often way left and in some ways made the city even more left than it was before. Some of the tech folks on Twitter who may have very large followings and be very impactful in various ways, they don't necessarily represent the broad perspective of tech workers. That's a

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much more diverse perspective. Well, I actually think that's become a pretty core driver of some of their politics. I think in a way that I don't believe this was nearly as true five years ago, 10 years ago, that there's much more conflict now between the tech bosses and the tech employees, much more frustration. They're all together in slack rooms or mad at each other. And as you say, the tech employee class is pretty far left and a lot of the tech bosses are in some cases more traditionally right or libertarian, but whatever they are are very frustrated by their own employees. And so there is this divergence where I actually think they're getting pushed right by their own people, their people are getting pushed left by them. There's a funny internal culture in tech that I think shapes a lot of the way San Francisco looks from the outside without actually being as far as I can tell as relevant as you would think to its politics. I think that is tech has been very complicated for San Francisco and obviously great economically, but it is not a monolith by any stretch of the imagination.

One thing I find interesting about the barrier liberalisms and one reason that being here and watching the politics closely has been helpful for me is that when you're in DC and you're watching what's happening, a lot of the focus, if you want more liberal outcomes is on Republicans, right? A debt ceiling crisis or the way Mitch McConnell might wield the filibuster. And here in the Bay Area specifically, in California at this point more broadly, I mean, there's not a single statewide elected Republican, the Republican party is too weak to be a major player in outcomes. And so in different ways, all the liberalisms are dealing with the successes, but also the failures of democratic governance. And so they're all in one fashion or another reformist movements. So when you look at sort of governance in the Bay Area, but then also governance in California broadly, because you're a state senator, what do you think Democrats have to brag about where they can say, look, we've made California, we've made San Francisco a model the nation should follow? And what do they have to answer for? What are people like you or some of the people in other factions trying to grapple with it didn't go that well, but that has to be understood as a coalitional failure, not a oppositional failure? Absolutely. And I will say there are things that were viewed as the liberal good thing that no longer are in housing and certain kinds of transportation.

I think in terms of what we can be proud of, I mean, you look at clean energy, for example, we have made massive investments in clean energy, the very near brownouts that we had last year, because of some of the wildfires and the extreme weather. Had we not made those massive investments in clean energy and energy storage in particular, we would have had rolling blackouts. We've been on the cutting edge of trying to reduce single use plastics or a lot of environmental strategies that we are the first to employ. And then of course, in protecting civil rights, reproductive health care, health care in general, we have gone to the limit and beyond in terms of expanding health care under the Affordable Care Act. We've expanded Medi-Cal to undocumented people, not of every age, but at least older and younger. And so in a number of ways, we've just done exactly what we want the federal government to do and we're leading the way here. In other areas, we have failed and we're trying to turn that around. We've absolutely failed on housing. California and Bay Area have just erected so many barriers to new housing. And again, that's sprung out of the, you know, it's all development is bad because you want to build freeways through parks and tear down neighborhoods. And so it became a reaction that we have to have as much process as possible for any kind of change,

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including building new homes by a transit station. We also made it hard to build new public transportation, extremely hard to build it. And so in those kinds of ways, some of these basic needs, new homes, homes for people to live, transit for people to get around, we made it so hard that we have driven the car into the ditch. We have a multimillion home shortage that is absolutely fueling homelessness and housing and security and making people live in overcrowded situations. And we saw what that did during the pandemic and we've made it really hard to get around. Do you understand that as a ideological choice that got made along the way, or do you understand that as systems and processes that were erected for possibly another use, or that most people don't even know about, you know, you talk about running for board of supervisors, most people

I don't think can tell you what comes before the board of supervisors or doesn't. I find this comes up a lot to the degree to which what we see happening now is an actual choice, like the voters weighed in on it and this is what they want, or we have what gets called policy drift and processes built in another era are now weaponized in this era in a way that is very contrary to the intentions of the people who design them. It's both. It's both intentional and it is drift.

On the intentional side, you look at housing and the downzonings that happen in the 70s and the 80s,

you know, it used to be that you could build apartment buildings pretty much anywhere, and then all of a sudden the zoning changed, so you can only build single-family homes, which created a math issue when you can only build one unit of housing per parcel, whereas you used to be able to build five or 10 or 20 per parcel, and that was one of the root causes of our housing crisis. LA in the 80s downzoned and literally eliminated 50% one-half of its own housing capacity. San Francisco did something similar in late 70s, and that happened up and down the state. That was all extremely intentional, so we don't want multi-unit, we don't want more housing, we don't want change. On the drift side, the poster child for drift is Sequa, the California Environmental Quality Act, which was passed in the early 70s signed into law by Governor Ronald Reagan. The purpose of it, which is a very important purpose, is to say when you're doing something significant, making a significant decision, you're going to build a new dam, new highway, you should do environmental analysis so you know what the impacts will be. Over time, Sequa came to apply to everything, and it could be absolutely weaponized so that people who oppose any project, even environmentally beneficial projects, can use this supposed environmental law to stop the project, to slow it down, to kill an apartment building right by a barred station, to delay or kill a bus rapid transit line or a bike lane, and so we have this environmental law that is in some ways harming climate action, and that was not necessarily intentional, but that was drift over time that has been very harmful.

