

# NIMBYism in Temple City, California

The role of social media, news reporting, and traditional communication strategies in undermining the permanent supportive housing development of Mercy Housing

by Anna Blue  
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*By: Anna Blue*

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## INTRODUCTION

In November of 2016, Los Angeles city residents voted overwhelmingly in favor of Proposition HHH, a mandate aimed at resolving the homelessness crisis that has taken the city by storm in recent years. Also known as the Permanent Supportive Housing Loan Program<sup>1</sup>, Proposition HHH passed with 76 percent approval<sup>2</sup>, paving the way to fund the \$1.2 billion measure intended for affordable housing units. Only five months later, on March 7 of 2017, the county of Los Angeles approved the Los Angeles County Sales Tax for Homeless Services and Prevention (Measure H) by 67.4 percent<sup>3</sup>. Both initiatives called for raising taxes, with HHH including a \$0.348 per square foot property tax increase and H relying on a quarter cent sales tax<sup>4</sup>, but still succeeded, showing that the Los Angeles area was fully committed to ending homelessness. For a brief period, it seemed like the priorities of policymakers, corporations, nonprofits, and community members began to overlap and to build momentum.

It has been largely recognized, in LA and beyond, that housing-first solutions<sup>5</sup> are the most effective in reducing homelessness long-term. According to the Coalition for the Homeless, several research studies have confirmed<sup>6</sup> that long-term housing assistance not only successfully reduces homelessness, but is also less expensive than shelter and other institutional care. Philanthropy and industry heavyweights have thrown their support behind increasing funding for permanent housing and streamlining the approval process for new developments. President & CEO of the California Community Foundation, Antonia Hernández, recently remarked, “We know that permanent supportive housing works to end homelessness, and we’re proud to work

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<sup>1</sup> “Supportive Housing (Prop HHH).” Los Angeles Housing + Community Investment Department, 2018, [hcidla.lacity.org/prop-hhh](http://hcidla.lacity.org/prop-hhh).

<sup>2</sup> Chiland, Elijah. “Measure HHH: Angelenos OK \$1.2 Billion Bond to Tackle Homelessness.” Curbed LA, Curbed LA, 9 Nov. 2016, [la.curbed.com/2016/11/9/13574446/homelessness-ballot-measure-hhh-housing-bond-pass](http://la.curbed.com/2016/11/9/13574446/homelessness-ballot-measure-hhh-housing-bond-pass).

<sup>3</sup> Carter, Ryan. “LA Election Results: Voters Approve Measure H to Fight Homelessness.” Daily News, Daily News, 28 Aug. 2017, [www.dailynews.com/2017/03/08/la-election-results-voters-approve-measure-h-to-fight-homelessness/](http://www.dailynews.com/2017/03/08/la-election-results-voters-approve-measure-h-to-fight-homelessness/).

<sup>4</sup> Chiland, Elijah. “Updated: LA County Voters Approve Measure H-Here's How Higher Taxes Will Help the Homeless.” Curbed LA, Curbed LA, 8 Mar. 2017, [la.curbed.com/2017/3/8/14855430/los-angeles-election-results-ballot-measure-h](http://la.curbed.com/2017/3/8/14855430/los-angeles-election-results-ballot-measure-h).

<sup>5</sup> “Deploy Housing First Systemwide.” United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, 25 May 2018, [www.usich.gov/solutions/housing/housing-first](http://www.usich.gov/solutions/housing/housing-first).

<sup>6</sup> Coalition for the Homeless, 2018, [www.coalitionforthehomeless.org/ending-homelessness/proven-solutions/](http://www.coalitionforthehomeless.org/ending-homelessness/proven-solutions/).



with other funders and the City to finance the early costs of providing homes for those most in need in Los Angeles.”<sup>7</sup>

Despite the availability of financial resources and popular enthusiasm for permanent supportive housing solutions<sup>8</sup>, well-respected nonprofit housing developers have since encountered significant opposition that has stymied efforts to implement new housing plans. From Koreatown<sup>9</sup> to Boyle Heights<sup>10</sup>, proposals for homeless shelters and housing for the homeless have been met



with resistance from local communities. In one such case, nonprofit developer Mercy Housing felt forced to rescind an application<sup>11</sup> to turn a run-down motel into new apartments for veterans and the formerly homeless in the west part of San Gabriel Valley. Officially, the motel is located in unincorporated Los Angeles County, but many of the residents of neighboring Temple City turned out at organized protests and City Council meetings to publicly challenge the permanent supportive housing proposal. The Mercy Housing example, which unfolded over a short few months in the spring and summer of 2017, has come to symbolize, for many, the power of NIMBYism (not-in-my-backyard) in undermining high-potential housing projects.

In Los Angeles, a city with a homeless population that has surged by 75% in the last six years, the initial setbacks exemplified by the Temple City case study pose a reasonable cause for concern. City Councilmembers, advocates, and nonprofits have pointed their fingers at NIMBYism<sup>12</sup>, saying that neighborhood protests have dismantled any attempts to end the homelessness crisis. One need only look, for instance, at the neighborhoods of Venice, where

<sup>7</sup> Fine, Howard. “Foundations Pump \$20 Million into L.A. Homeless Housing Loan Fund.” *Los Angeles Business Journal*, 19 Sept. 2017, [labusinessjournal.com/news/2017/sep/19/foundations-pump-20-million-l-homeless-housing-loa/](http://labusinessjournal.com/news/2017/sep/19/foundations-pump-20-million-l-homeless-housing-loa/).

<sup>8</sup> “Home L.A. Fund: Ending Homelessness in Los Angeles.” California Community Foundation, [www.calfund.org/homela/](http://www.calfund.org/homela/).

<sup>9</sup> Board, The Times Editorial. “Stop Fighting the Koreatown Homeless Shelter.” *Los Angeles Times*, 19 May 2018, [www.latimes.com/opinion/editorials/la-ed-koreatown-shelter-fight-20180518-story.html?outputType=amp](http://www.latimes.com/opinion/editorials/la-ed-koreatown-shelter-fight-20180518-story.html?outputType=amp).

<sup>10</sup> Nagourney, Adam. “For Homeless Advocates, a Discouraging Lesson in Los Angeles: Money Is Not Enough.” *The New York Times*, 29 Sept. 2017, [www.nytimes.com/2017/09/29/us/homeless-housing-los-angeles.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/29/us/homeless-housing-los-angeles.html).

<sup>11</sup> Yee, Christopher. “Application Withdrawn for Veteran, Homeless Housing in Temple City.” *San Gabriel Valley Tribune*, 30 Aug. 2017, [www.sgvtribune.com/2017/06/19/application-withdrawn-for-veteran-homeless-housing-in-temple-city/](http://www.sgvtribune.com/2017/06/19/application-withdrawn-for-veteran-homeless-housing-in-temple-city/).

<sup>12</sup> Chandler, Jenna. “LA Lawmakers Vow to Fight NIMBYs, Build Homeless Housing in Every District.” *Curbed LA*, 20 Mar. 2018, [la.curbed.com/2018/3/20/17144292/homeless-housing-hhh-city-council-pledge](http://la.curbed.com/2018/3/20/17144292/homeless-housing-hhh-city-council-pledge).

residents “raucously” protested a proposal<sup>13</sup> for housing for homeless individuals and for low income-artists, or at the prejudiced community opposition to shelters in Orange County<sup>14</sup>.

The popular claim is that NIMBYism, as well as zoning laws and restrictions on land use, are to blame for<sup>15</sup> the lack of affordable housing and the increasing marginalization of homeless people. As Dr. Lois Takahashi, an expert from the USC Price School of Public Policy, points out, “NIMBYs have been demonized” for trying to protect the status quo. Singling out NIMBYism as the sole culprit, though, may be misguided. First of all, the “demonizing” of NIMBYism ignores the role that land prices, competition between developers, and government bureaucracy play in delaying or preventing certain developments.

More importantly, though, it is important to consider how rhetoric and the media may drive or stimulate NIMBYism. A broader analysis of the role that communication plays in debates about permanent supportive housing is in order. Therefore, by investigating the Mercy Housing case study, the USC Annenberg Center on Communication Leadership & Policy aims to shed light on how societal narratives around the homeless population and permanent supportive housing projects have reinforced or strengthened community opposition to local developments in Los Angeles county.

This report begins with an introduction to NIMBYism and its history, so that readers know and understand the complicated relationship between NIMBYism and housing. The background literature is followed by a descriptive account of the events that took place after Mercy Housing agreed to purchase the Golden Motel property and up until Mercy Housing withdrew their petition from the LA County Planning Commission. A breakdown of the text of the online complaints and concerns of the Temple City community reveals the worries that motivated resistance to the Mercy Housing proposal. The report will culminate with a look at how news organizations, social media, and missteps in the communication strategy of Mercy Housing amplified the fears and frustrations of the Temple City opposition. The report will conclude with recommendations for combatting NIMBYism in future plans for permanent supportive housing.

Pointing out that NIMBYism exists is not a new contribution, but bringing the study of contemporary NIMBYism up-to-date is crucial for Los Angeles. It is likely that more examples like the Temple City case study may arise as nonprofit developers start to increasingly tap into the funds of Measure H and Proposition HHH to build more housing. For that reason, the following report seeks to illuminate ways that nonprofit developers can successfully balance community engagement and building timelines.

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<sup>13</sup> Holland, Gale. “Venice Residents Fight over Homeless Housing Project - and Character of the Neighborhood.” Los Angeles Times, 11 Mar. 2017, [www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-ln-homeless-housing-venice-20170311-story.html](http://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-ln-homeless-housing-venice-20170311-story.html).

