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A draconian idea for more high-rise housing in our cities

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Suburban residents on the SF Peninsula may possibly be faced with draconian state rules that will dictate how dense and high housing must be built in areas near Caltrain stops and major bus stops – if a newly introduced Senate Bill 50 is adopted.

Specifically, SB 50 prevents cities from allowing low-level residences within a half-mile near a transit hub, such as a Caltrain station or VTA bus stop. It raises height limit requirements to 45 feet, about four stories, within a half-mile of the station or major bus stop, and 55 feet or five stories within a quarter mile. It also eliminates minimum parking requirements for new developments, which means apartments can be built without providing any accompanying parking space needs. In Palo Alto, dwellers would have to park their cars on already overparked city streets near the downtown and Cal Ave stations.

A half-mile is a circular radius of 2,625 feet, meaning at California Avenue that would affect all housing properties all the way from the station eastward to about Waverley Street, according to my car odometer, and westward beyond El Camino. Four-story residences would be required; five stories closer to the tracks. Ditto for the downtown area. That's why I call this a draconian proposal. This state law would trump local zoning restrictions and concerns and would not allow local governments to preempt this state law.

The suburban quality of our city, I submit, would be drastically changed. High-rise buildings would abound.

The bill, the More HOMES (Housing, Opportunity, Mobility Equity and Stability) Act is being sponsored by Sen. Scott Weiner, D-San Francisco, who attempted similar legislation last year that never got out of committee. But Weiner says that housing attitudes have changed this year and he is optimistic his bill will pass. Suburban communities aren't doing their job to solve housing problems, Weiner implied, so the state must find a solution, and he said he has found one.

Palo Alto Councilman Adrian Fine, a zealot for more dense, transit-oriented housing, told the Daily Post that he is providing input into Weiner's bill, at the senator's request. Fine told the Post that the state needs to step in because "local councils and the idolatry around local control are not going to solve our housing issue."

Perhaps not, but Weiner's proposal for higher density housing doesn't even deal with resulting traffic and parking woes. Housing is an interrelated problem with traffic and parking -- not the only issue.

The council at first blush seems divided on this issue. Yet Councilman Eric Filseth is already opposed to it, labeling it "dumb."

At issue here is not only the additional high-rises that would pop up, but also the amazing absence of any ability to locally control the state building requirements. And local control has always been an integral part of the city's efforts to regulate not only zoning but the kind of density this city wants.

I certainly understand and agree with the need for more affordable housing in Palo Alto, but Weiner's bill – and his zealotry – is the wrong way to go.