One reason I think California policy is challenging for liberals is that you often find examples of things where affectively, you think that sounds great, right? You have the Environmental Quality Act, or there's simply a lot of what at least was intended to be small-day democratic input across the state. I've spent a lot of time at board of supervisor meetings and planning meetings and council meetings, and these are places where people from the community are supposed

to be able to come in and weigh in. You have the proposition process and ballot initiatives, right, where the public can get something onto the ballot and actually vote it into power,

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even if the legislature isn't going to take it up anytime soon, and all that sounds great, and then you look at the outcomes, and they're not what people want. People are very unhappy about them. Things get very expensive, things get slowed down. It seems like the people who show up

at the meetings are not always representative of the community. A lot of your bills, one of the things they've done at different points is try to make it so if, say, affordable housing fulfills basic requirements, you don't have to go through all these different councils and committees and so how do you think about that collision between values that a lot of, say, liberals hold dear, you know, environmentalism or participation and processes that often feel in the end like they are moving the other direction, like you're getting more, you know, sprawl out, which is bad for the environment, or you're getting, you know, more kind of status quo interest, which is not what you think of for small-day democracy? First of all, when we talk about environmental protection,

it should be about what the result is and not what the process is. And so we're phasing out single use plastics in California. We are trying to reduce oil drilling in California, putting those regulations in place to protect people's health and protect the environment. That's what it's all about. Putting process in place that can actually harm the environment by killing a new rapid bus line or by slowing down or killing a clean energy project. And we've seen CEQA and other environmental

laws used to stop clean energy. And Bill McKibbin actually just wrote, you know, one of the most respected climate activists in the world, just wrote an amazing piece about how this over-processing of decisions and abuse of environmental laws can actually impede climate action. And so we have to make sure that we're looking at the results and not just at the process. If you have an endless process and a bad result, first of all, it's not democratic because the people who show up at a planning commission hearing or a city council meeting or a town hall may or may not represent the broad popular view. In fact, often they don't because a lot of people don't even know those meetings are happening or trying to just get their kids to do their homework and eat dinner. And so we have in some ways harmed our democratic process by letting it be hijacked

through a very, very unrepresentative community process, which can often impede things like climate action. How do you think about this on a principal's level though? And I'll be honest, like this is in a lot of my more recent work on called supply-side liberalism, called abundance progressivism, the place I struggled the most, which is if you just take outcomes of what matter kind of of attitude, you could lose something that I think is really important in a democracy, which is that ability for different kinds of input to emerge a kind of not just sense of the community, but a genius of the collective, right? In theory, democracy is an information gathering and synthesizing technology to be very nerdy in San Francisco about the way I put it.

And there's I think a tendency to say, California has a huge housing crisis, we should say bump a bunch of this up to the state level. And if it fits the general goals Gavin Newsom has for affordable housing, it should just go through. And there's a very good critique that the way we do it now is a failure. But that feels to me like at some point, we're going to be losing something in the technology and possibility of democracy that we also don't want to sacrifice. What would ideal process look like? How do you make process not just a slur?



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Yeah. And to be very, very clear, I'm not opposed to process. I think community participation is a good thing. As a former local elected official, when we would have neighborhood problems and you have a community meeting, you would often get excellent feedback. So I think it's a bad thing to exclude the public. We need public participation, but there needs to be a beginning, middle and end of the process. And not everyone is going to get their way. Some people are going to be happier or less happy with the result, but you have to eventually get to that result. And if you look at our housing work, the housing work we do does not exclude the public from the process. I'm a big believer that once you set the rules up, if someone comes forward and says, okay, you've zoned for this height for this many units, you have these objective design standards, these are the setbacks, et cetera, et cetera. I have a project and I have checked all the boxes that you have set down in the law, public entity, you should get your permit. Whereas now what we say is, okay, we know you've complied with every rule that the elected officials have set, but you still have to go through an unpredictable five-year process. And so what we are doing around housing as an example is cities can still set a lot of the rule. We tell them you need to zone for 3,000 new homes in the next eight years. And the cities, then through their democratic process, decide where they want to focus that development. And that is a very localized public participatory decision. They get to come up with their design standards. They get to make a lot of these decisions locally. We set the broad parameters and we say, these are the results you need to achieve. You figure out the best way to achieve it. And once you've set the rules, if someone meets the rules, you need to give them their permit. That's good government and it allows public participation. So it's a balance.

How do you think about the propositions, the ballot initiative process, which in a theoretical way, I find completely inarguable. You should be able to get enough signatures and get something on the ballot and be able to bring at least some things that have very intense support to the direct democracy. And I barely know anybody at this point who doesn't think that process is a mess, who isn't worried about the amount of the budget that is tied up and things that sounded good when somebody put it on the ballot. There's a sense that you just, if you have enough money, you can kind of get anything on the ballot. What should we learn from the ballot initiative processes, uses and abuses? And to add one more fill up to this, I'm always so struck that that process emerges out of a feeling that the railroads have bought the entire legislature, you know, back in the early, late 19th, early 20th century. And then you get later on Uber and Lyft, sort of modern mega transportation players, use it to make it impossible for the legislature to do anything about gig workers. So you do have this also weird kind of modern version of it where it was meant to be a way around corporations. It's now a pathway for corporations. What should be learned from that?

One thing I've learned is that the voters really dislike the ballot measure system for a lot of reasons. But the only thing that they dislike more than the ballot measure system is the idea of giving up their power to politicians. And so I actually, when I was a brand new supervisor and so many people had said to me on the campaign trope, there are too many ballot measures, you people need to do your job. And so I proposed a very modest reform to San Francisco's ballot measure rules so that the Board of Supervisors and Mayor years after something was passed, couldn't make modest changes to it without having to go back to the ballot to account for changed circumstances. I got all sorts of endorsements from editorial boards, got it on the ballot. It got 30% of the vote. It got just destroyed. And so I learned then that

