Subject: Neighborhood Comp Plan Opposition Flyer & The Abundance Agenda Response
Attachments: Upzoning - letter to neighbors w_ endnotes.pdf

From: Brian Chambers
Sent: Saturday, March 15, 2025 10:22 AM
To: Planning <Planning@a2gov.org>; Lenart, Brett <BLenart@a2gov.org>; Stacey <Stacey@interface-studio.com>; jamie@interface-studio.com; Carolyn Lusch <carolyn.lusch@smithgroup.com>; Oliver Kiley <oliver.kiley@smithgroup.com>
Cc: Dohoney Jr., Milton <MDohoney@a2gov.org>; Taylor, Christopher (Mayor) <CTaylor@a2gov.org>; Ghazi Edwin, Ayesha <AGhaziEdwin@a2gov.org>; Radina, Travis <TRadina@a2gov.org>; Jen Eyer <jeneyer@gmail.com>; City Council <CityCouncil@a2gov.org>
Subject: Neighborhood Comp Plan Opposition Flyer & The Abundance Agenda Response

Dear Comprehensive Plan Project and City Leaders: (Brett, please share this with the Planning Commission):

I am sharing this information, so you are all aware of a segment of the Ann Arbor community organizing against the recent updates to the Comprehensive Plan, such as using Form-based Zoning and 48' heights for Low Rise Residential.

The attached flyer, "**Upzoning - letter to neighbors**" being distributed speaks for itself.

The main thrust of their critique appears to be that the new provisions are being done for the benefit of developers and city tax revenues, and not the interests of current residents (at least those who object to density increases), nor to necessarily build more subsidized, affordable housing at scale.

Recently, I was interviewed on the **15-minute Neighborhood** objective by a reporter from Concentrate. In the interview, I made sure they had the 'complete neighborhood' analyses done by the Comp Plan project last fall. He came back and asked if these land use reform initiatives by the City and Council could be considered examples of the "Abundance Agenda" as outlined by Klein and Thompson in their 2025 book, **Abundance**.

See: https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2025/03/10/abundance-ezra-klein-derek-thompson-book-review

My response was an emphatic ***yes***, the City and Council are calling for a reimagined and efficient City government that actively facilitates growth and innovation.

This is reflected in their charge to the Comprehensive Land Use Plan project, creating the Economic Development office, and bringing on board Joe Giant, as the Director. You are also working to remove unnecessary regulatory obstacles by having more 'by right' development, and implementing strategic regulations that enhance supply and competition. For example, your revamping of the development approval process is to create a more effective way for non-traditional

developers to work on projects in the City, is an example of increasing competition in our local housing market.

However, there is a **'progressive' critique** of the 'abundance agenda' which is worth noting so that the communications on the Comprehensive Plan may better and proactively engage in respect to it. That critique reflects what you are reading in the attached neighborhood flyer. Progressive critics fear that the *Abundance Agenda* rhetoric could be used to justify a corporate-friendly deregulation push.

Progressive Critique of Abundance Agenda:

- Some progressives may view *Abundance* as overly focused on supply-side solutions that emphasize efficiency and production without adequate concern for redistributive justice.
- The critique might be that it leans too heavily on reducing regulatory barriers rather than strengthening neighborhood protections, environmental safeguards, or community-led decision-making.
- Progressives could also argue that expanding production in housing might still fail to benefit marginalized communities if those gains are not distributed equitably.

Response from Abundance Advocates:

- Advocates can emphasize that abundance is not an alternative to equity—it's a necessary precondition for it. A society with more housing and abundant energy will make it easier to enact equity and inclusion policies. The **Renters Commission** in Ann Arbor is an example of this, as well as police reform initiatives, let alone simplifying our development project review processes to reduce the cost and risk to housing development projects.
- The *Abundance Agenda* does not advocate for deregulation across the board, but rather for **smarter** regulations that streamline development while maintaining worker rights, environmental protections, and affordability measures. **Labor rights initiatives by Council** should also be highlighted.
- The approach aligns with progressive priorities by removing artificial scarcity that disproportionately harms lower-income and marginalized communities.

Anyways, I try to provide recommended messaging and communications on these policy initiatives when I write to you.

Minimally, I want you all to be aware of the nature of a segment of the community organizing against the Comp Plan objectives and provisions on creating the context for sizable increases to Ann Arbor's housing supply, and what might constitute a rejoinder by the City to that critique

Best regards for equity-based, sustainable development,

Brian

PROPOSED ZONING CHANGES AFFECTING EBERWHITE

Dear Neighbor,

Ann Arbor is currently drafting a new Comprehensive Land Use Plan. As presently proposed, the Plan authorizes a rezoning of all residential neighborhoods throughout the city into a single residential zone.

This "upzoning" (as it is called) will allow, in all residential areas, substantial increases in housing density and expanded commercial uses.

