

Silicon Valley @ Home: Narratives of Opposition to Project Homekey
Case Study Analysis

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Introduction

In July 2020, the California Department of Housing and Community Development initiated Project Homekey, garnering approval from housing advocates and precipitating fierce dissent from others. This project sets out to understand how opposition to Project Homekey is expressed and organized in the Bay Area. Building upon the previous Project Roomkey, Homekey administers state funds to support local public entities' acquisition and occupancy of hotels, motels, and other properties to house people experiencing homelessness in California throughout the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Rather than providing primarily temporary shelter, the program focuses on converting or even manufacturing housing units for permanent housing to significantly reduce the ongoing crisis of homelessness in California.

Thus far, two rounds of rolling funding have been administered across the state, the first in fall 2020 and the second in fall 2021. As municipalities and organizations make their applications during these funding rounds, they must also contend with local residents who learn about the project and intend to oppose it. In Silicon Valley particularly, opposition to Homekey sites appeared to be significantly organized and even achieved success by influencing the Santa Clara City Council's decision to vote against a proposal to the city. In order to better understand this local resistance, we conducted four case studies of Homekey sites in Santa Clara and San Mateo Counties. We explored opposition to Round One sites Hillview Court in Milpitas and TownePlace Suites in Redwood Shores, and to Round Two sites Bella Vista Inn and White Oak Lane in Santa Clara.

This project report presents the organizing tools and rhetorical themes which were employed by the opponents to our selected case study sites. Ultimately, investigative analysis of our four case studies reveals extensive coordination and organizing of community opposition across various Project Homekey sites in Silicon Valley. Coordination of opposition occurred

primarily within private servers and networks where residents planned talking points and common arguments later expressed at public hearings and venues. Moreover, we have identified the criminalization of unhoused people, alleged lack of transparency and community agency, and various forms of NIMBYism as the key themes which arose across opposition to the four sites.

Hillview Court

As part of Round One of Project Homekey, a sum of \$29.2 million dollars was awarded to Santa Clara County in autumn of 2020. The County put the funds to use in Milpitas, under the management of the affordable housing developer Jamboree, to convert an Extended Stay America into 132 studio apartment units, now known as the Hillview Court Apartments. Jamboree worked with local housing advocates and the State Attorney General Office in order to avoid delays and community protests with some success. They also hosted online neighborhood workshops in order to increase community support; in those meetings, Jamboree officials would hear the concerns of residents, engage with them, and provide insights into the project and its projected effect on the community.¹

When the conversion was announced at the end of August in 2020, local political leadership in the City of Milpitas celebrated its potential. Mayor Rich Tran applauded the speed at which funding was allocated and he was excited at the possibility of being about to “build more housing for the homeless”² in Milpitas. Vice Mayor Bob Nuñez, serving at the time on the housing subcommittee in the City Council, expressed similar comments, excited for the Hillview Court project as “a unique opportunity to address critical housing needs.”³

¹ Jamboree, “Hillview Court: Permanent Supportive Housing for Formerly Homeless in Milpitas, CA”, accessed May 12, 2022, <https://www.jamboreehousing.com/blogs/affordable-housing-developer-partner/hillview-court-milpitas-santa-clara-county>

² Grace Hase. “Project HomeKey to Flip Milpitas Motel into Long-Term Housing,” *San Jose Inside*, September 22, 2020. <https://www.sanjoseinside.com/news/project-homekey-funds-motel-to-housing-conversion-in-milpitas/>

³ Ibid.

Community Backlash

That political support was not maintained for long; local politicians were up for election in 2020, and many residents in Milpitas did not share their initial excitement. As such, political leaders predictably changed their stance on the Project Homekey conversion of Hillview Court within a couple months; by October, Mayor Tran and others on the City Council were quoted describing the project as too “rushed” and out of local control, beginning to parrot many of the same concerns of residents.⁴ The timeline was compressed. According to Jamboree, the normal project speed from acquisition to completed construction is three to five years; due to the “use it or lose it” funding deal with Project Homekey, the conversion of Hillview Court compressed that timeline to ninety days.⁵ California’s AB83 was passed to help that expedited process, exempting sites funded by Homekey from the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) to push them through the review process faster in hopes of ensuring that housing projects for the unsheltered actually get built. Despite the necessity of such a policy according to lawmakers, this by nature resulted in a lack of community engagement that offended and upset residents. The speed this allowed the conversion process left residents concerned that the impact on the existing community had not been adequately researched.⁶

While the project did receive some vocal community support, many residents were upset that they had to find out about the conversion from the news, calling it an “unfair and

⁴ Ryan Fernandez. “Milpitas City Council wants homeless housing project stopped and moved,” *Silicon Valley Business Journal*, October 19, 2020.

