Opinion: California’s fear of heights

By Joe Mathews

Want to spook your neighbors this Halloween? Don’t bother with ghouls or ghosts. Instead, just decorate your door with a picture of an eight-story apartment building.

Californians are famously fearless. We devote ourselves to extreme outdoor sports, buy homes near earthquake faults, and launch startups against all odds. But in the face of tall buildings, especially multi-family high-rises, we turn into a bunch of scaredy-cats.

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This statewide acrophobia has created a historic housing shortage that holds back our economy, increases homelessness, and forces us into long, unhealthy commutes.

Taller development creates badly needed housing, and the population density to support robust public transportation and thriving retail corridors. But California is laced with Munsters-era zoning codes that bar tall multi-unit buildings in many neighborhoods. Even where we permit residential towers, our frighteningly complicated regulatory processes produce long delays that make taller buildings expensive.

To their credit, both cities and developers across the state

have been advancing plans for taller buildings, often in the dense centers where they're needed. But smart plans are little match for the collective acrophobia of Californians.

If you dare, you can witness the plague of height fears in housing in Oakland, which faces a massive backlog of 18,000 approved but as yet unbuilt units in its pipeline, many of which would be in taller buildings near transit.

In Long Beach, citizens are revolting against a city update of a three-decade-old land use plan to accommodate taller buildings. In Santa Monica, a new Expo Line rail connection should be encouraging taller development, but longtime residents, afflicted with the most haunting case of vertigo since Jimmy Stewart in the Hitchcock film of that name, oppose it.

"Fear is the mind-killer. Fear is the little-death that brings total obliteration. I will face my fear. I will permit it to pass over me and through me," wrote the late Frank Herbert, a Northern California journalist better known for his Dune novels.

When it comes to tall buildings, we should take his advice and face our fears. Instead, Californians construct self-deceiving justifications for our acrophobic anxieties.

We tell ourselves that earthquakes make taller buildings less safe– even though poorly designed smaller buildings are more likely to collapse and hurt us. We focus too much on the upfront costs of high-rise multi-family buildings–which are more expensive to build than single-family homes because they require stronger materials–and ignore all the hidden costs of single-family housing.

And we are highly selective in our fears. We fear the apartment building downtown and not the elaborate home surrounded by brush on a hill. We block tall buildings in our town centers because we worry about new crowds of new

people—claustrophobia and xenophobia are cousins to our fear of heights—and then complain about all the resulting freeway traffic at rush hour. We oppose new housing on the grounds that it will change the character of our neighborhoods, and then lament the appearance of homeless encampments down the street.

Our fears literally distort our vision. Many Californians oppose tall and thin buildings, even though they actually are better for our views.

During a recent interview, a leading Los Angeles architect took out his Smartphone. Holding the thin phone vertically, he explained that he could design a tall and thin building that is easy to see around. But because of fear of heights, he said, turning the phone horizontally, buildings are often made much shorter and squatter, effectively becoming walls that block more views of more people. “We’re building a bunch of fat boys,” he lamented.

Which is too bad, because the few areas of California with high-rise housing are successes. Fear somehow has blinded us to the vibrancy of high-rise-heavy precincts in the downtowns of L.A. and San Diego. The benefits of pursuing a taller, denser housing future, particularly in coastal urban areas, would be considerable: higher annual economic growth, more tax revenue, and fewer greenhouse gases.

But it’s hard to have a conversation about this fear when there is so much else for Californians to be afraid of now, from a spike in property crime in the state to the nuclear-armed madmen who run Pyongyang and Washington.

The current gubernatorial campaign might provide an opportunity for reassessing the altitude of our development. The top two contenders, Gavin Newsom and Antonio Villaraigosa, pushed to make their cities more vertical when they were mayors of San Francisco and Los Angeles, respectively.

But both got hammered for doing so. And now the two former mayors are surrounded by protective political professionals who, when it comes to the highest and hardest issues, are perpetually scared to death.

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