According to recent statements made by the city planning officials, proposed changes to residential neighborhoods include:
(1) allowing multiplexes up to 4 stories (48') high, and
(2) expanding commercial uses in residential zones.

1. Multiplexes up to 4 Stories (48') High, with an Unlimited Number of Units and an Expansive Building Footprint

Under the proposed Plan, all existing residential zones will be eliminated and combined into a single, new zone, called the "Low Rise Residential" zone. The new "Low Rise Residential" zone will allow single-family homes to be razed and replaced with multiplex apartment housing, allowing developers to:

- build multiplexes up to 4 stories (48') on all residential lots,
- split or combine lots in all residential neighborhoods,
- include as many units as possible in buildings,
- provide no on-site parking, and
- construct buildings that will take up a greater portion of the lot.[1]

The goal is to build "4 stories, no limit or regulation by number of units," according to Ann Arbor Senior Planner Michelle Bennett.[2]

Ann Arbor Planning Manager Brett Lenart summarized the general consensus of the Planning Commission, stating that the proposed Plan "allows an unlimited amount of units, likely in a four story-ish scale."[3]

Ann Arbor Planning Commissioner Donnell Wyche was emphatic in his support for 4-story multiplexes at 48' high. Wyche added that he would welcome "12-flat" multiplexes in his residential neighborhood.[4]

Focusing on the practical and economic concerns of developers, Ann Arbor Planning Commission Chair Wonwoo Lee noted that it is more "economically feasible" for developers to build 4-story buildings than 2-story.[5]

"Let's push the height limit," Ann Arbor Planning Commissioner Sara Hammerschmidt added, confirming her support for 48'-high multiplexes.[6]

Lenart added that the proposed building-footprint size could be "as broad and expansive as possible."[7]

As an example of a building-footprint size that the Plan would allow in any residential neighborhood, Lenart pointed to Lockwood, a 3-story multiplex with 154 units and a building footprint of over 61,000 square feet, located at 2195 E. Ellsworth in Ann Arbor. As Lenart explained, "If Lockwood goes into a [residential] neighborhood, that's fine."[8]

Lenart also cited The George apartments at 2502 Packard Street in Ann Arbor as an example of what would be possible in any residential neighborhood if the city allowed a slightly higher height of 49':

The George, Packard St., Ann Arbor

2. "More Housing, as Much Housing as Possible, Everywhere"

The Planning Commission no longer wants to pursue a "gentle density" approach, but instead wants to "maximize housing opportunities" in all the residential neighborhoods in Ann Arbor.[9]

Planning Commissioner Ellie Abrons urged, "More housing, as much housing as possible, everywhere."[10]

According to Lenart, there are currently 53,637 housing units in Ann Arbor.[11] Lenart said that the new Plan has the potential to supply an additional 30,000-97,000 new units.[12]

3. Expansion of Commercial Businesses in All the Residential Neighborhoods

City Council also said that it wants to allow commercial businesses, such as restaurants, in all residential neighborhoods.[13]

Lenart recently proposed, under the new Plan, to have "commercial businesses on every corner" of Ann Arbor's residential neighborhoods.[14]

4. The Plan Will Result in a Loss of Trees and Increase in Impervious Surfaces

Ann Arbor's tree canopy is likely to be substantially decreased as a result of the proposed Plan.[15] The Plan will also lead to an increase in impervious surfaces, resulting in environmental harm to streams and rivers.

5. The Plan Will Not Create Affordable Housing

Bennett expressly acknowledged that the city's "upzoning" Plan will **NOT** lower home prices or create affordable housing for middle- or lower-income households. Bennett stated that, to the contrary, housing prices are likely to continue to increase after the proposed upzoning, and that the "best-case scenario" would be that the rate of the increase might slow.[16]

Lisa Disch, City Council Member and liaison to the Planning Commission, acknowledged that allowing greater density in residential neighborhoods doesn't mean housing prices are going to come down. In Ann Arbor, "We are seeing [price increases] happen, for example, along Ashley," she said. "There's a *lot* of greater density there, and it is *really* expensive housing."[17]

Bennett also acknowledged at a February 2025 meeting with residents that where upzoning has been tried in numerous other cities, it has almost universally failed to lower home prices and has not created affordable housing.

In fact, upzoning has typically caused home prices to rise, because developers, seeking to maximize their profits, replace smaller, more affordable homes and apartments with high-end, luxury condos and expensive apartments.

6. Why Is the City Pursuing Upzoning Instead of Working to Produce Affordable Housing?

There are many homeowners and renters in Ann Arbor who are concerned about the housing plights of struggling students and low- and middle-income workers. Many residents want the city to explore ways to curb spiraling rent increases, and to assist low- and middle-income workers toward home ownership (through mortgage assistance, low-income loans, or otherwise).