<https://www.bizjournals.com/sanjose/news/2020/10/19/milpitas-council-stop-move-project-homekey-hotel.html>

⁵ Rhoda Shapiro. “The unhoused find shelter at Hillview Court Apartments in Milpitas,” *The Milpitas Beat*, March 2, 2021. <https://milpitasbeat.com/the-unhoused-find-shelter-at-hillview-court-apartments-in-milpitas/>

⁶ CBS, San Francisco. “Project Home: Bay Area Communities Grapple with Lack of Local Control Under Project Homekey,” *CBS*, November 20, 2020.

<https://www.cbsnews.com/sanfrancisco/news/project-home-bay-area-communities-grapple-with-lack-of-local-control-under-project-homekey/>

undemocratic process”⁷ that lacked transparency and airing concerns about crime and vagrancy in the nearby residential areas. Due to this, Mayor Tran raised the idea to bring the issue up for litigation, and the City Council unanimously agreed to consider the option on the grounds of issues with due process, environmental impact, and city’s rights. Ultimately, this would be unsuccessful.

Suraj Viswanathan, a candidate for City Council in 2020, was very active at least nominally in the community opposition to the conversion of Hillview Court. Alongside the then newfounded community advocating group Voice of Milpitas LLC, Viswanathan helped organize the GoFundMe and Change.org petitions started to support litigation against the Project Homekey conversion on behalf of the neighborhood. The first petition started by Viswanathan was addressed to the Milpitas City Council in an attempt to pressure the wavering Council to fight back against the conversion, garnering 4,400 signatures of residents concerned about the lack of community participation and the impact the sheltering the unhoused would have in the neighborhood.⁸ By the end of October the Milpitas City Council had officially decided against pursuing a lawsuit against Santa Clara County to halt the conversion of Hillview Court, which prompted lay community opposition to explore private litigation efforts. Viswanathan started a second Change.org petition to assess neighborhood commitment and direct interested parties, another 4,400 signatories, to the fundraising effort to support such litigation.⁹ Voices of Milpitas

⁷ Lloyd Alaban et al. “Milpitas to explore litigation against State, County over hotel conversion project for homeless housing,” *The Milpitas Beat*, October 7, 2020.

<https://milpitasbeat.com/milpitas-to-explore-litigation-against-state-county-over-hotel-conversion-project-for-homeless-housing/>

⁸ Suraj Viswanathan, “Petition - Public Input Needed on Project Homekey in Milpitas,” last modified 2020, <https://www.change.org/p/milpitas-city-council-public-input-needed-on-project-homekey-in-milpitas>

⁹ Suraj Viswanathan, “Private litigation to be explored,” last modified November 1, 2020, <https://www.change.org/p/milpitas-city-council-public-input-needed-on-project-homekey-in-milpitas/u/27992385>

LLC, formed in October of 2020 by the former Milpitas Mayor Jose Esteves,¹⁰ organized a fundraiser for the private litigation effort against the Homekey site, raising \$38,075 in total from community donations.¹¹ They rested their case primarily on the issue of cost; Voices of Milpitas LLC took issue with the appraisal process and found the use of taxpayer dollars to buy Extended Stay at a price far exceeding market value plus the cost of the proposed alterations to be unconscionable. Voices of Milpitas LLC saw the Hillview Court conversion as “devastating to nearby communities” with a project timeline and cost exemplifying “massive government overreach and overspending,”¹² but the judge did not agree and their litigation request was denied in November of 2020.

Despite the failure of the opposition to end the conversion in court, the community raised many concerns that should be addressed here. There was a moderate amount of concern over the fact that the Hillview admissions process would not prioritize the unhoused already living in Milpitas, and about whether the apartments would affect nearby property values. Alongside complaints of the lack of community input were arguments about how the conversion would cause an influx of unhoused into Milpitas, increasing the crime rate and the number of the mentally disturbed on the streets, in turn overburdening city police. Viswanathan summarized that if all that residents feared came to pass with the completion of the conversion, it would “spoil the entire future of Milpitas.”¹³ Though Jamboree promised to run background checks, credit checks, state background checks, and sexual predator background checks before admission

¹⁰ Lloyd Alaban. “Judge shoots down attempt by Milpitas residents to stop homeless housing project,” *The Milpitas Beat*, November 17, 2020.

