

The Curryys have the right to speak out

As we all do about what is built next door

GUEST OPINION

BY LYDIA KOU

Basketball legend Steph Curry recently sent a letter to local officials expressing concerns about how a new housing development near his Atherton home could impact the safety and privacy of his family.



KOU

Social media swarmed at once. “How dare he,” was the collective response on Twitter, Facebook and beyond.

You may, or may not, find Curry’s concerns about the safety of his family valid. But that is not really the point. The issue to remember is that he is being attacked for speaking out about his concerns. He is being demonized for participating in one of the most fundamental rights of any citizen in any robust democracy — to petition his government and ask for a fair hearing.

What’s ironic is that Steph Curry’s concerns for his family are essentially only being heard because of his status as a Bay Area sports legend. For the

rest of us, who are not headed to the Hall of Fame, our voices about what is being built around us have already been legally silenced.

No recourse

A neighbor in East Palo Alto who is concerned about a development right next door to her home, with six units or more replacing a single-family home, will not be heard. In fact, she has no recourse because new state laws like SB330, SB9 and SB10 take away the ability of local governments to make local planning decisions about most housing issues.

If you live in Fair Oaks near Redwood City — and you are worried that massive new development with no new affordable housing will lead to gentrification — you are out of luck. These new laws mean the Redwood City Council no longer has any meaningful ability to shape growth for the benefit of the entire community. They must approve what the for-profit developers present to them “as of right.”

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If you are living in south Palo Alto and the Eichler next door to you is torn down and replaced by a multi-unit building with no new parking and insufficient contributions to fund schools, libraries, community centers, roads or parks — you are also out of luck. These new laws mean developers have a virtual blank check; they can leave you with a higher tax bill to fund the services new growth requires.

Follow the money

Developers are writing massive campaign contributions, and most of the state legislators who wrote and passed these new laws that give developers a virtual blank check have been generously supported by the developer lobby. The same is true of many of the online groups now attacking Steph Curry — they are also supported by developer donors.

Thanks to the new state laws, the for-profit developers can maximize their profits in new housing construction. The developers and their online allies say that by building a massive amount of new luxury housing, we will lower the cost of all housing.

In reality, key studies have shown that simply building more high-cost housing does the opposite of what they claim — it doesn’t lower the cost of housing, it raises the level of gentrification and displacement (while leading to the need to raise taxes, because developers are no longer being required, in most instances, to help fund the costs of new services).

As for Mr. Curry and his family — they have been effectively disenfranchised by these new state laws already. The attacks on his attempts to exercise his free-speech rights merely add insult to injury.

As for the rest of us, who do not command media attention, we need to keep organizing to take back our voices in community planning.

We want to be sensible about where and what are being built. Development has to make sense, where it doesn’t unfairly raise our taxes, and where it doesn’t lead to traffic gridlock, gentrification, and displacement.

We must bring back our voice in our neighborhood planning. One way to start is to join the growing statewide coalition working on exactly that — Our Neighborhood Voices. You can check them out at www.OurNeighborhoodVoices.com.

Lydia Kou is mayor of Palo Alto but she is writing here as an individual.

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