The city's headlong embrace of profit-driven development will defeat those goals and make it even harder for students and workers to find affordable housing.

7. Elimination of the State's Annual Cap on Property Tax Increases

To encourage rapid development, the City Council Policy Agenda Committee recently stated that it wants to change property taxation in Ann Arbor by working to overturn the state's Headlee Amendment and institute split-rate property taxes. (See City of Ann Arbor Policy Agenda for Fiscal Year 2025 at pp. 2-3, attached to the agenda for the 2/24/25 meeting of the City Council Policy Agenda Committee, at http://a2gov.legistar.com/Calendar.aspx)

The Headlee Amendment imposes annual caps on property-tax increases.

8. The Eberwhite Neighborhood Is Not Covered by the Old West Side Historic District Protections

Although many of us think of Eberwhite as being part of the Old West Side ("OWS"), our neighborhood is not actually covered by the OWS Historic District protections. See a map of the city's historic districts here: https://www.a2gov.org/planning/historic-preservation/historic-district-maps/

So, unlike the OWS Historic District, Eberwhite will not be shielded from upzoning by historic-district protections.

9. Many Residents Are Not Yet Aware That These Major Land Use Changes Will Be Passed This Year

The planning staff admitted in a city council work session that it has conducted almost no public engagement regarding its most recent Plan to (1) allow 4 stories (or possibly more) with an unlimited number of units and an unlimited footprint size, and (2) develop "commercial at every corner."[18]

In February 2025, city planning staff told residents at an informational meeting that the city will not be mailing any notices to residents before the changes are made to the Comprehensive Plan and the zoning ordinances.

Planning staff also told residents that a draft of the new Plan will be completed this spring.

10. Contact the Ann Arbor City Planning Commission, Ann Arbor City Planning Staff, and Ann Arbor City Council to Express Your Opinions

If you have opinions about the proposed changes, you can express your views to:

(1) City Council members (email addresses listed at https://www.a2gov.org/city-council/),

(2) the City Planning Commission (planning@a2gov.org, or by mail at 301 E. Huron St., Ann Arbor, MI 48107), and

(3) the City Planning Staff (blenart@a2gov.org, or by mail at 301 E. Huron St., Ann Arbor, MI 48104).

In the meantime, here's a link to a video that is making the rounds in Ann Arbor. It's entitled, "The False Promises of Upzoning."
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jex02iV52pM

This video shows what happened to a suburb of Seattle when they instituted the kind of upzoning that is being proposed for Ann Arbor.

The first 15 minutes or so give a good visual sense of what our city officials would like to have happen here.

Leslie Ford
Wakefield Ave.
Eberwhite

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[1] See generally:
(1) 1/23/25 City Planning Commission meeting,
https://www.youtube.com/live/NH34npp8vyw, and
(2) 11/26/24 Planning Commission Comprehensive Plan Committee Meeting,
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7MqCxdFI_1k.

[2] 2/10/25 City Council Work Session at 5:41-52:28,
https://www.youtube.com/live/DiK7S57hpvw?si=-WxWXPPecjUKhEEt&t=3101.

[3] 1/23/25 City Planning Commission meeting at 2:52:08-3:15:04
https://www.youtube.com/live/NH34npp8vyw?si=n4uR_Q-UY4AJAVm2&t=10328

[4] 1/23/25 City Planning Commission meeting at 1:34:20-1:36:36,
https://www.youtube.com/live/NH34npp8vyw?si=Cyi2sINB0NRla6q3&t=5660

[5] 1/23/25 City Planning Commission meeting at 1:40:45-1:41:15.
https://www.youtube.com/live/NH34npp8vyw?feature=shared&t=6045

[6] 1/23/25 City Planning Commission meeting at 2:15:00-2:15:22,
https://www.youtube.com/live/NH34npp8vyw?feature=shared&t=8100

[7] 1/23/25 City Planning Commission meeting at 2:52:40-2:53:05,
https://www.youtube.com/live/NH34npp8vyw?si=FdcAa1QaQC9SLdqG&t=10360

[8] Id.; see also 7/27/20 Lockwood building permit,
https://stream.a2gov.org/energov_prod/selfservice/ - /permit/61da9ce6-0dcc-42de-949e-a5f1d5a325c9?tab=inspections

[9] 11/26/24 Planning Commission Comprehensive Plan Committee Meeting at 1:21:15-1:21:32, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7MqCxdFI_1k&t=4875s

[10] 1/23/25 City Planning Commission meeting at 2:28:37-2:28:44,
https://www.youtube.com/live/NH34npp8vyw?si=QkHLtMqBlneADAMU&t=8917

[11] 1/23/25 City Planning Commission meeting at 31:27-31:47,
https://www.youtube.com/live/NH34npp8vyw?si=VYbPPREEsKH8sbbZ&t=1887

[12] 1/23/25 City Planning Commission meeting at 33:48-35:50,
https://www.youtube.com/live/NH34npp8vyw?si=CqmHfOhNKdc7PUzG&t=2028.