<https://milpitasbeat.com/judge-shoots-down-attempt-by-milpitas-residents-to-stop-homeless-housing-project/>

¹¹ Voices of Milpitas LLC, “Help us fight the Homekey Project in Milpitas,” last modified November 16, 2020, <https://www.gofundme.com/f/VOMGofundme>

¹² Grace Hase. “Judge Rejects Motion to Halt Project HomeKey Development,” *San Jose Inside*, November 18, 2020, <https://www.sanjoinside.com/news/judge-rejects-motion-to-halt-project-homekey-development/>

¹³ Lloyd Alaban. “Judge shoots down attempt by Milpitas residents to stop homeless housing project,” *The Milpitas Beat*, November 17, 2020.

<https://milpitasbeat.com/judge-shoots-down-attempt-by-milpitas-residents-to-stop-homeless-housing-project/>

of any individual into Hillview Court, many residents were not comforted. Residents expressed multiple concerns about the surveillance of the formerly unhoused; in addition to vetting the potential newcomers before promising them housing, they wanted Jamboree and the staff on-site to be able to monitor individuals in the Hillview Court Apartments, track them inside and outside of the facility, and inspect their belongings within the units. One community member in particular expressed anger at the fact that Milpitas would convert Extended Stay into Hillview Court Apartments when the city lacked a medical center; that individual saw the project that would house the unsheltered as another burden on a city that lacked enough of the necessary amenities to support its then-present residents, especially as opposed to other cities in the Bay Area.¹⁴ The NIMBY argument also included the remark that Milpitas “already houses a dump and a jail,”¹⁵ reflecting the city’s unwillingness to take on another undesirable burden with a dehumanizing equivocation based on the assumption that the “majority of the homeless people have mental health issues, drug addiction, and alcohol addiction and thief issues.”¹⁶ Such positions on the potential criminality of incoming residents, the unsuitability of Milpitas as a Homekey site (in terms of the safety of current residents as well as community resources), and the lack of transparency from the government were all relatively standard across the members of the community who opposed the conversion in 2020.

Opposition to Hillview Court Today

Milpitas still holds some resentment and opposition to Homekey, and it has bled into sentiments around the unsheltered and unhousedness in the city generally. Voices of Milpitas, a lay grassroots organization working in conjunction with but not identical to the LLC, was the

¹⁴ Jamboree Housing Corporation, “Jamboree’s Hillview Court Community Meeting Audio Recording,” YouTube, November 4, 2020, video, 1:34:12.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HxBiTPZvHGU&list=PLGG1_-aH0_qBbbkuqcl1TJzxTekOCj2SR&index=6

¹⁵ Carol Hamilton, 2020. Comment on Viswanathan, “Petition - Public Input Needed on Project Homekey in Milpitas.”

¹⁶ Diane Kudela, 2020. Ibid.

most organized expression of community opposition to the Hillview Court conversion. They established themselves as the chief voice of opposition in order to seek “accountability and transparency from the City of Milpitas, Santa Clara County, and all government agencies regarding their actions affecting the welfare, health and safety of its community.”¹⁷ Voices of Milpitas was politicized by Project Homekey in Milpitas, but since the success of its implementation at Hillview Court, the organization has been largely inactive aside from occasional oppositional reference to other Homekey projects in Santa Clara County. They are still somewhat active in public spheres, though it is to a much lesser extent than before the completion of the conversion. On their Facebook, the group posts about houselessness and Project Homekey in a negative light. In the time since the success of the Hillview Court conversion, they have made sporadic posts linking various articles from Bay Area news sites that associate houselessness with violence and criminal activity and/or offer cheaper solutions to alleviating houselessness in the Bay Area.¹⁸

Voices of Milpitas also has a community group on Nextdoor, a social media app that connects people living in the same area based on their home address. Their group is private and inaccessible to outsiders, but the sentiments of opposition against Hillview Court Apartments and Project Homekey generally still show up in the general forums on the app. Conversations about Hillview Court Apartments on Nextdoor revolve around associations of crime in the area. The apartments are described as “always” having police activity,¹⁹ and as having caused “nothing but problems”²⁰ since the conversion. Residents who opposed and continue to resent the

¹⁷ Voices of Milpitas, “Voices of Milpitas: The Homekey Project,” accessed May 10, 2022, <https://www.voicesofmilpitas.org/home-key-project>

¹⁸ Voices of Milpitas. Facebook page, accessed June 1, 2022. <https://www.facebook.com/Voices-Of-Milpitas-105872161346062/>

¹⁹ Sharon Kachadoorian, January 8, 2022. Comment on Rob, “Hillview popo activity behind Extended Stay guns drawn.”