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people really don't want to give up power to politicians. But the reality is that the ballot measure system, especially at the statewide level, is not doing what it was intended to do more than 100 years ago when it was created. It's been decades since a volunteer driven ballot measure was qualified via signature. It usually is more along the lines of Uber and Lyft writing their own industry regulations and putting on the ballot and spending \$100 million to get it passed. Or the cigarette companies doing a referendum to repeal our restrictions on flavored tobacco. We passed a law to say you can't drill for oil right next to someone's home or by their kid's school. The oil companies have qualified a referendum to repeal that. And then of course, local government cannot fund itself without going to the ballot. And now there's a ballot measure being proposed by the business community that would say to pass any local tax, it has to be a two-thirds vote. So there's a lot of problematic aspects to our ballot measure system that make it hard to fund basic public services and to govern the state. When you were talking about the different liberalisms earlier, you mentioned one is sort of YIMBY liberalism. Yes, in my backyard liberalism. And I do think of the YIMBYs as one of the much more consequential policy movements I've seen emerge just in my time covering politics altogether. And they emerged in part around you. I mean, you were on housing quite a bit before most people were. It's how I first started hearing a view back when I lived in D.C. You had these bills, including a very famous one that would have allowed a lot more development around transit. These became big flash points. And to the extent,

I think some of these movements emerged, they emerged around the idea, well, passing things like this is what it would look like to be a YIMBY. And so it sort of made it more literal. How did you get into housing? And particularly, how did you get into the view that you just need more of it, which is not where everybody certainly 10 years ago who thought about that got? Well, it was probably a 15-year journey for me. I mentioned earlier that the first department open house I went to in 97 was a liner on the block. After that, as a young lawyer, I did a lot of pro bono work representing or defending low-income renters facing eviction. And these were people who a lot of long-term HIV survivors who would tell me if I lose this case, I'm going to have to leave San Francisco and I won't be able to get the HIV care that I need. I then got active in my neighborhood association. And I still remember one excellent project that was entirely within zoning that had to go through 50, 5-0 community meetings before it went to the planning commission. And I remember thinking, why 50? Couldn't we do this in like four meetings or five or seven or three? Why 50? It seemed ridiculous to me. And then I got on the board of supervisors and I quickly saw that just the chaos around housing, that everything was a fight and that we created the rules to allow the loudest voices to obstruct pretty much anything or drag it out and make it more expensive. Meanwhile, I saw the damage that that was causing with working-class low-income people and I connected the dots. It took me some time, but I finally connected the dots that this system, this anti-housing system we had set up that was designed to make it hard to build housing was directly harming people, was causing evictions, was pushing people out, pushing people into homelessness. And the more I learned about it, the more horrified I was. And that's why early on, I did something that no one did back then. I proposed legislation to upzone my entire district, only my supervisor district. I wasn't trying to put it in the whole state, just my district. And it passed and it had a lot of support. And then I said to myself, wait, I thought people

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were supposed to hate new development and new housing. Maybe they actually like it. My neighborhood

group did a poll, like an online poll for that ordinance that I proposed to upzone the district and it got like 70% support. And so I saw something there. And then when the Yimby, the woman by the name of Sonia Trowse was the first, she started showing up at the board of supervisors sort of berating us about not approving more housing. And I sensed something was happening

and it was a trickle and then it became a tidal wave.

I think typically when people think about the dynamics of an issue, they think first about polling. As you just mentioned, would people in your district support that or oppose it?

But you've been around a lot of these bills now. You've passed some, you've failed on a bunch.

What is the typical structure of interest group politics on housing California? Who's kind of always in favor of more? Who's routinely in favor of less? What are the dynamics people might not expect on this from the outside? How does this work inside the maneuvering in Sacramento?

Well, we have over, I'm in my eighth year in the legislature and over those eight years, we have methodically built a huge coalition. In my first year, it was sort of small. And every year when we do more housing bills, there are a few more groups that come out of the woodwork like Habitat for Humanity or an AARP or a United Way. And once they're in, they're in, they stay.

But we have the housing advocates, the Yimby groups, the groups that advocate for more affordable subsidized housing. We have the anti-poverty groups that have gotten increasingly involved.

There's a group that just this year for the first time got involved, the Inner City Law Center in LA, which is like a pro bono law firm for people in Skid Row. And they see the big picture on housing and they have become part of our coalition. We have some of the tenants groups, some of the landlord groups, but not others. The people who build housing, there are environmental organizations that have gotten increasingly involved because they understand that if you're not building new homes in places like Berkeley and San Francisco and LA, it means that you are building sprawl, which is so destructive. And then we also work a lot with labor. Labor unions are generally very pro housing. Sometimes there are disputes about some of the aspects of different bills and we have some fights at times, but labor has generally been part of our coalition as well. Labor is much more powerful, is my impression in Sacramento than it is in DC. Maybe that's because Democrats run Sacramento. And it's another one of these things where people talk about it as a singular, like where is labor on the issue? But there are a lot of unions and they split.

So who is sort of early on more housing? Who needs more negotiation? What are some of the flash points or points of tension there that have to be negotiated? How do you describe the dynamics of that? I am proud that California in many ways is a union state. We want to get union membership up and I'm really proud of some of the work that some of our labor unions are doing to organize, particularly low-income service workers. So the building trades and the carpenters have always been involved in different ways in housing policy because they actually build our new homes. And so they've always been involved. More recently, additional unions have gotten involved. For example, SCIU has gotten very involved. They obviously aren't building the homes, but they have a lot of low-wage workers who struggle with housing instability. The United Food and Commercial Workers, I'm hoping, will get more and more involved. They did a survey of their workers and a big percentage struggle with housing. So we're seeing a broader cross-section

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of labor unions get involved in housing. Why does San Francisco have such a visible homelessness problem compared to other places? Let's look at California as a whole. So California has 12% of the U.S. population but 30% of the U.S. homeless population and 50% of the unsheltered U.S. homeless population. There are some folks who believe that homelessness is a mental health and drug problem and that's false. It is a housing problem. California does not have more addiction or more mental health problems than other places, but we have higher housing costs. And that is what is driving homelessness, not just in San Francisco, but in Oakland, Sacramento, and San Diego, and LA. But in San Francisco, we are the most extreme. The housing costs are so high that it absolutely pushes people into homelessness. And we're seven miles by seven miles. This is a very small city geographically. We're very dense. We're very compact. So problems that exist everywhere, whether it's homelessness or drug use or untreated mental health, tend to be much more visible here. And some of the people we see on our streets who are in distress because of mental health or addiction problems, they're not all homeless because people may be housed, but they might live in a small place. They're not going to stay in a small room every day. So there are reasons because of our setup physically, why everything is more visible in San Francisco, even if it's not necessarily worse. Why do we have such a significant unsheltered homelessness population? I mean, if you look at numbers, New York does not look better on homelessness than we do really, but they're better on sheltered homelessness, right? They don't have as many people unsheltered. We are unusual in how many people are actually out on the streets, even given our homelessness population.