[13] 9/3/24 City Council meeting at 1:26:19-1:44:24, https://www.youtube.com/live/EPNrNkZARmA?feature=shared&t=5179. See also https://www.mlive.com/news/2024/09/former-home-based-cafe-among-types-of-businesses-ann-arbor-council-wants-to-see-again.html

[14] See of 1/23/25 City Planning Commission meeting at 2:15:19-2:16:10 https://www.youtube.com/live/NH34npp8vyw?feature=shared&t=8119; see also Commissioner Hammerschmidt at 2:16:11-2:16:30, https://www.youtube.com/live/NH34npp8vyw?feature=shared&t=8171

[15] https://www.seattletimes.com/opinion/more-concrete-less-green-a-cautionary-tale-about-upzoning-from-south-park/

[16] See 1/23/25 City Planning Commission meeting at 2:42:24--2:43:14, https://www.youtube.com/live/NH34npp8vyw?feature=shared&t=9744

[17] See 1/23/25 City Planning Commission meeting at 1:54:42-1:55:13, https://www.youtube.com/live/NH34npp8vyw?feature=shared&t=6882

[18] See
(1) 2/10/25 City Council Work Session at 50:24-53:14 https://www.youtube.com/live/DiK7S57hpvw?feature=shared&t=3024
(2) Id. at 1:02:28-1:04:58, https://www.youtube.com/live/DiK7S57hpvw?feature=shared&t=3748,
(3) Id. at 1:13:32-1:14:44 https://www.youtube.com/live/DiK7S57hpvw?feature=shared&t=4412
(3) 1/23/25 Planning Commission Meeting at 2:17:54-2:21:50, https://www.youtube.com/live/NH34npp8vyw?feature=shared&t=8274