²⁰ Sharon Kachadoorian, April 16, 2022. Comment on Quirarte, “I know this Suzuki Motorcycle is stolen property!”

conversion feel vindicated by incidents associated with Hillview Court, from a stolen motorcycle to a fatal instance of domestic violence: “homicide first, drugs and then stolen vehicles. I hear crickets chirping from all the homeless hotel proponents.”²¹ There is nothing novel about the criminal activity near the Hillview Court Apartments, but the lasting bitterness surrounding the conversion process still colors perceptions of them. While residents may no longer be able to actively try to stop the conversion and the opposition is resultantly less vocal, such sentiments can create a hostile environment not only for future, similar projects, but also for the formerly unhoused individuals who have moved into the community.

TownePlace Suites:

San Mateo county was granted \$18,040,000 in Coronavirus Relief Funds in November 2020 to develop one of its Project Homekey sites.²² On December 1, 2021 the San Mateo County Board of Supervisors voted to purchase a former Marriott TownePlace Suites in the Redwood City neighborhood of Redwood Shores for \$25.25 million.²³ This site, now called Shores Landing, is located at 1000 Twin Dolphin Drive. Shores Landing is unique as a case study because of its relatively muted campaign of opposition as well as its designation as housing for extremely low income seniors aged 62 and older.²⁴ Opposition to Shores Landing manifested itself largely through community meetings, but was at times supplemented by protests and monthly neighborhood publications. Narratives of opposition included concern over safety and security, integration into the neighborhood, and lack of communication.

Safety and Security

²¹ Vikhyath Reddy Marapadaga, April 16, 2022. Comment on Quirarte, “I know this Suzuki Motorcycle is stolen property!”

²² California Department of Housing and Community Development. *Homekey: A Journey Home 2021 Legislative Report*. 2021.

²³ "Mid-Pen to Manage Senior Housing at Former Redwood Shores Hotel." *Climate Magazine*. February 26, 2021.

²⁴ MidPen Housing Corporation. "Shores Landing." Last modified 2021.

As is the case with most projects which introduce formerly unhoused populations to a neighborhood, current residents expressed concern for perceived fluctuations in the level of safety and security within their community. One of the largest concerns for the community during this process was the proximity of Shores Landing to Shores Child Development Center, located at 1050 Twin Dolphin Drive. Current residents consistently had questions about the potential risk their children would be facing once new residents occupied Shores Landing. Several references to pedophilia and sexual crime were made as examples of the potential danger these children would face.²⁵ Community members also made sure to check that smoking protocols and designated smoking areas for the site would not negatively impact the children or other people in the community.

Residents also shared their worry for potential increases in the level of crime that they perceived could happen across the neighborhood. Some people even questioned whether or not there would be increased levels of policing in Redwood Shores to deter crime or other undesirable behavior.²⁶ At the San Mateo County Special Board of Supervisors Meeting on November 5, 2020, public commenters expressed that housing this population so near a childcare center would unnecessarily introduce danger to the children who spend their days there.²⁷ Several questions were posed about disciplinary protocols in situations where residents who do not abide by the rules and regulations established at Shores Landing.²⁸ This included inquiry into admission protocols for those with substance abuse problems and people who participate in recreational drug use.²⁹ Concerns about smoking in or near the building, along with common

²⁵ MidPen Housing Corporation. "Shores Landing: Frequently Asked Questions." Last modified 2021.

²⁶ RSCA. "Some Answers About Project Homekey." WordPress. Last modified December 2, 2020.

²⁷ "BOARD OF SUPERVISORS on 2020-11-05 2:00 PM - SPECIAL MEETING OF THE BOARD OF SUPERVISORS." *Granicus: County of San Mateo*. November 2020.

²⁸ RSCA. "Some Answers About Project Homekey."