And why? New York made a policy decision decades ago to create what they call a right to shelter and a mandate that the city has to provide shelter to anyone who needs it. And so New York has a massive, massive shelter system that definitely, I think, reduces unsheltered homelessness. It also is a massive drain on resources that could be going to permanent housing. And that's a policy choice. In California, we've not made that choice. We've decided and Gavin Newsom, when he was mayor of San Francisco, really focused on this, focusing more on housing, permanent housing solutions, rather than endless construction of new shelters, which is very, very expensive. And so if the desire has been to solve the root cause of homelessness, which is a lack of housing, rather than the more triage approach of temporary shelter, there are people on both sides of that argument. And people have good points on both sides. I personally, I'm a housing person. I also think we need more shelter beds. We do not have enough shelter beds in San Francisco. And that makes homelessness more visible and means we have more unsheltered homeless people. I've never understood if this is a different policy choice. California could actually make, given the reality of housing politics, which is to say, one of the big problems with having permanent housing be your main answer is it's expensive to build. It's slow to build. And we're not succeeding in building enough of it, like flatly. On the other hand, the idea that you're going to get communities to accept a huge increase in shelter construction, which they often oppose even more vociferously than they oppose smaller, permanent housing projects. That's a little hard to believe either, given at least what I've seen happens when you try to say, we're going to build a shelter right here. So I recognize that there's a policy fight between more permanent housing, more shelter, or the sort of why not both

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contingent.

But in terms of the real question, I've always wondered, I mean, if Gavin Newsom and Mayor London Breed and others tomorrow wanted to go the shelter route, could they? Is there the political capacity to just put shelters up all over San Francisco?

There is, and it wouldn't have to be all over. And again, it's not just San Francisco. There's bad homeless problems in other cities. In fact, LA is actually on my mind here, because I've reported there on the efforts to try to build shelters and housing through things like Prop HHH. And the community opposition was ferocious.

So we have actually passed various laws, and I've authored some of them to streamline or make what we call ministerial, so non-discretionary, the addition of supportive housing navigation centers, which are like a better form of homeless shelter, and other tools to make it so that cities cannot block shelters or supportive housing.

Cities are required in their every eight-year housing plan to designate a zone of their city for automatic approval of homeless shelters. And those locations can't be in the middle of nowhere or an industrial area. It has to be in a place that is actually connected to services, and we've passed other laws as well. So cities now and private individuals, nonprofits, have tools to be able to site these homeless services, homeless shelters, navigation centers, supportive housing, and not have to get approval from a city council or planning commission. So why doesn't San Francisco build a lot more of them?

San Francisco definitely prioritizes building supportive housing for homeless people. The mayor and the city are also prioritizing, I think, beginning to prioritize mental health and particularly more mental health beds, and that is a resource choice. The city has the tools legally to add more shelter. The city has really focused on housing and mental health beds, and there's a reasonable argument for that. I feel like I watch you get more diplomatic as we talk here. Do you think this is the right choice? We do need more shelters.

I don't want to see us go down New York's path where we put so many dollars into a shelter that we don't have the resources to build the housing that we need. I do want to continue to prioritize housing. We do not have enough shelter beds, and it's taken us over 50 years to dig ourselves into this hole. It's going to take us time to get out of it, so it's not like we're going to fix the housing problem in two or three or five years. It's a longer-term process, and so until we get there, we have to have these triage solutions like navigation centers or other forms of shelters, and we don't have enough of them in San Francisco. We do need more, and I believe the city should create more. One of the things that has been dominant in both the politics here while I've lived here and the way the politics here are then refracted, particularly through right-wing media, is what gets called crime and what I would call disorder. This has been said by many people now as San Francisco does not look unusual on crime statistics. We actually have a lower murder rate than a lot of the cities that other people talk about as being a place they want to move to, like Miami, but there is a lot of what people experience as a disorder on the streets. You walk around and you see people doing drugs very much out in the open. The tenderloin is just a it's wild what happens there, and it is distinctive. I mean, you can find things like this in other places, Skid Row and LA, but there is a sense people have that San Francisco has made a political decision or a policing decision to live with more disorder for one reason or another. How do you think about that? You're absolutely right that we have, of the midsize to big cities, we have one