<sup>14</sup> Board, The Times Editorial. “Orange County Is Making the Same Hapless Mistakes on Homelessness That L.A. Did a Decade Ago.” Los Angeles Times, 10 Apr. 2018, [www.latimes.com/opinion/editorials/la-ed-oc-homeless-housing-20180410-story.html](http://www.latimes.com/opinion/editorials/la-ed-oc-homeless-housing-20180410-story.html).

<sup>15</sup> Florida, Richard. “Anatomy of a NIMBY.” CityLab, 23 Feb. 2017, [www.citylab.com/equity/2017/02/california-land-use-housing-affordability/517320/](http://www.citylab.com/equity/2017/02/california-land-use-housing-affordability/517320/).

## WHAT IS NIMBYISM?

NIMBYism is not a new attitude<sup>16</sup> or a recent phenomenon; the beginning of academic study of NIMBYism is sometimes attributed to the 1982 book, *Not on Our Street*<sup>17</sup>, which analyzed community stances on mental health care facilities. Lately, use of the phrase has seen a resurgence among scholars and the public, especially in urban environments confronting skyrocketing rates of homelessness. NIMBYism is used as a catchall term to refer to various types of local obstructionism and generally, the acronym<sup>18</sup> captures the sentiment felt by a community when a new development in their local area is undesired by the residents.

Some anthropologists and political scientists have argued that NIMBYism stems from the desire or the need for neighborhoods to maintain socio-spatial exclusion<sup>19</sup>, while others have suggested that NIMBYism may be a reaction to local feelings of betrayal by the city or regional government sponsoring the invading development or construction. Economist William A. Fischel has a more straightforward take on NIMBYism, claiming in his 2001 article, “Why are there NIMBYs?” that “NIMBYism is a rational response to the uninsured risks of home-ownership”<sup>20</sup>. Fischel asserts that changes in nearby land use threaten to devalue houses, usually the only stable assets that many individuals own.

Community opposition to homeless shelters or homeless housing, though, is not seen to be just rooted in economics concerns. A complex combination<sup>21</sup> of discrimination, prejudice, worry about community safety<sup>22</sup>, economic concerns, and class and racial inequity contribute to hesitation and protest. For example, Maria Foscarinis, the founder and executive director of the National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty, wrote a journal article in 1996 for the Yale Law & Policy Review that described a so-called “war on the homeless”<sup>23</sup>. Foscarinis pointed to the actions by city governments in the 1980s and 1990s to forcibly remove homeless people from city streets. When those actions were sometimes validated by courts that considered the actions “legitimate efforts to regulate public spaces,” the consequence was that activities associated with homelessness were criminalized. Charles G. Steffen, a professor of history at Georgia State

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<sup>16</sup> Glaberson, William. *Coping in the Age of 'Nimby'*. The New York Times, 19 June 1988, [www.nytimes.com/1988/06/19/business/coping-in-the-age-of-nimby.html](http://www.nytimes.com/1988/06/19/business/coping-in-the-age-of-nimby.html).

<sup>17</sup> Dear, M. J., and Stuart Martin Taylor. *Not on Our Street: Community Attitudes to Mental Health Care*. Pion, 1982.

<sup>18</sup> “NIMBY (Not in My Backyard).” Homeless Hub, [homelesshub.ca/solutions/affordable-housing/nimby-not-my-backyard](http://homelesshub.ca/solutions/affordable-housing/nimby-not-my-backyard).

<sup>19</sup> DeVerteuil, Geoffrey. *Where Has NIMBY Gone in Urban Social Geography?* Social & Cultural Geography, 2013, [www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14649365.2013.800224?journalCode=rscg20&](http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14649365.2013.800224?journalCode=rscg20&).

<sup>20</sup> Fischel, William A. “Why Are There NIMBYs?” Land Economics, vol. 77, no. 1, 2001, pp. 144–152.

<sup>21</sup> Lyon-Callo, Vincent. “Making Sense of NIMBY Poverty, Power and Community Opposition to Homeless Shelters.” AnthroSource, vol. 13, no. 2, 2001, pp. 183–209.

<sup>22</sup> Pendall, Rolf. “Opposition to Housing.” Urban Affairs Review, vol. 35, no. 1, 1999, pp. 112–136.

<sup>23</sup> Fischer, Pamela J. “The Criminalization of Homelessness.” Homelessness, 1992, pp. 57–64.

University, even argued in the *Journal of Social History*<sup>24</sup> that the 1973-1988 campaign against the homeless people in Atlanta was corporate-sponsored as companies sought to create “a good business environment.”

Prominent experts in urban and regional planning like [Lois. M Takahashi](#), the Houston Flournoy Professor of State Government at the USC Price School of Public Policy, have also studied how the public (and even the local government) view homeless populations as a threat. In her 1998 book, “Homelessness, AIDS, and Stigmatization: The NIMBY Syndrome in the United States at the End of the Twentieth Century,” Takahashi argues that the association of homeless populations with not only street lawlessness, but also epidemics like HIV/AIDS, has marginalized homeless individuals<sup>25</sup>.

Dianne Gilbert offered a more nuanced portrayal of the rise of NIMBYism in certain neighborhoods. Gilbert wrote in her January 1993 article “Not in My Backyard” for *Social Work* that her experience as a social worker in an inner-city neighborhood showed her that resentment among residents is not just due to bias or discrimination, but that “some of the negative response is precipitated by the manner in which agencies' proposals for location of facilities are presented and by the agencies' lack of planning for understanding of individual neighborhood needs”<sup>26</sup>. The condescension, according to Gilbert, of nonprofit development agencies when arriving in the poorer minority neighborhood, greatly influenced local distaste for the proposals of a residential treatment center and homeless shelter. Gilbert’s article is a valuable insider perspective to take into account when considering how little rapport and trust existed between Mercy Housing and the residents of Temple City.

Other literature has brought the study of homelessness and NIMBYism up to date. In some situations, say some academics, communities do not feel any responsibility for the homeless that have entered into their neighborhoods<sup>27</sup>, and as a result, do not feel that they should bear the burden of affordable housing for the formerly homeless. In 2012, urban studies professors Mai Thi Nguyen, Victoria Basolo, and Abhishek Tiwari found that the negative framing of affordable housing tenants as deviant and undeserving leads to the placement of subsidized housing disproportionately in concentrated poor neighborhoods<sup>28</sup>. How did news outlets, government officials, and leaders of the Temple City community frame the proposed development when announcing it to the public? And how did the self-perceived identity of Temple City as a minority-majority, working class area contribute to the community’s feelings that they may have been taken advantage of in the Los Angeles quest to find more housing for the homeless?

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<sup>24</sup> Steffen, C. G. “The Corporate Campaign against Homelessness: Class Power and Urban Governance in Neoliberal Atlanta, 1973-1988.” *Journal of Social History*, vol. 46, no. 1, 2012, pp. 170–196.

<sup>25</sup> Takahashi, Lois M. “The Socio-Spatial Stigmatization of Homelessness and HIV/AIDS: Toward an Explanation of the NIMBY Syndrome.” *Social Science & Medicine*, vol. 45, no. 6, 1997, pp. 903–914.

<sup>26</sup> Gilbert, Dianne. “Not in My Backyard.” *Social Work*, 1993.

<sup>27</sup> Hartwell, Stephanie, et al. “Helping America's Homeless: Emergency Shelter or Affordable Housing?” *Contemporary Sociology*, vol. 31, no. 2, 2002.

<sup>28</sup> Nguyen, Mai Thi, et al. “Opposition to Affordable Housing in the USA: Debate Framing and the Responses of Local Actors.” *Housing, Theory and Society*, vol. 30, no. 2, 2013.



So then, why study Temple City as a case study?

First of all, Temple City is part of one of the areas that arguably needs affordable housing the most. The San Gabriel Valley is the worst equipped region in the county to deal with homelessness, according to a study<sup>29</sup> discussed in 2005 by the Los Angeles County Office of Education. Although the study was completed more than ten years ago, some of the conclusions of the study ring true today: The San Gabriel Valley still lacks an appropriate number of emergency shelters and beds, making the crisis in SGV cities like Temple City even more urgent. Homelessness in the San Gabriel Valley was up by 31%, just from 2016 to 2017<sup>30</sup> and right around the time when Mercy Housing withdrew their proposal.

Second, as a matter of curiosity, the city government in Temple City recently experienced a lot of turmoil and turnover, when much of the old City Council and the Mayor were accused of corruption related to the Temple City Piazza Project<sup>31</sup>. This is noteworthy for two reasons: the strong reaction from the public after the corruption scandal shows the community is active and aware and the new government is young and reportedly forward-thinking<sup>32</sup>. Why did these attitudes not translate to the situation with Mercy Housing?

Most importantly, though, other proposals for low-income or formerly homeless housing have received some media attention, both negative and positive, such as the WORKS' proposal to convert the Old City Jail in Lincoln Heights<sup>33</sup>, but the Temple City project did not receive nearly as much scrutiny and study as it deserved. The case study is not just about how residents of Temple City perceive homeless people, due to stereotypes or biased impressions, but it is also about how Mercy Housing conveyed the development to the county and about how the general public perceive the residents of Temple City as a result of the coverage by media and news organizations.