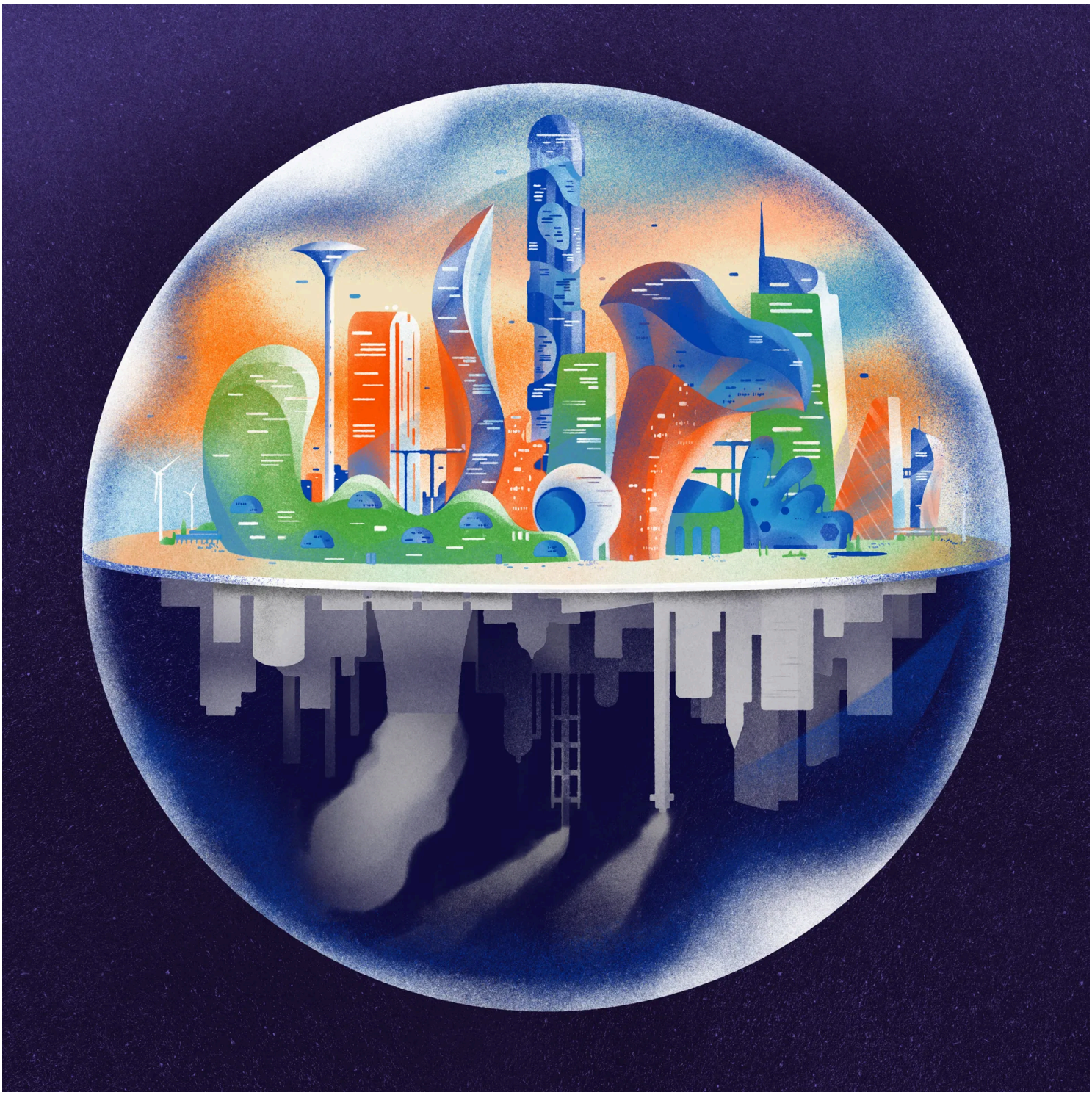
A CRITIC AT LARGE

DO DEMOCRATS NEED TO LEARN HOW TO BUILD?

Liberals have long emphasized protections over progress. Champions of the "abundance agenda" think it's high time to speed things up.

By Benjamin Wallace-Wells

March 3, 2025



A basic conviction of “abundance” liberals is that stagnation represents something like a national emergency. Illustration by Golden Cosmos

Listen to this story

I grew up in the late eighties and early nineties in a pair of functional redbrick postwar apartments on the fringes of New York City—first in a two-bedroom in an eight-story building in Inwood, on the northern tip of Manhattan, and then in a three-bedroom in a twelve-story building in Riverdale, in the West Bronx. Each had a coin-operated laundry in the basement. The Gordons, friends of my parents, lived on the nineteenth floor of a taller building a few blocks away in Riverdale, and from their little balcony you could look east across the borough and see low-rise brick buildings much like mine, in which hundreds of thousands of people lived, little yellow windows against the gray Bronx sky. "They were basic," Samuel J. LeFrak, who built hundreds of such structures in Brooklyn and Queens, said of these apartments. "The windows opened and closed. You opened them in the summer and you closed them in the winter."

At the time, the city's population wasn't quite eight million, but to my mother it was an article of faith that this was an undercount—that census-takers were too nervous to fully explore the poorest neighborhoods, that illegal immigrants hid from the survey, that the true figure must be at least nine. She taught in public schools in Washington Heights and East Harlem, and each fall immigrants from new countries enrolled in her class: Cuba, then the Dominican Republic, then Ecuador. The world was vast, and we had so many affordable apartment buildings. Surely New York City would grow.

What has happened since then has been a sort of rupture in the laws of supply and demand. First, New York got safe, in the nineties, and then it got almost unfathomably rich. I still remember a conversation in the mid-aughts in which my friend Will, who had gone into real estate, told me confidently that Russian

oligarchs were now buying property not just in lower Manhattan but in Brooklyn. This seemed impossible in the moment but within a few months was very clearly true. In a way that hadn't been the case in my childhood, the city had become an obviously desirable place to live. And yet it didn't get any bigger. Newcomers continued to arrive—according to official statistics, the city has become considerably less white—but they were balanced by departures. The view from the Gordons' balcony has not changed very much. In 2000, New York City's population was 8,008,278. In 2023, the Census Bureau estimated that it was 8,258,035. In a safe and prosperous quarter century, the most important city in the country has scarcely grown at all.

For some liberal journalists and researchers of my generation, the stagnation of American cities has become a fixation. The progressive metropolises we love the most, and where the highest-paying jobs are increasingly found, seem to be having the most trouble growing, perhaps because they have the most trouble building. In 2023, seventy thousand housing permits were issued in red-state metro Houston, and just forty thousand in metro New York, which has three times as many people. (In the San Francisco and Boston metro areas, there were even fewer.) When urbanists looked into why that was, they tended to find not a single cause but a constellation. The idealistic progressive laws of the seventies—those mandating environmental review, safety and anti-corruption standards, historic preservation, prevailing wages, and, most important, local power over zoning—had meant to protect small communities against moneyed interests. But they had been

manipulated by homeowners and businesses, and used to block all kinds of new construction. Good intentions had paved the way to what the political scientist Francis Fukuyama termed a "vetocracy." As the *Times*' Ezra Klein and *The Atlantic's* Derek Thompson write of this regulatory pattern in their book "Abundance" (Avid Reader), "Each individual decision is rational. The collective consequences are maddening."