²⁹ MidPen Housing Corporation. "Shores Landing: Frequently Asked Questions."

imagery of fires being associated with homeless populations, brought up concerns about fire hazards in the building.³⁰

Another concern repeatedly raised by community members was the type of behavior this new population would engage in due to possible mental health concerns or mental illness. Commentary and suggestions on this topic included talk of screening protocols and services to help these residents once they moved in to Shores Landing. Residents were adamant in getting answers from the county on what background checks would look like for these incoming residents during a November 2020 Redwood Shores Community Association (RSCA) community meeting.³¹

Integration into the Community

Redwood City is one of the most expensive places to live in the United States, with a cost of living that is 92% higher than the national average.³² Residents of Redwood Shores cited this as another important point of consideration during Shores Landing's approval process. One public commenter at the Board of Supervisors meeting explained their confusion about placing housing for an extremely low income population in an area like Redwood City.³³ Considering the high cost of living in Redwood City, residents did not feel as though the location of Shores Landing aligned with the goal of truly helping these seniors establish a stable living environment.

RSCA directors identified accessibility to transportation as a potential barrier to a new population of senior citizens living in Redwood Shores, as well as access to nutritional food and

³⁰ Redwood Shores Community Association. "RSCA and MidPen - Meet the Shores' Project Homekey Operator."

³¹ Redwood Shores Community Association. "RSCA's Project Homekey Community Meeting."

³² "Cost of Living in Redwood City, CA."

³³ "BOARD OF SUPERVISORS on 2020-11-05 2:00 PM - SPECIAL MEETING OF THE BOARD OF SUPERVISORS."

medical services.³⁴ Community members were curious to know what plans the county and site management teams had in place to ensure the basic needs of these seniors were going to be met.

Lack of Communication

Inadequate communication from San Mateo County to the residents was a consistent topic in public comments and discussions about Shores Landing being approved as a site. Being a part of early Project Homekey funding meant that the purchase of TownePlace Suites and its subsequent conversion into senior housing was a process that happened more quickly than would have been normal outside of a pandemic. Because of this, residents were not necessarily kept up to date at the rate or depth they were used to. Residents felt that Mark Callagy, County Executive Officer, was not forthcoming in his initial explanations of what this Project Homekey site would entail. According to one public commenter, Callagy had only described the site as housing for low income residents but left out information about formerly unhoused individuals living in the space.³⁵ Callagy expressed to residents during a November 2020 RSCA meeting that the approval and purchase of the TownePlace Suites for a Project Homekey site was essentially a done deal, which may have contributed to residents' frustrations of feeling unheard during this process.³⁶

Methods of Opposition

As mentioned, most of the opposition to the Shores Landing site was expressed through RSCA meetings or San Mateo County Board of Supervisors meetings. Many of these meetings took place during the last few months of 2020 over Zoom calls. Panels of speakers related to the Shores Landing site would provide updates to community members on the call, answer

³⁴ Redwood Shores Community Association. "RSCA and MidPen - Meet the Shores' Project Homekey Operator."

³⁵ Redwood Shores Community Association. "RSCA and MidPen - Meet the Shores' Project Homekey Operator."

³⁶ Redwood Shores Community Association. "RSCA's Project Homekey Community Meeting."

pre-submitted and live questions, and create FAQ pages to put online for community members to view on their own.

The RSCA runs *The PILOT*, a monthly publication distributed to 6,000 Redwood Shores households and businesses.³⁷ Language in the publication itself was neutral and was used to simply communicate short summaries of information about Project Homekey updates as well as the date and time of upcoming community events about the topic.

Physical protest was not a commonly used tactic used to express opposition for Shores Landing. At least two small protests occurred in which community members were voicing their concerns about Project Homekey developing a site in Redwood Shores. One protest in November 2020 was largely focused on the cost associated with Project Homekey and the “costly \$\$ for hotel for homeless.”³⁸ A protest at the end of 2020 was more angled towards concerns about community safety, background checks for incoming residents, and the lack of community engagement from the county.³⁹

Bella Vista Inn:

The first of our two investigated Round Two Homekey sites is Bella Vista Inn, a 64-unit motel conversion project in Santa Clara which would eventually be granted \$22 million from the state. Not only were very local residents opposed to the site, but so too was a growing cross-city coalition throughout the south County.

In late October 2021, residents called into a city council meeting to express concerns over the project’s impact on local safety and to urge council members to endeavor to stop its

³⁷ RSCA. "The PILOT." WordPress. Last modified December 2, 2020.

³⁸ Li, Han. "Redwood City community protesting the nearby Homekey project, a homeless housing purchase program funded by Governor Newsom." *Twitter.com*. 2020.