## THE MERCY HOUSING PLAN FOR TEMPLE CITY

Temple City, California sits in the western part of the San Gabriel Valley. Although the striking diversity of the city is not unique, especially in Southern California, the makeup of the

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<sup>29</sup> Esparaza, Christina. "Study Shows Homeless Shelters Inadequate: Area Failing to Cope with Growing Problem." Union Station Homeless Services, 26 May 2005, [unionstationhs.org/press-releases/study-shows-homeless-shelters-inadequate-area-failing-to-cope-with-growing-problem/](http://unionstationhs.org/press-releases/study-shows-homeless-shelters-inadequate-area-failing-to-cope-with-growing-problem/).

<sup>30</sup> Yee, Christopher. "San Gabriel Valley Homeless Count up 36 Percent, Volunteers Found a Big Jump in Homeless Veterans." Pasadena Star News, 28 Aug. 2017, [www.pasadenastarnews.com/2017/05/31/san-gabriel-valley-homeless-count-up-36-percent-volunteers-found-a-big-jump-in-homeless-veterans/](http://www.pasadenastarnews.com/2017/05/31/san-gabriel-valley-homeless-count-up-36-percent-volunteers-found-a-big-jump-in-homeless-veterans/).

<sup>31</sup> Gazzar, Brenda. "After Political Fallout, a New Chapter Begins for Temple City." Daily Bulletin, 25 Apr. 2010, [www.dailybulletin.com/2010/04/25/after-political-fallout-a-new-chapter-begins-for-temple-city/](http://www.dailybulletin.com/2010/04/25/after-political-fallout-a-new-chapter-begins-for-temple-city/).

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Razetti, Megan. "Proposals for Old City Jail Include Mix of Housing and Retail." EPGNews, [egpnews.com/2017/08/proposals-for-old-city-jail-include-mix-of-housing-and-retail/](http://egpnews.com/2017/08/proposals-for-old-city-jail-include-mix-of-housing-and-retail/).

population is notable<sup>34</sup>. The population skews older, with 44 percent of the population over the age of 45, and very young, with 22 percent of the population under the age of 18<sup>35</sup>. Temple City is also relatively affluent compared to some of its San Gabriel Valley neighbors; the median household income in 2016, according to estimations by the U.S. Census Bureau, was \$63,756<sup>36</sup> or almost \$10,000 higher than the median family income of the whole valley.

Over the past few decades, Temple City has been at the center of what some experts have labeled the “rise of the Asian-majority suburb” in Los Angeles County<sup>37</sup>. 45 percent of the total 35,600 residents are foreign-born. 56 percent of the total residents identify as Asian, many of whom hail from East Asia or share East Asian ancestry. The eastern part of the county has also experienced a steady inflow of Hispanic migrants, but the high concentration of East Asian and Asian American populations in the San Gabriel Valley stands out. In this particular case study, the majority of the opposition to the Mercy Housing development identified as Asian or Asian American, a factor that this report explores later on in depth.

In recent years, there have been suggestions that the quick and unprecedented demographic transitions in many suburbs of east Los Angeles County has led to increased tension<sup>38</sup>, although it has been hard to prove that the tension is racially motivated<sup>39</sup>. Regardless, knowledge of the demographic make-up and climate of Temple City is important for understanding why and how such a strong local grassroots movement developed in opposition to the Mercy Housing proposal.

Mercy Housing, Inc. has long been a power player in the affordable housing industry, having created more than 48,213 affordable homes nationwide since 1981<sup>40</sup>. The organization’s California division is its largest and it has developed 10,942 affordable homes in California, including 7,940 in rental and 3,002 in homeownership<sup>41</sup>. The client-centric advocacy model of Mercy Housing is well-respected across the state and the group has already had many successful projects in Southern California, ranging from Anaheim-based Casa Alegre (for those with special needs) to the San Felipe multi-family homes in Los Angeles county<sup>42</sup>.

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<sup>34</sup> “Fact Sheet: Demographics.” City of Temple City, [www.ci.temple-city.ca.us/DocumentCenter/View/756/Demographic-Indicators-2013](http://www.ci.temple-city.ca.us/DocumentCenter/View/756/Demographic-Indicators-2013).

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> “U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Temple City, California.” U.S. Census Bureau, [www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/templecitycitycalifornia/PST045217](http://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/templecitycitycalifornia/PST045217).

<sup>37</sup> Chowkwanyun, Merlin, and Jordan Segall. “How an Exclusive Los Angeles Suburb Lost Its Whiteness.” CityLab, 17 Aug. 2012, [www.citylab.com/equity/2012/08/how-exclusive-los-angeles-suburb-lost-its-whiteness/3046/](http://www.citylab.com/equity/2012/08/how-exclusive-los-angeles-suburb-lost-its-whiteness/3046/).

<sup>38</sup> Chowkwanyun, Merlin, and Jordan Segall. “The Rise of the Majority-Asian Suburb.” CityLab, 24 Aug. 2012, [www.citylab.com/equity/2012/08/rise-majority-asian-suburb/3044/](http://www.citylab.com/equity/2012/08/rise-majority-asian-suburb/3044/).

<sup>39</sup> Vuong, Zen. “‘Mansionization’ Conflict Fueled by Racial Tension, San Marino Candidate Says.” Pasadena Star News, 28 Aug. 2017, [www.pasadenastarnews.com/2015/08/28/mansionization-conflict-fueled-by-racial-tension-san-marino-candidate-says/](http://www.pasadenastarnews.com/2015/08/28/mansionization-conflict-fueled-by-racial-tension-san-marino-candidate-says/).

<sup>40</sup> “The History of Mercy Housing.” Mercy Housing, [www.mercyhousing.org/history](http://www.mercyhousing.org/history).

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> “California Properties.” Mercy Housing, <https://www.mercyhousing.org/california/properties#SouthernCAProperties>





The nonprofit developer aimed to turn 6343/6353 Rosemead Boulevard, the site of the Golden Motel, into permanent supportive housing. According to our interview with Ed Holder, the Regional Vice President of Real Estate Development for Mercy Housing, the nonprofit developer originally set their sights on the Golden Motel because executives had “heard consistently that it was a troubled motel with significant crime.” Since 6343/6353 Rosemead Boulevard

“was a threat to the community and a drain on resources”, converting the land into permanent supportive housing would address both those issues.

The plan for the site guaranteed that 60 units would be for veterans and 129 units for the formerly homeless<sup>43</sup>. The permanent housing was set to cost \$17 million in renovations. According to the Mercy Housing website, Mercy Housing California partnered with *New Directions for Veterans*, so that 100 percent of the units in the two buildings could “offer wrap around services, connect residents to resources and re-engage them with the community”<sup>44</sup>. It is estimated that around 2,600 individuals in the San Gabriel Valley are homeless, so there is apt need for a development like the one Mercy Housing proposed.

The Golden Motel is owned by [Wang's Golden Enterprises](#), an organization that has been operating for approximately 28 years and is estimated to generate \$747,445 in annual revenues. On July 12, 2016, after coming to buying terms with Wang’s Golden Enterprises, Mercy Housing submitted their project plan to the Los Angeles County Department of Regional Planning<sup>45</sup>. The project requested that Mercy Housing be granted a Conditional Use Permit, Housing Permit, and Environmental Assessment to authorize the conversion of the Golden Motel and the maintenance and establishment of the new facility.

The initial environmental impact study was conducted two days later by case planner Michele Bush<sup>46</sup>. Ms. Bush concluded that the proposed project would not have a significant effect on the environment. The finding was significant because it signaled that the Mercy Housing project was so far in compliance with the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), a 1970 statute that

<sup>43</sup> Yee, Christopher. “Temple City Residents Demand City Block Affordable Housing for Veterans, Homeless.” San Gabriel Valley Tribune, 30 Aug. 2017, [www.sgvtribune.com/2017/05/04/temple-city-residents-demand-city-block-affordable-housing-for-veterans-homeless/](http://www.sgvtribune.com/2017/05/04/temple-city-residents-demand-city-block-affordable-housing-for-veterans-homeless/).

<sup>44</sup> Mercy Housing. <https://www.mercyhousing.org/>

<sup>45</sup> “Project Summary.” 31 May 2017. [planning.lacounty.gov/assets/upl/case/rppl2016003160\\_factual.pdf](http://planning.lacounty.gov/assets/upl/case/rppl2016003160_factual.pdf).

<sup>46</sup> “Environmental Checklist Planning.” [http://planning.lacounty.gov/assets/upl/case/rppl2016003160\\_study.pdf](http://planning.lacounty.gov/assets/upl/case/rppl2016003160_study.pdf)

“requires state and local agencies to identify the significant environmental impacts of their actions and to avoid or mitigate those impacts”<sup>47</sup>. A comprehensive 2015 study, carried out by international law firm Holland & Knight, found that the CEQA mandate is frequently used by self-interested groups to undermine infrastructure progress. According to the report, sixty-four percent of CEQA lawsuits were filed by individuals or local “associations,” the vast majority of which had no prior track record of environmental advocacy<sup>48</sup>. More recently, the abuse of the legislation has been directly linked to the California housing crisis because activists and NIMBYs have used petty lawsuits to avoid growth<sup>49</sup>. Although no lawsuit was filed against Mercy Housing in the Golden Motel case, the strategies utilized by the opposition groups in Temple City were similar to those of NIMBYs that use the CEQA process to expose projects to great financial risk.

After initial approval from Michele Bush, a public hearing was scheduled for May 31, 2017<sup>50</sup>, so that residents of the surrounding area could have the opportunity to testify, or to submit written comments to Mercy Housing for consideration. Given that there was no zoning conflict, no overly negative impact on pollution or land, and that the site plans abided by all of the policies of the [General Plan 2035](#), why did Mercy Housing eventually withdraw their application<sup>51</sup> for a conditional use permit on June 19, 2017?