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of the lowest murder rates. We have a fairly high property crime rate, and that does really impact people when their homes are getting broken into or their cars are getting broken into or vandalism happens. It scares people when your home gets broken into. Yeah, it's very scary. We've had our car broken into a bunch, but there is a weird thing here that has not happened to me elsewhere where just everybody says you can't leave anything in your car, and people say that it speaks to a pervasiveness of a fear. Well, and for people who need their car to get to work, it's a problem, and it's terrifying when someone breaks into your home, especially if you happen to be there. And so there are crime issues in San Francisco, but we also have to be clear that even if violent crime is low, if you've been victimized or your friend or your neighbor or kid or your husband or wife has been victimized, violent crime is high for you. And so I think it's really important not just to rely on the statistics, because it's also about people's personal experiences and what they're going through. And when you see someone on meth on the street acting in a really bizarre and scary way, that is really scary for people, because also they don't know what that person is going to do. And so, yes, people are concerned. I think people have a right to be concerned. I think there are things happening on our streets that are not okay. And some things, like for example, in the tenderloin, the open-air drug market there, I don't think that arresting drug dealers is going to end addiction. It won't. People will find another way to get drugs, but that drug dealing has huge impacts, public safety impacts on that neighborhood. And if you're someone who's raising a kid in the tenderloin, and there are quite a few kids in the tenderloin, and that kid has to walk through a drug market to get to school, that's a huge problem. And so I think sometimes San Francisco gets unfairly tired of sort of this Mad Max Thunderdome situation. And it's absolutely not. But there are parts of the city where there are real issues. And there are some really legitimate safety issues that we need to do more to deal with. But let me get at a wrinkle of this. I lived in D.C. for about 14 years, and crime was much worse there. And violent crime was much closer to me there. The number of my friends who got mugged, one of my dear friends roommates got shot. Terrible things happened constantly. And so they were having a lot of trouble getting crime under control. But what nobody seemed to believe, even if they believed that the policing was ineffective or the government was ineffective, was that the government was tolerating it. And what is different about the politics of crime here for rightly or wrongly, because again, there is actually less crime here than there was in D.C. when I was there, certainly less violent crime, is that there is a perception widespread that at least disorder, levels of disorder, levels of kind of basic crimes, shoplifting, things like that are tolerated here in a way they aren't elsewhere. Well, I think for a long time, and I'm not going to comment on whether this was an intentional policy choice or not, but at least in effect, there were things that were tolerated. So car break-ins, I think for a long time, the attitude was that's between you and your insurance company. Shoplifting, it was not a high priority. Even the tenderloin, I think, was in some ways effectively a containment zone, which was horrific for the residents, including many older people, people with disabilities, immigrant families, who were living in the tenderloin. And so I think for some types of problems and crimes, there was a tolerance, and I think that's been changing over time. But the other thing they always keep in mind, so San Francisco is the best city on the planet. People love writing San Francisco's obituary. It's almost like a national pastime.

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Every year or two, there's a big article proclaiming that San Francisco is dead. We always come back so much good is happening in the city. And we as San Franciscans love this city and we expect it to be perfect. We want our city to be amazing and flawless. And so we hold it to the highest possible standards, sometimes realistic, sometimes less realistic. But that's one of the great things about San Francisco. We're all so committed to making it as good as it can be. Well, I think that's one of the interesting contradictions of the place. I mean, I don't think some of what we're talking about is the highest possible standards when we're talking about the Tenderloin or others. But San Francisco has gotten refracted in a way that has probably always happened, but I've been more alert to it while being here through practically right-wing media, as as you put it, the sort of Mad Max, post-apocalyptic hellhole. And there was all this talk that all the tech people are going to leave and move to Miami. And you can just look at housing prices here and you know that has not happened. And AI is all located here. It is geographically intensely concentrated here. So now AI is a big thing. And if you look at the big AI companies, they're in San Francisco or right around it, right? There's one in London. That's basically it. And so there is this interesting way in which San Francisco seems on the one hand, you know, people talk a lot about the quality of life issues here. And on the other hand, things like housing would become much cheaper if actually it was driving people out, but it's not. It maintains just an unbelievable desirability. So when I was deciding right before I decided to move to San Francisco, it was in '96, I made the decision to go to San Francisco instead of staying in Philadelphia where my family was. I remember talking to someone who lived in San Francisco for a long time, but had moved to Philadelphia. And I asked him his opinion and he said, well, you should try out San Francisco. It's a fun place. He said, but let's be clear. It's a tourist town. There's no real industry there or any kind of economic base anymore other than tourism. And so just, you know, go there to have fun. And of course, that's not true. San Francisco came back again with tech, with biotech, with healthcare. We are in some ways a boom bus town. We see that now we're having problems downtown, this huge problem, huge risk factor for the city, which I believe we will deal with. And we're seeing it with some of the conditions on our streets. And we know what we need to do to address that. And we just need the political will to do it. I mean, do we know what do we need to do to address that? We talked about more shelter, more navigation centers, more housing, more mental health beds, more access to mental health treatment, much more access to addiction treatment. And we also need to, and this is something that can be controversial in some quarters. I actually don't think it's that controversial in San Francisco. For people who are debilitated and dying on our streets, we need to give them an extra level of care. And so that's why we're in the legislature this year, trying to expand conservatorships for the people who are truly debilitated, can't make decisions for themselves, and are dying. And we all see those folks on the streets every day. And people wonder, why is that person out here clearly dying? And why is no one doing anything about it? And we're trying to change the laws to make that possible. How much is what we were talking about the beginning of the conversation and what we're talking about now in a way the same, which is to say that when I asked you why you moved here, you were telling

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me

about the tolerance of San Francisco. And you were talking about that in part around LGBTQ, but also then you started talking about tech. And I noticed it too. I mean, people are tolerant to very weird ideas. They're tolerant to very weird ways of dressing. They're tolerant of a lot of things people would not be open to elsewhere. And that openness to ideas, I think, is fundamentally what keeps San Francisco's economy powered in the way it is.

So people just sit there and listen to you straightforwardly as you're saying, the wackiest thing. And in some percentage of those, you get a 52 billion dollar company out of it.