Sometimes even the individual decisions are maddening. In San Francisco, anti-abortion activists stopped a clinic from being built by arguing that it would violate local standards for noise and traffic—because of the protests they themselves intended to organize. Residents also managed to obtain historic-preservation status for a laundromat in an effort to prevent its demolition. (Twenty-seven per cent of Manhattan is shielded from developers because of various preservation covenants.) A Los Angeles project to convert a polluted aircraft factory into apartments and shops was sued twenty times in twenty years, under the same law. In Maryland, homeowners organized a petition to stall construction on an apartment building in order to develop a parking lot.

Even public projects tend to get snarled in the same vetocracy. Adding a kilometre of subway track in the United States now costs twice what it does in Japan or Canada, and six times what it does in Portugal; in the past fifty years, the inflation-adjusted cost of a mile of interstate highway has tripled. A forthcoming

academic paper detailing the long-arc history of urban development and its opponents, by the law professors Roderick M. Hills, Jr., of N.Y.U., and David Schleicher, of Yale, is titled "How the Gentry Won."

These urbanists have been inching toward the political center, seeing the logic in development and turning against some progressive icons. In "Stuck" (Random House), by Yoni Appelbaum, of *The Atlantic*, a chief villain is Jane Jacobs, the standard-bearer of Greenwich Village and a left-wing theorist of neighborhood living. But the need to build remained a niche obsession until the Biden Administration, when some of the same intellectuals noticed that efforts to construct a green-energy infrastructure were foundering on the same opposition. Three years after Congress authorized $7.5 billion to create a nationwide E.V. charging network, only two hundred and fourteen individual chargers were ready. In the mid-aughts, an entrepreneur named Michael Skelly conceived a plan to build a vast wind farm in the barren Oklahoma panhandle and sell the energy to the federal government's Tennessee Valley Authority. Skelly secured the Obama Administration's commitment to buy his energy, but in the course of a decade the project slowly collapsed, as state powers dawdled and eventually refused to issue the necessary permits. Anyone who had been politically invested in the attempts to build high-rises in West Harlem would have noticed a familiar pattern. "We are at a moment of history," Skelly is quoted as saying in "Why Nothing Works: Who Killed Progress—and How to Bring It Back" (Public Affairs), by Marc J. Dunkelman, a research fellow at Brown. "Robert Moses could come back from the dead and he wouldn't be able to do shit."

These three new books explore such decelerations, and seek to move from urbanism toward a more general political philosophy. Klein and Thompson are perhaps the most ambitious. "For decades, American liberalism has measured its success in how close it could come to the social welfare system of Denmark," they write, but those efforts have been complicated by the difficulty of supplying enough housing, enough solar panels, enough of what people need. They're aiming

for a "change in political culture" through which liberalism, which has long acted to pump the brakes on building things, now works to "speed up the system." Klein and Thompson want a "liberalism that builds," not just in housing and green energy but in artificial intelligence and in drug development, too, areas where they see similar patterns of stagnation. Their goals are broad. This group of policies, which they call the abundance agenda, offers, Klein and Thompson believe, "a path out of the morass we're in. A new political order."

It is an interesting time for so many prominent liberal thinkers to focus on dynamism, since the Republicans who hold power in Washington are in an accelerationist mood, too. In many ways, the conservative argument is more straightforward. Abundance liberals might hope to turn the federal government into a weapon against local vetocracies; Trump's Republicans simply want to destroy it, so business can flourish. The DOGE blitz of the past month has already led to mass and scattershot layoffs and threatened agency closures at U.S.A.I.D., the F.A.A., the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, and the Department of Education, and, though some of these efforts are being contested in court, more are in the offing. Even people within Trump's orbit who had been skeptical of Big Tech when he was out of power now see a future in it. In Paris this February, just a few weeks after being sworn in, Vice-President J. D. Vance addressed a summit on artificial intelligence. "I'm not here this morning to talk about A.I. safety," Vance said. "I'm here to talk about A.I. opportunity." America's response, he went on, could no longer be "self-conscious" or "risk-averse."

Abundance, for elected Democrats who have embraced it, has offered a politics of growth, and perhaps even risk, that they can get behind, since it centers on an energetic hands-on government rather than an unfettered free market. These causes have moved quickly toward the core of the Party's self-conception, and its plans. The top item on the Harris campaign's policy agenda was an expansion of housing. Ritchie Torres, a centrist Democratic congressman from the Bronx and a

likely candidate for New York governor in 2026, said in January that "the abundance agenda is the best framework that I've heard for reimagining Democratic governance." In California, Governor Gavin Newsom struck a similar theme. "People are losing trust and confidence in our ability to build new things," he said. It isn't just the urbanists who blame liberals for the problems with building; some leading Democrats do, too. According to John Podesta, the White House chief of staff under Bill Clinton and a senior adviser to both Barack Obama and Joe Biden, "We got so good at stopping projects that we forgot how to build things in America."