In May of 2017, resistance in Temple City exploded. By the time of the scheduled May 31 public hearing, Mercy Housing had already hosted two March community meetings in Temple City that were poorly attended, so the organization “thought things were moving along smoothly.” Given that there seemed to be little resistance from the community at first and that Mercy Housing had followed proper procedures, it is understandable that the revolt at the third meeting came as a surprise.

But on May 2, hundreds of residents attended the Temple City Council meeting<sup>52</sup> to voice their opposition to the establishment of housing for the homeless, right at the border of the city. Given that the city government had zero approval authority over the project, since the land was in unincorporated Los Angeles County, the residents instead showed up to ask the City Council to make a formal statement to the county of Los Angeles and the Department of Regional Planning disapproving of the conversion.

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<sup>47</sup> “Frequently Asked Questions about CEQA.” California Natural Resources Agency, 2014, [resources.ca.gov/ceqa/more/faq.html](http://resources.ca.gov/ceqa/more/faq.html).

<sup>48</sup> Hernandez, Jennifer, et al. “In the Name of the Environment: Litigation Abuse Under CEQA.” Holland & Knight, Aug. 2015, [www.hklaw.com/publications/in-the-name-of-the-environment-litigation-abuse-under-ceqa-august-2015/](http://www.hklaw.com/publications/in-the-name-of-the-environment-litigation-abuse-under-ceqa-august-2015/).

<sup>49</sup> “CEQA and the California Housing Crisis.” Orange County Register, 8 Jan. 2018, [www.ocregister.com/2018/01/08/ceqa-and-the-california-housing-crisis/](http://www.ocregister.com/2018/01/08/ceqa-and-the-california-housing-crisis/).

<sup>50</sup> “Los Angeles County Department of Regional Planning Notice of Public Hearing Notice of Intent to Adopt a Negative Declaration.” [http://planning.lacounty.gov/assets/upl/case/rppl2016003160\\_hearing-notice.pdf](http://planning.lacounty.gov/assets/upl/case/rppl2016003160_hearing-notice.pdf)

<sup>51</sup> “Withdrawal Letter.” [http://planning.lacounty.gov/assets/upl/case/rppl2016003149\\_withdrawal-letter.pdf](http://planning.lacounty.gov/assets/upl/case/rppl2016003149_withdrawal-letter.pdf)

<sup>52</sup> Chiland, Elijah. “Temple City Residents Are Fighting Housing Project for the Homeless.” Curbed LA, 4 May 2017, [la.curbed.com/2017/5/4/15546344/temple-city-homeless-veteran-housing-project-opposition](http://la.curbed.com/2017/5/4/15546344/temple-city-homeless-veteran-housing-project-opposition).

A group protesting the Temple City development also showed up to a Mercy Housing information session on May 11, to speak out about their worries related to the dangers of housing for the formerly homeless<sup>53</sup>. According to the San Gabriel Valley Tribune, “At least 300 of the 500 locals in attendance were opposed to the project and protested outside the meeting, held at Hope Christian Fellowship Church. During the meeting, they voiced concerns about their fears of public safety risks related to the development”<sup>54</sup>. The same day, Ed Holder wrote to Michele Bush to ask to reschedule the public hearing to June 21, so that Mercy Housing could take the additional three weeks to “conduct community outreach and respond to concerns and questions expressed by the community”<sup>55</sup>.

The “misinformation spreading about who [Mercy Housing was] serving, how they would control access and screen residents, and about what services would be provided [at the facility]”<sup>56</sup> was too damaging, claimed Holder. The successive community meetings that Mercy Housing hosted were “shouting matches” with numerous protesters posted outside, which was not the way the organization had hoped to engage with Temple City<sup>57</sup>.

Mercy Housing was under contract with Wang’s Golden Enterprises to acquire the property by July, but when the organization requested more time from the seller so that they could ease community concerns, the owners decided to pursue other options<sup>58</sup>. By June 19, 2017, Mercy Housing had withdrawn their application<sup>59</sup> from the Los Angeles County Department of Regional Planning when it was unable to secure additional funding to compete with higher offers for the property. The strong resistance to the permanent supportive housing, by a loud minority of Temple City residents, delayed the development timeline to the extent that it damaged the financial feasibility of the project. The tactics of the protestors in Temple City took on a shape similar to that used by many NIMBYs across California, when they refer to or abuse the requirements of CEQA to take down proposed developments. Opposition groups, including two of the main organizations, Temple City Residents for a Better Living and the San Gabriel Valley Concerned Residents, celebrated.

It is evident that NIMBYism was heavily influential in the withdrawal of the Mercy Housing proposal. The analysis below aims to dissect which fears fueled NIMBYism in Temple City. It is also essential to make clear that this report, in no way, aims to unilaterally criticize or call out the residents of Temple City, but instead to suggest how the faults of NIMBYism can be remedied.

## NIMBYISM IN TEMPLE CITY

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<sup>53</sup> Yee, Christopher. “Tempers Flare at Info Session for Affordable Veteran, Homeless Housing Proposal near Temple City, San Gabriel.” San Gabriel Valley Tribune, 30 Aug. 2017, [www.sgvtribune.com/2017/05/11/tempers-flare-at-info-session-for-affordable-veteran-homeless-housing-proposal-near-temple-city-san-gabriel/](http://www.sgvtribune.com/2017/05/11/tempers-flare-at-info-session-for-affordable-veteran-homeless-housing-proposal-near-temple-city-san-gabriel/).

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> “Withdrawal Letter.”

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> “Withdrawal Letter.”

What did NIMBYism towards the Mercy Housing development look like?

As resistance exploded in May of 2017, a new movement sprouted: Temple City Residents for a Better Living. They started a petition to stop the Mercy Housing project<sup>60</sup> on April 28, 2017 that eventually received over 4,000 signatures.

**change.org** Inicia una petición Más peticiones Programa de socios 🔍 Entrar

## Stop the Mercy Housing Homeless Project on Rosemead Blvd!



**4.076 personas han firmado. ¡Ayuda a conseguir 5.000!**

Potomac, 20854 Estados Unidos

☒ Muestra públicamente mi firma y mi comentario en esta petición


**Firma esta petición**

Procesamos tus datos personales de acuerdo con nuestras [Política de privacidad](#) y [Normas de uso](#).

 Temple City Residents for Better Living ha iniciado esta petición dirigida a Temple City Mayor Cynthia Sternquist y 15 otros/as

Did you know that a massive low-income housing project is currently being proposed in our neighborhood that will have a

The petition claimed that, as a result of the project, “Temple City residents and families will face increased traffic, added population density and plummeting property values”<sup>61</sup>. Comments on the petition ranged from simple, one-reason responses like one on May 1 claiming, “Don't want high traffic on Rosemead blvd” to more complicated explanations such as this one on May 3 from a user named Ban Tat:



**Ban Tat**

May 3, 2017

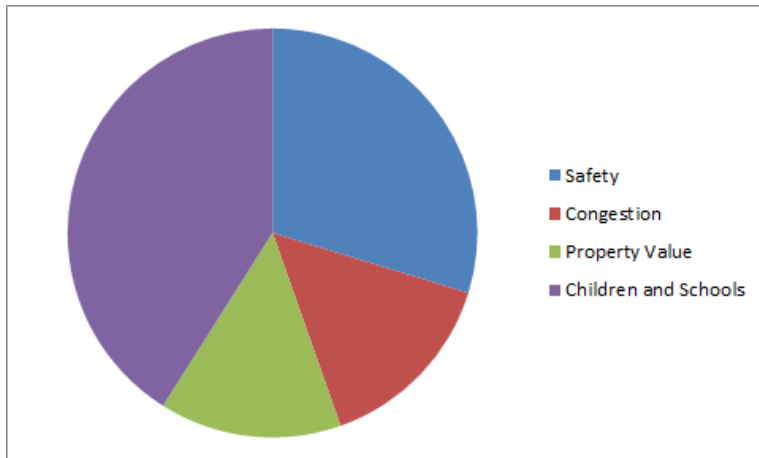
I am opposed to the housing project because of the negative impact it will have on my beloved community. We need to be concerned about the future with the passing of this project specially due to the increase in thefts and break-ins in our communities. A few of my neighbors & I were victims of break-ins to our homes. Not to mention that there were 2 shootings in Temple City last year. As much as I want to be compassionate towards the homeless, I do not see this project can be beneficial or a bright future to our community but to invite chaos & more crimes into the city.

♡ 1
[Report](#)

<sup>60</sup> “Stop the Mercy Housing Homeless Project on Rosemead Blvd!” Change.org, [www.change.org/p/cynthia-sternquist-stop-the-mercy-housing-homeless-project-on-rosemead-blvd](http://www.change.org/p/cynthia-sternquist-stop-the-mercy-housing-homeless-project-on-rosemead-blvd).

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.





To better understand how and why residents of Temple City insisted that the Mercy Housing project not be carried out, USC Annenberg CCLP conducted a text analysis that compared and contrasted the language of the 120 responses of some signatories to the petition (Appendix A). Although the text analysis below is not comprehensive, it is a good representative sample measured over a multi-month period.

Hopefully, a look at the frequency of different words (Appendix B) will help to pinpoint common themes among the reasons why Temple City residents signed the petition.

Worries about congestion and property values should not be underestimated, as they represented about 15% and 14% of responses. Safety, though, stands out as an overwhelming concern, with 49 individual mentions of the word safe or a variation of safe (such as unsafe, safety, safely, etc.). More specifically, the safety of schools and children was questioned by a large majority of respondents. In addition to the mentions of safety, there were 80 individual mentions of vocabulary related to children, students, and school. And those totals do not take into consideration responses that included synonyms, such as “violence”, “drugs”, “vagrants”, or negative references to the homeless. Those opposed to the project, or even media outlets writing about the project, took special care to point out the fact that the proposed site was within five miles of city schools.