And that tolerance has political dimensions too. I mean, some of what we've talked about around more is tolerated here. I mean, there is political conflict around what to crack down on and what to not. Whereas in cities that are simultaneously less innovative and in some ways like less disordered, I wonder how much it's not the same thing all the way through that it's just when you have a politics built around tolerance, that's going to give you a different problem set, but also a different benefit set than a politics built around conformity or built around tighter standards. Absolutely. And we see that with some of the fights we have around unsheltered homelessness

in San Francisco where let's say we do have enough shelter for everyone. Let's say we get there and we have enough shelter, we have a shelter for anyone who needs it. There will still be people who will say that if someone wants to stay on a tent in the sidewalk, even if there is a shelter bed for them, they should be able to do that. Can you clear a tent city? Right. The city can and the city has done that, but that can become politically controversial in San Francisco. And that springs out of the philosophy that we have to live and let live here. But we also need a city that's going to work for everyone. I want to ask about another dimension of that, which is this is a city with a very, again, compared to everywhere I've lived, a very unusual drug culture. On the one hand, the power elite is sort of drenched in psychedelics. And there's a lot of very interesting psychedelics policy. You have a bill to decriminalize basically all the major classes of psychedelics. We also have a very, very bad now fentanyl and overdose death problem, or one of the worst cities for that. How do you think about the broad kind of experiments and drug policy? And just in drug acceptance, and I don't want to paint all this fentanyl on the streets, it's not the same as ayahuasca ceremonies that tech executives are attending. But I do think there's something about the way in which San Francisco has kind of always had a different attitude towards drugs. It has both created, again, a lot of possibility and consciousness, and at this point, also a lot of dangerous outcomes. Yeah, I think psychedelics also, I do want to give a shout out to cannabis because we were the birthplace of medical cannabis during the HIV crisis. And so we have, we are a city that has definitely been very embracing of substance use, particularly cannabis, psychedelics, et cetera. But like everywhere else in the country, yeah, we have problems with opioid addiction. We have problems with meth addiction. In terms of fentanyl, when you look at overdoses in general, when you look at the cities that are up there with San Francisco, it's Philadelphia, it's Franklin County, Ohio, it's the Bronx, these are all very different demographics, very different kinds of places, and they all have fentanyl problems. I think San Francisco was the first West Coast city to really experience a lot of fentanyl. And so we are, that explains part of it. I don't think our acceptance of like cannabis and psychedelics is why we have a fentanyl problem. I think there



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was a national problem with opioids in general and with fentanyl specifically. It's spreading everywhere. Meth has always been a huge problem everywhere. These issues are in rural areas, suburban cities, and San Francisco absolutely has a problem.

Well, one place you do see, I think, more of a through line is over what policy solutions are being debated here. So tell me a bit about the fight over supervised consumption sites.

Yeah, so we have people who are using drugs on our streets in very unsafe ways. It's unsanitary for them. It's bad for the surrounding neighborhood. It's not good. And there was a focus group that was done with some people who were injecting in public because intuitively, you would think, why would I ever want to do something that private in a public space? And one of the answers that people were giving was, well, then if I overdose, at least someone will see me and try to save my life. And so supervised consumption sites have been used in Europe, in Canada, and Australia for 30 years, a place where you can go inside in a healthy, safe, clean, sanitized setting. Make sure you have a clean needle. If you overdose, they reverse the overdose and 30 years, not a single death from overdose has ever happened that we know of in any of these places around the world. It reduces ER visits because you have care right there, reduces HIV and hepatitis infections, and about half of the people end up going into treatment, not right away, perhaps, but at some point. So you can connect people to treatment. Sometimes people have concerns, oh my God, you're enabling drug use. No, we're not. These people are already using drugs. No one is going to be like, well, I've never used drugs before, but I see a safe consumption site. So I'm going to start using meth or start using fentanyl. These people are already using, and the question is, do we want them using on the sidewalk or inside in a safe, healthy space? I did author legislation to allow San Francisco, Oakland, and LA to pilot safe consumption sites. Unfortunately, the governor vetoed that legislation. So now San Francisco is considering moving forward despite that veto. We are waiting for guidance from the Biden administration because this administration has been very progressive on many aspects of drug policy, and we are hoping that the administration will create guidance for cities to do this. One thing people have been talking about around this debate is that San Francisco has seen a jump in OD deaths since December when the city's Tenderloin Center, which is kind of an informal supervised consumption site closed. We obviously don't have the kind of research it would fully make a causal claim there, but it seems to me a lot of people suspect and have been talking about the possibility that as people got turned out of that space where they were using drugs under some level of medical supervision, that it's led to more ODs. Well, the Tenderloin Lincoln Center did a lot of things. It was really not a supervised consumption site and didn't have a lot of the elements that you would have in a supervised consumption site. I think the city absolutely needs to open up actual safe consumption sites, and it also points to the need to make Narcan, which reverses opioid overdoses, available everywhere. And we have bills in the legislature this year to require it in schools and public libraries and bars and nightclubs. And so we need to push out the Narcan everywhere. And it's tragic that people should have to carry Narcan around with them in their briefcase or in their purse or wherever. But here in San Francisco and other cities, I think more people need to have access to it. When you author a bill like that, and you know that both the bill and you will then become refracted in San Francisco for that matter through the right-wing media ecosystem, something you now have actually quite a lot of experience with, how do you think about what that is? The interest in the stuff you do particularly,