These Democrats might, like Appelbaum, be thinking about the consequences for working people of being stuck in place. Appelbaum is a lovely storyteller, and in this gentle book he emphasizes how much the historical ability of Americans to change their circumstances has depended on moving somewhere else, from John Winthrop to Hang Kie, the immigrant small businessman who fought the efforts of the citizens of Modesto to confine his laundry to the Chinese part of town through zoning. Appelbaum reserves a special animus for the conservative sentimentality over the small town, and he is disturbed by how many progressives, like Jacobs, sought to re-create it in the middle of cities. He thinks that Americans were once such great belongers—to the Tocquevillian bouquet of churches, civic leagues, bowling clubs—because we were newcomers, seeking to ingratiate ourselves, and that, as we've stopped moving, "these structures have atrophied, leaving Americans alienated and alone." Appelbaum is clear about where the fault lies: one study he notes found that, as a city's voters grew ten per cent more liberal, it issued thirty per cent fewer housing permits.

Dunkelman supplies the political theory behind this phenomenon—"Why Nothing Works" is effectively a history of twentieth-century progressive policymaking. The high point, he thinks, was the ambitious conception of governance inscribed in Franklin D. Roosevelt's second Inaugural Address: "We are fashioning an instrument of unimagined power for the establishment of a morally better world." Dunkelman celebrates the creation of the Social Security Administration, the Federal Communications Commission, the National Labor Relations Board, and the Securities and Exchange Commission (what a run!), and he sees the same "Hamiltonian" spirit in Dwight D. Eisenhower's interstate-highway system. Cracks appeared in the sixties, Dunkelman thinks, as liberalism started to reflect the baby boomers' distrust of the establishment. He deftly maps how anti-poverty and then environmental policy were designed to empower local communities to resist outside forces, putting liberalism at the service of stymieing grand plans. (He also castigates Robert Caro's classic, critical book on Robert Moses for giving a generation of readers the misapprehension that aggressive building was a political vice rather than a virtue.) "Why Nothing Works" is blunt and exhortative—the word "Hamiltonian" appears on a hundred and twenty-five pages—but Dunkelman is making a subtle point about the interplay between cultural emotion and social design. He writes, "Progressivism's cultural aversion to power has turned the Democratic Party—purportedly the 'party of government'—into an institution drawn almost instinctively to cut government down."

Part of the political charge these three books carry comes from the clarity of their disavowals. The natural move for political writers is to blame the other side; the abundance faction says, "This one's on us." But somewhere deep in their combined

thousand pages I began to wonder whether the liberal self-blame isn't a little overstated. That so many leading Democrats are enthusiastic about their arguments somewhat undercuts the case. The pattern these writers identify is that wealthy or powerful interests hire lawyers to contest a new project, by using a mechanism designed by liberals in the seventies. The abundance advocates emphasize the problem of ideology, because of who usually wrote the rules, but what's happening is also, more simply, about wealth and power. When it comes to the expense of New York's subways, the latest studies identify some specific culprits: the city builds many more mezzanine levels in its stations than is the case in stations overseas, and it hires more consultants. How much of that is really about liberalism?

The situation is starker when it comes to climate policy. Klein and Thompson note that infrastructure projects have to navigate more than sixty separate review processes from federal authorities alone, and that does sound unnecessarily challenging—probably the Migratory Bird Treaty Act could be downshifted. But it's flatly ahistorical to think that liberals are mainly to blame for the halting progress of American climate policy. As Klein and Thompson acknowledge, Jimmy Carter put solar hot-water panels on the White House; Ronald Reagan took them down. Book deadlines being what they are, these works all to a degree reflect the Biden years, when the questions were about whether we'd get faster solar or slower solar, and whether the transition would be led by China or by us. But the 2024 election was a reminder of why it has been so hard for liberals to re-create the conditions of Roosevelt's second term, which he won in a 523–8 electoral-vote landslide. Our far more divided country disagrees about basic goals. Right now, half of it—the part in power—doesn't seem to want solar or wind energy on almost any timetable. It would prefer to burn more coal.

On June 11, 2023, a truck driver named Nathan Moody lost control on the Cottman Avenue exit off I-95 in northeast Philadelphia, overturning the eighty-five hundred gallons of gasoline his vehicle was carrying. It ignited, killing

Moody and generating so much heat that the bridge beneath collapsed. The accident took place in an especially important spot in the highway system of the Northeast. (On drive-time traffic reports, "backup at Cottman Avenue" is something like "delays on the Cross Bronx Expressway.") Pennsylvania's newly elected Democratic governor, Josh Shapiro, staked his reputation on a quick rebuild; he gave nightly updates to the press and on TikTok, and got a camera rigged at the site so the public could follow along.