Some responses were of a different nature and spoke to a concern that the Temple City population had been taken advantage of by Mercy Housing or the city. For instance, one message from Jack Liu on June 12, 2017 read: “Stop picking on Asians.” Christopher Yee, a reporter for the *Pasadena Star-News* and the *San Gabriel Valley Tribune*, said that when he spoke with Asian-American and Asian protesters, they often expressed that they were frustrated with the property because they had to work hard after immigrating to California to earn their place in the community<sup>62</sup>.



<sup>62</sup> Yee, Christopher. Personal Interview. 5 Dec. 2017.

Of the 120 responses, only one of them included a comment that criticized the petition. It opened with: “I find this petition callous, cold, and it shakes my belief that people are a generally compassionate, kind and empathetic animal. You have no actual evidence to suggest that this project will cause the kind of catastrophic degradation you assume the unwashed and destitute masses will bring your community. However, we can reasonably assume that this project will indeed help support your neighbors who truly need it the most.”

NIMBYism based on false stereotypes about housing for formerly homeless individuals resulted in a misinformation campaign that hurt the legitimacy and potential of the Mercy Housing development. However, apprehension about possible hits to property values, increased congestion, and threats to public safety is unfounded.

In 2016, Trulia, the online residential real estate site, conducted a comprehensive analysis of nationwide home value data to determine whether or not low-income housing projects built nearby houses led to a depreciation of those houses’ property values<sup>63</sup>. The team at Trulia found that, “In the nation’s 20 least affordable markets, our analysis of 3,083 low-income housing projects from 1996 to 2006 found no significant effect on home values located near a low-income housing project, with a few exceptions”<sup>64</sup>. The two exceptions were Boston and Cambridge, Massachusetts, two cities with very different infrastructure and city design compared to Los Angeles. The Center for Housing Policy verified that affordable housing does not lead to a decline in values and that, in some cases, affordable housing can even have a positive impact on property<sup>65</sup>. One of the unifying findings of existing research on housing prices is that the quality of the properties’ design, management, and maintenance impacts property values much more than the type of affordable housing.

Yee, who closely monitored the Temple City case, chalks up the defensiveness of Temple City residents in regard to their property values to the set-up of the current American property system<sup>66</sup>. Yee claims that, for many residents, the act of buying property makes “people feel entitled to the homes...and to the land”<sup>67</sup>. That entitlement might have been part of the reason that Temple City residents felt they should have the final say in the conversion of the Golden Motel<sup>68</sup>, despite the fact that the property was actually located on incorporated Los Angeles county land.

As Mercy Housing points out on their website, most homeless individuals take public transportation, so it is unlikely that the tenants of the permanent supportive housing would have increased traffic.

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<sup>63</sup> Young, Cheryl. “There Doesn’t Go the Neighborhood: Low-Income Housing Has No Impact on Nearby Home Values.” Trulia, 21 May 2018, [www.trulia.com/blog/trends/low-income-housing/](http://www.trulia.com/blog/trends/low-income-housing/).

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> “‘Don’t Put It Here!’: Does Affordable Housing Cause Nearby Property Values to Decline?” Insights from Housing Policy Research, The Center for Housing Policy, [furmancenter.org/files/media/Dont\\_Put\\_It\\_Here.pdf](http://furmancenter.org/files/media/Dont_Put_It_Here.pdf).

<sup>66</sup> Yee, Christopher. Personal Interview. 5 Dec. 2017.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Painter, Gary. Personal Interview. 18 May 2018.



The rhetoric used by Temple City Residents for a Better Living also suggested that the development would bring more violence to the neighborhoods. For instance, Yee says that at City Council meetings and Mercy Housing hearings last year, protesters repeatedly raised the example of a 2015 murder of a young girl in a Mercy Housing facility in Sacramento<sup>69</sup>, treating it like propaganda. However, the Golden Motel was already very crime-ridden. The motel receives about 10 police

calls for service per month, according to data from the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department Temple Station<sup>70</sup>. The Golden Motel already hosted vulnerable or homeless families and individuals<sup>71</sup> when Mercy Housing proposed to turn it into permanent supportive housing, which the opposition campaign surrounding the Mercy Housing development often failed to bring up or discuss.

On a similar note, messaging surrounding the Mercy Housing proposal failed to consider how re-integrating the formerly homeless in society through affordable housing could have a beneficial impact on the Temple City community. Chris Ko, Director of the Homeless Initiative for the United Way of Greater Los Angeles, says formerly homeless people have sometimes been a spark for community redevelopment<sup>72</sup>. The Council to Homeless Persons has been outspoken about their belief that individuals develop better health and healthier routines when living in a safe home, “which results in declining costs of frequent admissions to health and crisis services, as well as correctional and mental health facilitates”<sup>73</sup>. By consequence, taxpayer money can be redirected to other resources for the community and the pressure on overwhelmed care facilities and systems is reduced.

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<sup>69</sup> Smith, Darrell. “Mom of Jadiana Larsen Files Wrongful-Death Suit; 2 Held for Trial.” The Sacramento Bee, 9 Jan. 2017, [www.sacbee.com/news/local/crime/article125520384.html](http://www.sacbee.com/news/local/crime/article125520384.html).

<sup>70</sup> Yee, Christopher. “Application Withdrawn for Veteran, Homeless Housing in Temple City.” San Gabriel Valley Tribune, 30 Aug. 2017, [www.sgvtribune.com/2017/06/19/application-withdrawn-for-veteran-homeless-housing-in-temple-city/](http://www.sgvtribune.com/2017/06/19/application-withdrawn-for-veteran-homeless-housing-in-temple-city/).

<sup>71</sup> “Golden Motel Fight Could Portend Trouble for Homeless Strategy.” Southern California Public Radio, 9 Nov. 2017, [www.scpr.org/news/2017/06/12/72157/how-the-golden-motel-could-portend-trouble-for-hom/](http://www.scpr.org/news/2017/06/12/72157/how-the-golden-motel-could-portend-trouble-for-hom/).

<sup>72</sup> “With Golden Motel Project Kaput, How Can LA Get More Community Buy-in on Future Homeless Housing Projects?” Southern California Public Radio, 22 Aug. 2017, [www.scpr.org/programs/airtalk/2017/06/21/57500/with-golden-motel-project-kaput-how-can-la-get-mor/](http://www.scpr.org/programs/airtalk/2017/06/21/57500/with-golden-motel-project-kaput-how-can-la-get-mor/).

<sup>73</sup> “Ending Homelessness Is Good for the Community.” Council to Homeless Persons, [chp.org.au/homelessness/about-victorias-homelessness-system/how-ending-homelessness-benefits-the-whole-community/](http://chp.org.au/homelessness/about-victorias-homelessness-system/how-ending-homelessness-benefits-the-whole-community/).

Compared to the 4,088 signatures (as of May 14, 2018) on the Change.org petition aimed at stopping the Mercy Housing development<sup>74</sup>, the petition in support of the homeless housing only garnered 417 signatures<sup>75</sup>. What caused such an explosion of resistance in Temple City among community members that would lead to such a staggering contrast? Yes, it is true that Change.org petitions can be signed by all internet users, so it is possible that not all the signatures were from Temple City residents. At the same time, the difference is shocking enough to raise questions about how the messages of Temple City Residents for a Better Living spread faster and wider, especially given that there were respected voices in the neighborhood speaking out in support of the new development, such as Reverend David Palmer<sup>76</sup>, the pastor at the Temple City United Methodist Church. Three major churches, which comprised the five-year-old Coalition for the Homeless in Temple City, backed the Mercy Housing development from the beginning<sup>77</sup>.

Permanent supportive housing projects like the proposed development in Temple City do not usually meet such strong resistance<sup>78</sup>. The resistance was so robust that many stakeholders, including Ed Holder, suspected that the community was organized by a competing developer that wanted to buy the Golden Motel<sup>79</sup>. Yet, May Wang, the Chief Financial Officer of Wang's Golden Enterprises, insists that the Golden Motel will not be bought by another buyer anytime soon and that it will stay a motel now that Mercy Housing has withdrawn their application<sup>80</sup>. So, what influenced the tenacity and intensity of the NIMBYism in Temple City?

## HOW SOCIAL MEDIA, THE NEWS, AND TRADITIONAL COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES MOTIVATED NIMBYISM

Three major factors played a role in the eruption of Temple City's unusually strong resistance: newfangled platforms for social media, the somewhat one-sided coverage of news organizations, and missteps in communication that hurt dialogue and trust with the Temple City community.

### *Mobilizing on Nextdoor, WeChat, and Weibo*

Research on the impact of platforms like Twitter and Facebook on movement-building and activism is well-known. In Temple City, Nextdoor was used to spread concerns and sometimes misinformation about permanent supportive housing developments. Nextdoor is the private

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<sup>74</sup> "Stop the Mercy Housing Homeless Project on Rosemead Blvd!" Change.org, [www.change.org/p/cynthia-sternquist-stop-the-mercy-housing-homeless-project-on-rosemead-blvd](http://www.change.org/p/cynthia-sternquist-stop-the-mercy-housing-homeless-project-on-rosemead-blvd).