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what San Francisco does particularly, what San Francisco represents culturally on the right. Tell me a bit about the symbolic dimension of your job and this place in the sort of broader political culture war. Well, I'm a gay Jewish Democrat from San Francisco. Very tall. Very tall too. I think the right-wing is okay with my height. But the other pieces, they're not okay with it. I'm sort of their ultimate caricature of everything that the MAGA QAnon world hates. And so they do demonize me a lot and go after me and threaten me. And that's okay. It just sort of energizes me to do the work even more. What I know is that my constituents in San Francisco, I'm not saying are unanimous. There are people in all sides of a lot of these issues. But on the work we do around drug policy, there's a lot of support here in San Francisco. The work we do around LGBTQ civil rights, enormous support in San Francisco. And so I try to always remember the Twitter does not frequently represent public opinion, especially not since a certain person purchased it. And I try to stay very grounded in my own community. And that's why I love riding transit in San Francisco. I love showing up at block parties and just being out and about because I actually like it when constituents come up to me and say, hey, I have concerns about this bill that you're doing. And we get to talk about it. And I get to hear those concerns. And it makes me a better elected official. But it also grounds me. And I know what people are saying. And that is very helpful to me. Give me the re-narration of this. I would say that the right-wing narrative of San Francisco, which is quite out there now because it's also all over Twitter from people who live in San Francisco. It's in the New York Times for that matter. Is that it's a place it is collapsing around its own sort of mixture of tolerance and status quoism. And at the same time, so many of these people live here, want to live here, so many of the great companies are here, so many of the great technologies are here. How would you describe that contradiction? How would you try to change San Francisco's political space in the narrative? Not to pick on Bakersfield or the good people of Bakersfield, but Bakersfield has a much higher murder rate than San Francisco and has the worst air pollution in the state. And you don't see right-wing media talking about that. Where Speaker Kevin McCarthy is. Exactly. Speaker McCarthy represents a district that has very high air pollution and a high murder rate. Unfortunately, I wish it were a better situation there. And I'm not trying to pick on Bakersfield, but they don't talk about that. They talk about San Francisco and talk about one murder that happened here. And so in San Francisco, we need to just be better about talking about the challenges. We should not try to erase the challenges that we have. We have real problems here. And we should be transparent about those and acknowledge them and work over time to solve them. But I think it's important for us to really make sure people know the good. And I recently, San Francisco, tourism is almost as high as it was before the pandemic. It's come back that strongly in the last year or so. Conventions are coming back. Recently, someone gave me a letter that J.P. Morgan, they do a big healthcare conference in San Francisco every year. They sent a letter to the mayor talking about what a great experience they had and that their participants had. There are all these good things happen that people don't necessarily hear about. And I also sometimes get feedback from people who say, hey, I just visited San Francisco and I was prepared for this post-apocalyptic situation. And it was amazing and beautiful. And we need to do more to get that out there. One of the things broadly that has been true, I think, about California

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politics for the last four or five years, true in San Francisco, but true, I think, more broadly statewide, is that a lot of contradictions and difficult decisions have been papered over by money. And particularly during the pandemic, Gavin Newsom had this unbelievable budget surplus to spend. But in San Francisco, the downtown, which drove a lot of revenue, is in pretty unusually bad straits because so many tech companies are open to remote work. It's not coming back as quickly as it is in some other cities. There's reason to think that California is not going to have the budget surplus is going forward. It's had in the past couple of years. How does California kind of politics and policy change and probably California liberalism change if it can't do quite so much through spending? Well, just if I can put in a little plug, because there is some short-term spending that is essential for our future economy, and that is we're at risk of having our public transportation agencies or systems fall apart. Yeah, this is a very big problem. The fiscal cliff because they're playing the fiscal cliff. Yeah. So our transit agencies lost, you know, 90, 95% of the ridership early in the pandemic. They've been slowly recovering, but way slower than they want. BART is like a 30%. They were at 5%. They're now at 30% of pre-pandemic ridership. So they don't have the same fare revenue that they had. And Congress, one of the great things that it did during the pandemic was to provide a lot of rescue money to transit systems around the country. Without that money, these systems would probably be gone, and the fare revenue is not recovering quickly enough to replace it. And so if they hit that wall or that fiscal cliff, and the federal money runs out, and they don't have the fare money that they need, we will start seeing massive service cuts. So BART might stop running on the weekends or just run hourly during the week. That would be so devastating for our economic recovery. It would be devastating for our climate goals. More and more people would have to drive. There'd be much worse congestion on bridges and roads. And so we need short-term help from the state, which I am fighting very, very hard and making a lot of noise about, to get money in our budget to backstop that. So that is a money issue. Although we're also going to be having a hearing soon to talk about all the reforms and restructuring that some of these systems need to do to be more nimble in the future. So they need to reform and they need money. But in terms of downtown, we need to think differently about downtown. And the fact that we had a downtown where there was really no housing or almost no housing is sort of odd. And we look at what happened in Lower Manhattan after 9-11. And granted, they had an enormous amount of federal rescue money, but they turned what was only offices into offices and residential and nightlife. And Lower Manhattan is super vibrant now. We need to rethink downtown. We need to consider that there are some office buildings, particularly some older ones, that will need to be torn down and rebuilt into some sort of mixed use. The crisis that we face in downtown San Francisco, we should not be frozen. It needs to be an opportunity to completely rethink it and make it even better than it was before. Does that need money or does that just need the regulatory and zoning capacity to shift? It's both. It will need regulatory change because

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it's going to have to happen. It's not something that happens in a year or two. It might happen in five to 10 years. But right now in California, I mentioned the California Environmental Quality Act, which goes well beyond environmental protection. It does some really important environmental protection things. But any building that is 45 years or older is considered a quote-unquote potential historic resource. I live in a 1965 condo building that is not architecturally or historically significant in any conceivable way, but it is technically a potential historic resource. And that means that it could get completely caught up in years of process and litigation. We're going to need probably some state regulatory relief for downtown San Francisco to allow us to much more nimbly make decisions and allow property owners to make decisions to transform it into something for the future because it's very hard for many high-rise office buildings to convert them into housing. The plumbing isn't set up correctly. It might not be financially feasible for some maybe, but for others not. We need to be very, very flexible as we pivot downtown San Francisco to the future.

When you think about the broad housing agenda in California, there's been this dynamic where for a while, it was like at the end of every session, people like me would pay attention and feel sad as some of the housing bills that you had hoped would make it over the line didn't, and then didn't, and then didn't. And then they started to, and then more did, and then more did. And then last year, or two years ago, there was like a flood of end-of-the-year housing policy that got passed. I mean, so much that most of us couldn't even keep up with all that had happened. What to you that has come into play will really matter here? And what big parts of the agenda for you haven't happened? Like, if you had your housing wish list of these three or four, not bills, but changes, what would they be?