As Klein and Thompson tell the story, the key action happened within the state's Department of Transportation, whose secretary, Michael Carroll, took advantage of the Governor's emergency declaration to suspend rules he otherwise would have had to follow. Carroll picked contractors to do the work and agreed on a price without waiting for competing bids, authorized them to pave at night when rain forecasts would normally have halted work, and generally gave speed priority over the usual prudence. When he came across a team of workers disassembling a roadway sign by screwdriver so that it could be reused later, Carroll recalled, "I said turn the machine on and knock the goddamn thing over." In twelve days, astonishingly, the bridge was rebuilt, and traffic resumed.

In their day jobs, as columnists and podcasters who began their careers online, Klein and Thompson have advanced a wonky tendency in political journalism: an interest in the details about how government programs work. As they have grown in prominence—during the Biden years, Klein's podcast became one of the main places in which the aims and judgments of liberalism were evaluated—they have helped impose a technocratic sensibility and seriousness on the political conversation, along with a particular interest in different forms of futurism. Klein and Thompson's influence is one good reason to see these books as blueprints for a political movement. "Abundance" is a fair-minded book, and it recognizes some of the trade-offs that come with redesigning government for dynamism. "These were risks," Klein and Thompson acknowledge, of the choices Shapiro made to set aside safety and anti-corruption rules, and they quote Carroll: "It could've gone

badly, but it didn't." They write, "The process Shapiro used would typically be illegal. Yet national Democrats and Pennsylvania voters alike loved it. What does that say about the typical process?"

A basic conviction of the abundance movement is that stagnation represents something like a national emergency, which may require the government to take risks and liberals to sideline their quest for a Scandinavian-style social democracy. Much of the second half of Klein and Thompson's book focusses on supercharging American science, and here the authors edge toward a more ideologically nebulous futurism. They envisage "a new kind of entrepreneurial state," namely, "the government as a bottleneck detective." They hope to ease the immigration of talented scientists, limit the paperwork required of federally funded investigators, and use government money a bit more like a venture fund does, coaxing along potentially ground-shifting ideas by setting up prizes and helping to guarantee markets. The discussion of artificial intelligence is brief; there's a much longer one on the N.I.H. "The U.S. has thrown tens of billions of dollars annually into scientific discovery," Klein and Thompson write. "But it hasn't brought as much progress as we'd expect." Of course, the past half decade has delivered the COVID vaccine, breakthroughs in immuno-oncology, and a new class of obesity drugs so effective that they seem to lower all-cause mortality. This is a disappointing level of progress? Compared with what?

The obvious candidate is China. It is China that has twenty-seven nuclear reactors under construction, compared with zero in the U.S., China whose artificial-intelligence and drug-development infrastructures have begun to rival our own and whose production of solar panels puts ours to shame. Perhaps, Klein and Thompson suggest, we should learn from the ways that Beijing's model is more efficient than ours. "China can build hundreds of thousands of miles of high-speed rail in the time it takes California to fail to build hundreds of miles of high-speed rail," they write. "China does not spend years debating with judges whether to move a storage facility. That power leads to abuse and imperiousness.

It also leads to high-speed rail." There are ways in which the comparison with China makes sense and ways in which it doesn't—given that Americans, on average, are seven times as rich as their Chinese counterparts, it's not surprising that China might still be in more of a Robert Moses phase. But thrumming in the background of the abundance books is an almost rhythmic impatience with the pace of change and technology. The real question these authors pose for liberals is whether we feel it, too.

"The year is 2050," Klein and Thompson write, in the introduction to "Abundance," imagining a scene. "You open your eyes at dawn and turn in the cool bed sheets. A few feet above your head, affixed to the top of the roof, a layer of solar panels blinks in the morning sun." They conjure a tech-enabled green future: inside your refrigerator are apples, tomatoes, and eggplants, grown on a vertical farm "mere miles away." There is chicken and pork in the fridge, but no live animals were needed to make it. An autonomous drone "drops off the latest shipment of star pills"—medicines that slow cellular aging and reduce overeating. "Thanks to higher productivity from AI," workweeks shorten and weekends extend. "How different this era is," Klein and Thompson write, "from the opening decades of the twenty-first century, which unspooled a string of braided crises. A housing crisis. A financial crisis. A pandemic. A climate crisis. Political crises. . . . We knew what we needed to build to alleviate the scarcities so many faced and we simply didn't build it." They ask, "Why?"

Choose to build, Klein and Thompson say, and liberals can have this future. Of course, Elon Musk's Republicans want to build something similar, and so do the technocrats in Beijing: we may well get lives like those they imagine, and yet a less liberal or equitable society. In their evocation of a leisurely utopia a quarter century away, Klein and Thompson stray from the pragmatic matter with which the abundance movement began, of affordable housing in the middle-class parts of big, expensive cities—the orienting geography of the Democratic Party, the LeFrak City of the mind. It's good to ask how fast we will get a transformative

future. But another question, one that has more traditionally preoccupied liberal politics, is whether we will get it in the Bronx. ♦

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