<sup>75</sup> "Support Veteran's housing!" Change.org, <https://www.change.org/p/support-veteran-s-housing-on-rosemead-blvd>

<sup>76</sup> Palmer, David. Personal Interview. 5 Dec. 2017.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

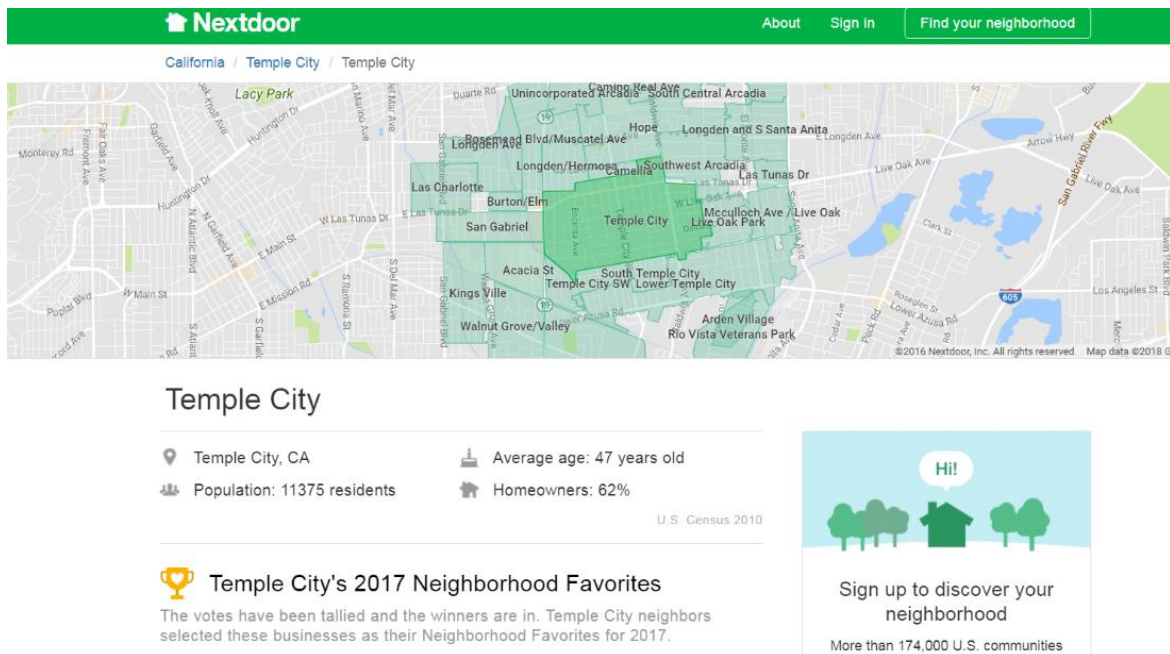
<sup>78</sup> Holder, Ed. Personal Interview. 15 Nov. 2017.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Although the owners of Wang's Golden Enterprises did not agree to participate in an extensive interview with the CCLP team, May Wang did assure us during a phone call on May 17, 2018, that the owners did not have any plans to sell the Golden Motel in the near future.



social network for neighborhoods, where approved members with a verified address within the neighborhood can post about anything from items for sale to crime alerts. The Temple City profile on Nextdoor says that residents value Temple City because it is “safe”, “family friendly”, “clean”, and “quiet”, a community image that residents prized and guarded.



According to an interview with Reverend Palmer, a dramatic dialogue about the Mercy Housing proposal unfolded on the platform, behind the private protections of Nextdoor<sup>81</sup>. It started when Temple City Residents for a Better Living posted their petition opposing the development on Nextdoor and it quickly garnered 500 signatures in a short period of time.

When Palmer, the lead sponsor of the petition in support of the conversion of the Golden Motel, posted his counter-petition in May, he recalls that, “It quickly escalated because, then, as I posted this petition on Nextdoor, the opposition groups started posting pretty nasty counter responses”<sup>82</sup>. During the interview, Palmer described how, at one point, there was a comment posted by a man that said, “Pastor David Palmer feeds the poor and is responsible for the stabbing that happened in the park last month”<sup>83</sup>. Palmer characterized the comment as a prime example of the correlation made between the Mercy Housing proposal and crime in the city<sup>84</sup>.

On the organizing power of Nextdoor, Dr. Takahashi said in an interview, “Nextdoor has enabled people to get the word out much more quickly. It’s a much more efficient way to get out

<sup>81</sup> Palmer, David. Personal Interview. 5 Dec. 2017.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

information, or inaccurate misinterpretations”<sup>85</sup>. The ability to create crisis through channels like Nextdoor has made it much more difficult for developers like Mercy Housing to have an open-minded and calm conversation once invested groups arrive to present at City Council meetings. In her research on stigma towards individuals with AIDs, which bears a striking resemblance to bias towards homeless people, Dr. Takahashi has found that legislation and policy (like Proposition HHH or Measure H) is not enough to build up acceptance<sup>86</sup>. Instead, the tone of discussions surrounding AIDs is what defines how communities feel towards the disease<sup>87</sup>.



While harassment between community members continued on NextDoor, opposition groups continued to organize on platforms such as WeChat and Weibo<sup>88</sup>. The platforms allowed Temple City Residents for a Better Living to build momentum outside of the public eye, and little to no engagement from the groups that supported the Mercy Housing development took place on WeChat and Weibo. There were no fact checks on the misinformation spread on the social media platforms and the lack of communication online may have signaled to the protesting community members that Mercy Housing and the LA city government did not have an understanding of the community. The group San Gabriel Valley Concerned Residents also circulated photos of

<sup>85</sup> Takahashi, Lois. Personal Interview. 16 May 2018.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> 金悅酒店改建案流產 社區團結抗議成關鍵. Sing Tao Daily, 20 June 2017.

homeless individuals outside of a Mercy Housing residence in San Francisco<sup>89</sup> that were used to raise worry about parents with children that might be attending the schools near to the Golden Motel.

Both Mercy Housing and the groups advocating for the development, such as United Way, failed to understand that passionate opposition was festering online, which may explain why Mercy Housing representatives felt like the resistance to the project arrived out of nowhere.

Ed Holder remarked in CCLP's interview with him that nonprofit developers need to "create settings where people can engage in real conversations"<sup>90</sup>. However, the real problem may be that nonprofit developers and advocates for homeless housing need to meet community residents in places where they feel most comfortable engaging in dialogue, whether that be at poorly-attended public hearings or on language-specific social media platforms.

### *The Role of the News Media*

The *San Gabriel Valley Tribune* and Curbed Los Angeles covered the protests in Temple City more closely than other publications. Published stories about the Mercy Housing proposal were sometimes picked up or referenced in outlets like the Los Angeles Times and the Pasadena-Star News, but for the most part, the Temple City case study was covered by local papers. As mentioned before, it is important to consider how the tone of coverage and the amount of coverage might have affected the strength of NIMBYism in Temple City.

The San Gabriel Valley Tribune ran five articles that were dedicated to the Temple City-Mercy Housing case. In each of the five, the majority of the articles discussed resident opposition to the project and failed to highlight the attitudes and actions of those Temple City residents in support of the project. The Tribune and other local news organizations failed to cover the events hosted in support of the housing development. Support groups in Temple City hosted two notable public events: an open seminar on homelessness with the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority and a demonstration at the motel itself to advertise their approval of the Mercy Housing development<sup>91</sup>. Yet, as



<sup>89</sup> "Letter to the Temple City Unified School District Board of Education." 5 June 2017.

<sup>90</sup> Holder, Ed. Personal Interview. 15 Nov. 2017.

<sup>91</sup> Palmer, David. Personal Interview. 5 Dec. 2017.

far as can be seen from online research, neither of the events were covered by news outlets. As a result, the opposition groups were given a better platform to articulate and voice their concerns.

Some of the articles even referenced the petition sponsored by the opposition groups but lacked any mention of the petition published to gather signatures in support of the development. One of the articles, “El Monte starts construction on affordable housing project for veterans, leaders criticize Temple City residents who helped kill similar plan,”<sup>92</sup> published on November 16, 2017, used a successful development to place blame on the Temple City community.

The language used by Curbed Los Angeles also made the Mercy Housing development in Temple City sound like an impossible task, which may have discouraged supporters and empowered dissenters. An article published after the fact mentioned Temple City briefly: “Earlier this year, Temple City residents successfully blocked the conversion of a local motel to housing for homeless residents and veterans, with some arguing it would bring “drugs [and] violence” to the area”<sup>93</sup>. First of all, no mention was made of the successful development in El Monte, right next door. Secondly, the article oversimplified the case study, forgoing any description of the issues Mercy Housing faced due to budget and timeline.

According to Dr. Gary Painter, the Director of the Homelessness Policy Research Institute at USC, data is “a necessary, but not sufficient condition for convincing populations”<sup>94</sup> that permanent supportive housing is a must. From requirements such as using “homeless” as an adjective instead of as a noun to weaving stories that better humanize the veterans or families or artists that would live in the permanent supportive housing development, there are many changes that journalists need to make to report on homeless housing in a progressive and forward-thinking manner. Dr. Painter recommends that newspapers do a better job of emphasizing a community’s positive reaction to a development instead of a community’s negative reaction<sup>95</sup>.

It is important to consider not just how the leaders of the resistance movement spread false information and propaganda about permanent supportive housing, but also how the media and news organizations may have influenced Temple City residents. More coverage of the resistance sparked more attention and more pressure on Mercy Housing.

Social media and online organizing are changing the way that developers engage with a community, as well as the ways that neighborhoods mobilize against developments. In Los Angeles, land is scarce and permanent supportive housing is needed urgently, so nonprofit developers cannot afford to make mistakes or to alienate the communities in which they build.