Well, what we've done, we've done some really significant change that is already having impacts. So actually, I was probably best known for the big bill you mentioned at the beginning that would have rezoned a lot of California that was Senate Bill 50. And that got, it sucked the oxygen out of the room. But it rezoned a lot of around transit. Right. And at the same time that I was pursuing that proposal, I was also authoring a law that effectively forced cities to zone for much more density up and down the state. And that was a bill that really changed how we set housing goals for cities and we set much higher goals and we put more accountability in place. And right now, as we speak, cities have rezoned and are rezoning for much more density. We have passed various laws that take sustainable housing proposals out of CEQA entirely, because these are sustainable projects, and have prevented cities from blocking them. And there was one passed last year by my, I'm the chair of the Senate Housing Committee, my counterpart in the Assembly, Buffy Wicks from the East Bay passed an amazing law that allows a much easier conversion

of commercial in the residential. So strip malls that are dying. For example, we have made our affordable housing density bonus program much stronger, which means that if you do a higher level of affordability, you get to build taller, more densely, waive some other requirements. I could go on and on, but I won't. But we have, we've taken some really tangible steps that are slowly bearing fruit. It's never as fast as we want, but the seeds have been and are being planted. But what don't you have that you wish you did?

We still need more streamlining. So when I say streamlining, I mean that you set up the rules ahead of time. If someone meets all the rules with height density design, etc., they get their permit

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in a matter of months, not years. We have done some of that and I had one bill that I had authored and there are a few others that my colleagues authored to try to really do that kind of expedited permitting. We have a big bill this year, Senate Bill 423, which will make a lot of that streamlining permanent and make it more robust. But we need to move to a model where there is no longer chaotic,

politicized discretion in whether you approve or don't approve housing and where we have a system where the loudest voices prevail. We need a system and I think it's a good government system where we set up the rules ahead of time and if you meet the rules, you get your permit now. That will go a long way in allowing us to build the housing we need.

You opened an exploratory committee and you said that if Nancy Pelosi decides not to run for reelection, you're likely to run for her congressional seat. Why? And the reason I ask is that you've been working on a bunch of these issues, particularly housing for a long time. The moment has caught up to the man. The winds are at your back. You chair one of the key committees. Why not keep working on the California-specific issues as opposed to becoming one of a bunch of Democrats in the House with the lack of seniority and the difficulties of national politics, the likelihood of being in the minority, that kind of thing?

Well, first of all, San Francisco has a member of Congress.

I said you're not going to run unless she doesn't run for reelection.

She's amazing and she walks on water and she saved their democracy and she was really good at handling Donald Trump. So I'm a huge fangirl of her. And if there's an opportunity, I think it would be very exciting to represent San Francisco in Congress. And I will say that every office I've ever run for, including for the San Francisco Board of Supervisors and member of the State Senate, I was told I wasn't going to be able to get anything done. When I ran for the Board of Supervisors, I was told that place is a mess. It's crazy. You are never going to get anything done there. You're going to be miserable. I got there and we got a whole bunch of stuff done. When I ran for the State Senate, some of my pro-housing YIMBY supporters told me, we don't even want to support you because you can't do anything on housing in the State Legislature.

You should stay on the Board of Supervisors. Well, I think I proved them wrong. We've done a lot on housing. I was told that the State Legislature is so convoluted and corrupt that you're never going to be able to get anything done. That's not true. We got a lot done. So I understand that there are challenges with Congress. We all see what they are. But you also look at, in the last few years, Congress did a lot. I mean, some huge stuff and it's in a different way. But the issues that I care about, housing, we need to get the federal government back into the business of building public housing or what we now call social housing. Ronald Reagan killed it off and that helped spike homelessness. We need more social housing and the federal government needs to get back into that business. I do a lot of work around mental health treatment and helping people with insurance, for example, access to treatment. The federal government can play a huge role if it wants to in ensuring people have access to mental health treatment. And we need stronger civil rights laws at the federal level. So all of this toxic bullshit that's happening in Florida and in Texas and Alabama where they're basically criminalizing trans people and their families and criminalizing drag queens and saying you're not allowed to talk about being gay. We need civil rights laws that wipe those away. There's a lot you can do

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in Congress. It might take a long time, but you can do it. Always our final question then. What are three books that have influenced you that you'd recommend to the audience? One is a book called *And The Band Played On* by Randy Schiltz, which is I think the definitive authoritative history of the public health debacle that fueled the HIV AIDS crisis. And you can learn a lot about what not to do when you have a public health problem or a pandemic. Another is a book called *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros. It's an amazing book, a vignette about this teenage girl, her upbringing, and it ties in a lot about what it means to live in inadequate housing and people's dreams and aspirations about housing. And then a book called *Last Call*, I can't remember the author's name. It's about the history of how prohibition happened. And sometimes people wonder how on earth did prohibition not only happen, but get amended into the United States Constitution. And this is an absolutely brilliant recitation of the history of how it happened and how it failed. And it relates directly to the drug war and why drug criminalization doesn't work. And then I want to just do a shout out for all of the fantasy nerds out there, because I am a fantasy nerd. And the series *The Wheel of Time*, which is one of the- It's going old school there. It's old school, but you know what I love about it? It was written, it started decades ago. It's a great gender parable, like comparing to the real world, because the hero of the story was a guy. But the women actually were the real heroes, because without the women, the world would have ended and the guy would have failed. Isn't that often the case in real life? Scott Wiener, thank you very much.

Thank you.

This episode of *The Other Clans Show* is produced by Amapha Agawoo. Our show is also made by Rashid

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