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<sup>92</sup> Yee, Christopher. “El Monte Starts Construction on Affordable Housing Project for Veterans, Leaders Criticize Temple City Residents Who Helped Kill Similar Plan.” San Gabriel Valley Tribune, 17 Nov. 2017, [www.sgvtribune.com/2017/11/16/as-el-monte-starts-construction-on-affordable-housing-project-for-veterans-leaders-criticize-temple-city-residents-who-helped-kill-similar-plan/](http://www.sgvtribune.com/2017/11/16/as-el-monte-starts-construction-on-affordable-housing-project-for-veterans-leaders-criticize-temple-city-residents-who-helped-kill-similar-plan/).

<sup>93</sup> Chiland, Elijah. Temple City Residents Are Fighting Housing Project for the Homeless. Curbed LA, 4 May 2017, [la.curbed.com/2017/5/4/15546344/temple-city-homeless-veteran-housing-project-opposition](http://la.curbed.com/2017/5/4/15546344/temple-city-homeless-veteran-housing-project-opposition).

<sup>94</sup> Painter, Gary. Personal Interview. 18 May 2018.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.



Some areas feel disproportionately over-burdened by developments for formerly homeless individuals because of the “unfair distribution of government services and shelters”<sup>96</sup>, so in the future, developers need to tread lightly and take into consideration the history and political dynamics of the intended development area. The next section identifies precautions or advance actions that can be taken by developers to prevent the spread of misinformation and to build rapport with a community.

### *Missteps in Mercy Housing Strategic Communications*

Overall, Mercy Housing worked hard to assuage the concerns of the community. Lucy Liou, one of the organizers of the opposition, continued to assert after the withdrawal of the Mercy Housing petition that representatives had not addressed key issues, like the healthcare and employment needs of Mercy Housing residents<sup>97</sup>. However, the Mercy Housing website clearly outlines the health and wellness and financial stability services available to residents at facilities<sup>98</sup>. And according to Doug Shoemaker, the President of Mercy Housing California, Mercy Housing set up an additional response website that outlined solutions to each Temple City-specific concern<sup>99</sup>. Furthermore, when the skepticism of the Temple City community became apparent, Mercy Housing started to offer tours of their facility at the thriving El Monte Veterans Village<sup>100</sup>. While some critics did attend the tours and Mercy Housing continued to participate in community meetings about the development, it didn’t seem to dampen the passionate and determined opposition<sup>101</sup>.

The claims by residents like Lucy Liou demonstrate the deep apprehension and suspicion, enhanced by social media and the news, that eventually undermined the trust between Mercy Housing and Temple City community members. Despite all of the reactive outreach by Mercy Housing to respond to protestors’ apprehension, the developer could have taken more proactive steps to:

- Properly inform the residents of Temple City about the development
- Engage with community groups that could have thrown their weight behind the conversion
- Better understand the needs of the community

As far as low-hanging fruit goes, Mercy Housing only missed a few. Mercy Housing admitted they did not sufficiently notify the surrounding residences, which is required. But more importantly, the notices were distributed only in English, not in Chinese or Spanish. In a town

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<sup>96</sup> Takahashi, Lois. Personal Interview. 17 May 2018.

<sup>97</sup> “With Golden Motel Project Kaput, How Can LA Get More Community Buy-in on Future Homeless Housing Projects?” Southern California Public Radio, 22 Aug. 2017, [www.scpr.org/programs/airtalk/2017/06/21/57500/with-golden-motel-project-kaput-how-can-la-get-mor/](http://www.scpr.org/programs/airtalk/2017/06/21/57500/with-golden-motel-project-kaput-how-can-la-get-mor/).

<sup>98</sup> “Resident Services.” Mercy Housing. <https://www.mercyhousing.org/Resident-Services>

<sup>99</sup> Shoemaker, Doug. Personal communication. 23 June 2018.

<sup>100</sup> Holder, Ed. Personal Interview. 15 Nov. 2017.

<sup>101</sup> Holder, Ed. Personal Interview. 15 Nov. 2017.

where 40.7% of the population lives in homes where the primary language spoken is Chinese<sup>102</sup> and 11.9% of the population lives in homes where the primary language spoken is Spanish<sup>103</sup>, not distributing notification flyers in multiple languages left many residents without any information on the development. The result was that many community members reported feeling left out of the loop or purposefully unaware by Mercy Housing.

The San Gabriel Valley Concerned Residents, one of the opposition groups, then took it upon themselves to circulate their own notification letters in English, Spanish, and Chinese that strongly advised residents to oppose the development<sup>104</sup>. The flyers falsely advertised, “Your new homeless neighbors, according to the developer, must have substance use disorder [drugs], serious mental illness, PTSD, or some other “disability” in order to live there. This project will have a huge impact on your family’s safety, your city’s reputation and your property values”<sup>105</sup> and then urged readers to donate to the legal battle against Mercy Housing.

Secondly, Mercy Housing should have made a better effort to partner with, or at least get in touch with, groups in the community that could have been allies. Reverend Palmer, one of the leaders of the city’s Coalition for the Homeless, recalled that the first time he learned about the development was through an email about the petition for those that opposing the new housing<sup>106</sup>. In the interview, he said he remembered feeling shocked and thinking to himself, “That’s really strange, I didn’t know there was a housing development going on”<sup>107</sup>. It is possible that if Reverend Palmer had been notified ahead of time, he would have been able to create and post the counter-petition before the opposition group petition gained too much traction to be stopped.

As far as interviews have revealed, there were also no overtures made by Mercy Housing to powerful groups in the community, such as the Temple City Chinese American Association. If each group had been consulted and spoken to individually, Mercy Housing representatives may have had more time to reason with concerned residents.

The biggest misstep in the Mercy Housing plan in Temple City, failing to earn the trust of Temple City, was probably the most fatal. It is going to become even more crucial in the future that developers fully understand the communities in which they are working, from knowing which languages to distribute flyers in to earning the trust of those with real influence. For instance, Reverend Palmer suggested that the nuns who spoke on behalf of Mercy Housing at community meetings, “may have misunderstood what it meant to be vulnerable in Temple City”<sup>108</sup>. As a result, the Temple City residents struggled to relate to the mission of Mercy

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<sup>102</sup> “Languages in Temple City, California (City).” Statistical Atlas, [statisticalatlas.com/place/California/Temple-City/Languages](https://statisticalatlas.com/place/California/Temple-City/Languages).

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> *San Gabriel Valley Concerned Residents*. <https://www.sgvcr.org/>

<sup>105</sup> “Say NO to the Homeless Housing Project on Rosemead Blvd & Longden Ave!” *San Gabriel Valley Concerned Residents*. <https://www.sgvcr.org/>

<sup>106</sup> Palmer, David. Personal Interview. 5 Dec. 2017.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Palmer, David. Personal Interview. 5 Dec. 2017.

Housing and they did not invest emotionally or culturally in the project. Palmer's point raises questions about who nonprofit developers should choose to represent them in front of skeptical audiences.

Another example of the disconnect between Mercy Housing communication and Temple City resident beliefs is the standing of the Golden Motel. As discussed above, the Golden Motel was afflicted by scandal and crime when Mercy Housing pinpointed the location for their new development, partly at the recommendation of local officials. The conversion of the Golden Motel would have been in line with the policy approach of Los Angeles city government, which voted in April of 2018 to remove zoning ordinance obstacles that formerly prevented motel owners from turning their properties into shelters for the homeless<sup>109</sup>. During debates about the Temple City property, Mercy Housing sometimes relied on the crime-ridden image of the Golden Motel to justify their choice to convert the motel<sup>110</sup>. Unfortunately, many of the protestors had newly emigrated to Temple City and were unaware of the motel's reputation or did not identify the Golden Motel as poorly managed<sup>111</sup>.

Since Mercy Housing's development rationale did not match the experience or understanding of the community, the development felt fast-tracked by residents, as if something bad was being forced into the community<sup>112</sup>. Something similar is happening in Koreatown now, where residents feel that the city government is lying to the neighborhood to justify a development for the homeless. In future research, it would be interesting to dive into the situation in Koreatown and to explore how many Korean-speaking employees or consultants are employed by the nonprofit development there.

Dr. Takahashi claims that the homeless services that have been really successful in her experience were those that had embedded themselves in community<sup>113</sup>. The Mercy Housing case shows that developers can no longer expect more empathy or support because the housing will home veterans<sup>114</sup>, just as it demonstrates that it is insufficient for nonprofit developers to solely rely on their good reputations. Instead, they must think about how they can be good community members.

In the Temple City case, this could have come in the form of community benefits agreements between Mercy Housing and Temple City, or in promising to include retail space in the facility

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<sup>109</sup> Chou, Elizabeth. "LA Approves Fast-Tracker Plan to Build Homeless Housing, Convert Motels into Temporary Shelters." Los Angeles Daily News, 13 Apr. 2018, [www.dailynews.com/2018/04/11/la-approves-fast-tracked-process-to-build-homeless-housing-convert-motels-into-temporary-shelters-2/](http://www.dailynews.com/2018/04/11/la-approves-fast-tracked-process-to-build-homeless-housing-convert-motels-into-temporary-shelters-2/).

<sup>110</sup> Holder, Ed. Personal Interview. 15 Nov. 2017.

<sup>111</sup> Palmer, David. Personal Interview. 5 Dec. 2017.

<sup>112</sup> "With Golden Motel Project Kaput, How Can LA Get More Community Buy-in on Future Homeless Housing Projects?" Southern California Public Radio, 22 Aug. 2017, [www.scpr.org/programs/airtalk/2017/06/21/57500/with-golden-motel-project-kaput-how-can-la-get-mor/](http://www.scpr.org/programs/airtalk/2017/06/21/57500/with-golden-motel-project-kaput-how-can-la-get-mor/).

<sup>113</sup> Takahashi, Lois. Personal Interview. 17 May 2018.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

(like in Boyle Heights<sup>115</sup>), or in the vocal promise that Mercy Housing would employ and train local residents to create more job opportunities. Given that the Golden Motel already houses vulnerable and low-income families, maybe Mercy Housing could have converted the motel into a better-managed facility for those same families to reassure Temple City residents that strangers would not be arriving in the town. Considering what the town needs the most, like a senior home for low-income seniors for instance, is a potential form of compromise for future nonprofit developers.

### *Communication Innovations and Recommendations on Boosting Community Buy-In*

In general, cities and neighborhoods almost never wholeheartedly embrace permanent supportive housing for the homeless beforehand. Any successful campaign for a development requires positive messaging, outreach, and some amount of mutual understanding. The following section provides examples of goals that nonprofit developers, like Mercy Housing, can aim for when trying to clearly communicate the importance of a new project, as well as recommendations on how to boost community buy-in through collaboration and solicitation.

Oddly enough, as of May 2018, Mercy Housing California did not have any mention of the Golden Motel or Temple City on their Facebook page. If residents of Temple City were looking for information on social media, they could not find any news from the developer itself. Around the same time as Mercy Housing worked with the Planning Commission on moving the conversion of the motel forward, the Facebook Page talked extensively about another project that Mercy Housing was involved in in San Francisco. As a result, there was a disparity between how Mercy Housing presented themselves in person and how Mercy Housing presented themselves on social media.

Facebook posts are a small step in raising support for a project and there are many other measurements that a nonprofit developer can use to gauge positive awareness by a community. For instance, how many public officials have spoken out in support of the development? If Temple City City Council members supported the Mercy Housing development, they were not outspoken about it. In fact, according to meeting minutes, the City Council members directed the City Attorney's office to investigate the project<sup>116</sup>, the opposite of a vote of confidence. The meeting minutes also asserted that the council met in a closed session to discuss "anticipated litigation" relating to Mercy Housing, an ominous statement that showed the antagonism against the developer. It is also important to integrate words of support from prominent nonprofits like United Way in messaging and marketing surrounding developments.

Nonprofit developers should consider other ways to invite community stakeholders into the fold. Previous research has revealed that when community groups are closely involved in communication strategy, it helps them take ownership of the initiative of development rather

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<sup>115</sup> Chiland, Elijah. Boyle Heights Affordable Housing Complex Nearly Set to Rise on Metro-Owned Land. Curbed LA, 30 Nov. 2017, [la.curbed.com/2017/11/29/16717720/boyle-heights-affordable-housing-metro](http://la.curbed.com/2017/11/29/16717720/boyle-heights-affordable-housing-metro).

<sup>116</sup> "Regular Meeting Minutes." June 20, 2017. Temple City City Council. <https://ci.temple-city.ca.us/DocumentCenter/View/8738/CC-Minutes---2017-06-20?bidId=>



than seeing themselves as inheritors of the development. Developers can show community members that their input is valued by appointing a task force or speaking with them in informal, unstructured time outside of public meetings. In the Temple City case, Mercy Housing might have worked with the General Plan Advisory Committee to integrate language about supporting permanent supportive housing into the Temple City Mid-Century Plan<sup>117</sup>. Temple City is in the middle of updating their city's mission, goals, and zoning laws, for the first time since 1987, and the city has a unique opportunity to distinguish themselves as an ambitious and progressive force in combatting homelessness. By identifying influential people, like the Community Development Director in Temple City, nonprofit developers can make local allies that will help carry a project forward.

It is only fair to mention that many of these strategies require additional resources and time, which are often hard to come by for nonprofit developers.

## **SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

The case study of the Golden Motel reveals holes in the existing research on homelessness and permanent supportive housing.

For instance, very little is known about the homelessness crisis in Asian American communities, a knowledge gap that may exist because Asians reportedly make-up around one percent of the homeless population in Los Angeles. However, the lack of research on the subject may also be due to the phenomenon of hidden homelessness<sup>118</sup>; many reporters and writers have suggested that the number of Asian homeless is much higher than the official count says<sup>119</sup>. As a result, poverty is often disguised from the public and inside Asian communities. More research on the subject could suggest whether or not that reality had an impact on how the protestors in Temple City, a high percentage of which were Asian, perceived the Mercy Housing proposal.

It would also be beneficial to see more research on how ingroup and outgroup theory affect the attitudes of NIMBYs and community members in regards to homelessness. Are there ways in which mitigating ingroup bias and favoritism might encourage more support among communities for permanent supportive housing? Homeless individuals have other identities and belong to other groups besides the homeless population, yet they are mainly identified by their housing status. Studies have already shown that association with homeless "social groups" hinders the ability of homeless individuals to connect with other social groups, based on other identities<sup>120</sup>.

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<sup>117</sup> "Temple City Mid-Century Plan." 2050 MakeTHappen, 2014, maketchappen.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/CommunityProfile\_FINAL.pdf.

<sup>118</sup> Green, Carla. "Counting America's Hidden Homeless." Al Jazeera, 1 Feb. 2017, [www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2017/01/counting-america-hidden-homeless-170131105914895.html](http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2017/01/counting-america-hidden-homeless-170131105914895.html).

<sup>119</sup> Jeung, Russell. "What the Homelessness Crisis in Asian-American Communities Reveals About Ourselves." Sojourners, 5 June 2017, [sojo.net/articles/what-homelessness-crisis-asian-american-communities-reveals-about-ourselves](http://sojo.net/articles/what-homelessness-crisis-asian-american-communities-reveals-about-ourselves).

<sup>120</sup> Johnstone, Melissa, et al. "Discrimination and well-being amongst the homeless: the role of multiple group membership." U.S. National Library of Medicine, 2015, [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4450171/](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4450171/).

In the Temple City case study, did ingroup bias play a role in community distrust of Mercy Housing? As in, did the community feel that Mercy Housing had intruded? It is also possible to imagine that protestors' fear of the possible residents of the facility might have derived from an incorrect assumption that all of the residents would come from outside of the community.

Lastly, nonprofit developers could always benefit from more statistics and stories of how permanent supportive housing has positively changed communities. Studies like the Trulia one, referenced above, are important for creating a constructive narrative and dispelling the stigma around homelessness.

## **CONCLUSION: NAVIGATING NIMBYISM IN THE FUTURE AND MOVING TOWARDS ACCEPTANCE OF AFFORDABLE HOUSING**

There are a number of creative solutions out there for combatting homelessness that can be tweaked to fight NIMBYism and bias as well. For example, the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors just approved a pilot program to encourage homeowners to build guesthouses in their backyards for homeless individuals<sup>121</sup>. The creative use of land may also suggest ways to increase awareness about and exposure to homeless individuals, so that families learn how to interact and engage with the individuals as part of their daily lives. In another example, old parking lots are quickly being covered by temporary trailers for homeless people<sup>122</sup>, so that Los Angeles homeless constituents no longer live on the streets. The temporary trailers may pose a good short-term alternative to permanent developments that are often delayed by protests from NIMBYs.

The county of Los Angeles is working hard on solving the problem created by a lack of affordable housing, but the work must go hand-in-hand with education that discourages NIMBYism and more positive communication and messaging that decreases stigma against the homeless population. Letters of support for the project in Temple City were plentiful<sup>123</sup>, but the news rarely covered the letters and social media strongly promoted opposition narratives<sup>124</sup>. The county should actively empower faith coalitions, like the one in Temple City, as they partner with faith nonprofits like LA Voice to end homelessness.

Last year, three months after Mercy Housing withdrew their petition to convert the Golden Motel, \$20 million in new funding was added to the City's Supportive Housing Loan Fund (SHLF), lifting its total available funding to \$60 million in support of the Mayor's goal to build

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<sup>121</sup> Holland, Gale. "L.A. County Wants to Help Build Guest Houses in Backyards - for Homeless People." Los Angeles Times, 11 Apr. 2018, [www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-ln-homeless-tiny-house-20180411-story.html](http://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-ln-homeless-tiny-house-20180411-story.html).

<sup>122</sup> Smith, Dakota, et al. "Temporary Trailers for Homeless People Planned on Downtown City Lot." Los Angeles Times, 16 Jan. 2018, [www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-ln-housing-trailers-20180116-story.html](http://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-ln-housing-trailers-20180116-story.html).

<sup>123</sup> "Temple City Housing for the Homeless and Veterans: Letters." Pasadena Star News, 28 Aug. 2017, [www.pasadenastarnews.com/2017/05/05/temple-city-housing-for-the-homeless-and-veterans-letters/](http://www.pasadenastarnews.com/2017/05/05/temple-city-housing-for-the-homeless-and-veterans-letters/).

<sup>124</sup> Visit <http://krcla.org/en/post/895> for more examples of letters of support.

1,000 new units of permanent supportive housing each year<sup>125</sup>. But for permanent supportive housing for all to become a reality, nonprofit developers and policymakers must learn the dangers of contemporary Los Angeles NIMBYism and important lessons in communication strategies and messaging.

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<sup>125</sup> “Mayor Garcetti Announces the Expansion of the City's Supportive Housing Loan Fund.” Office of Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti, 19 Sept. 2017, [www.lamayor.org/mayor-garcetti-announces-expansion-citys-supportive-housing-loan-fund](http://www.lamayor.org/mayor-garcetti-announces-expansion-citys-supportive-housing-loan-fund).