³⁹ Toledo, Aldo. "San Mateo County Buys Two Redwood City Hotels for Senior, Homeless Living." *The Mercury News* (San Jose), December 2, 2020.

development. Opponents were informed that the city council had no authority over the project since it was organized at the county and state level. Simultaneously, an article was being shared on the Chinese messaging app WeChat which would ensure that opposition did not end after that meeting. Published October 26th by Tian Tian Hui, originally in Chinese, the article warned that “HomeKey homeless shelters [were] about to enter the South Bay residential area in a big way.”⁴⁰ The article noted concerns about the locations’ proximities to childcare facilities, municipalities’ lack of transparency, increases in crime, and high expenses. It urged participation in the opposition through actions including joining the author’s WeChat group; emailing a photograph of one’s own signature to the designated email address nohomekeysantaclarasunnyvale@gmail.com; letter writing to county and city representatives; contacting district and even state legislators; and, most importantly, attending the Santa Clara County Board of Supervisors’ virtual meeting on November 2nd, at which both the Bella Vista and Mountain View’s Crestview Hotel would be voted on. Regarding the meeting, the article encouraged readers to “let the legislative members hear your voice” at “the final battle!”⁴¹

Although through our investigation, we were not able to access the mentioned WeChat group, we still believe this article, and likely the chat group, made a significant contribution to the organization of opposition to Bella Vista given the frequent similarities in talking points used at the November 2nd meeting. In total, 250 speakers joined the Zoom-based meeting to voice some opinion on the Homekey sites. 168 of those callers had arrived in opposition to one or multiple Homekey sites; 25 spoke specifically against the approval of the Bella Vista project while 95 opposed both Homekey sites discussed at the meeting, as well as the White Oak Lane site in Santa Clara which was not on the meeting agenda.

⁴⁰ Tian Tian Hui. “Please widely distribution~ Urgent! Homeless shelters will flood the South Bay neighborhood like crazy. And the people don’t even know! How to stop it?”

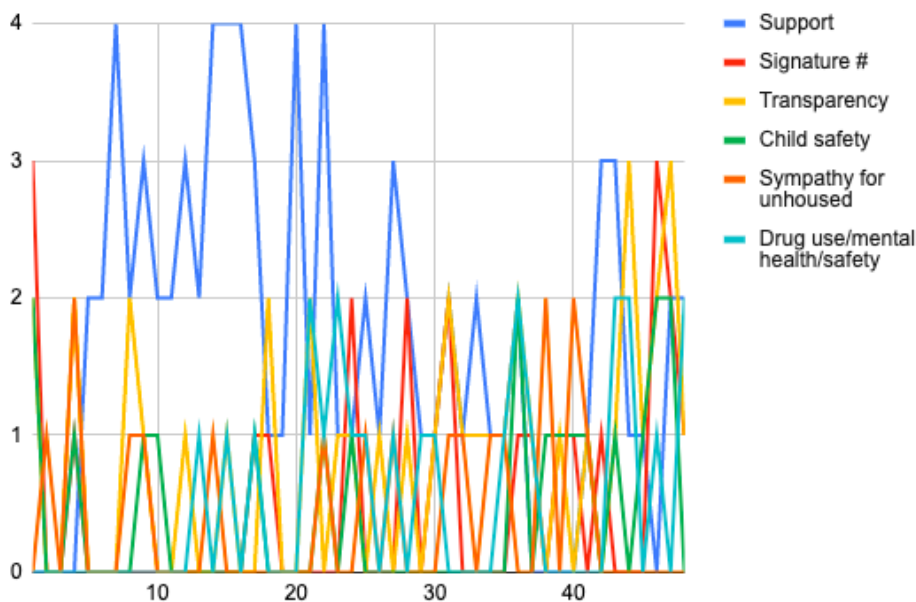
⁴¹ Ibid.

The opposed speakers' major themes can be mapped closely to the WeChat article. For instance, of the 120 comments about either Bella Vista or all Homekey sites, 20 comments included references to child safety, mirroring the article's warning that "some shelters are even minutes away from daycare centers, kindergartens, elementary and middle schools, community parks, supermarkets, etc." 40 comments mentioned the perceived lack of transparency and communication on the part of the county, echoing the article's charge that "the residents only learned of the construction of homeless shelters near their homes through 'grapevine.'" The article's description of the project as one in which the state provides "accommodation for those who are unemployed, mentally ill, have been evicted from a rented house, have a criminal record, and during drug rehabilitation" was likewise reflected in the 24 comments which expressed concern over Homekey residents' potential drug use, mental health issues, or tendencies towards violence. Finally, 18 comments included an expression of sympathy for unhoused people, which matched the article's assertion that "we should help the homeless, but we need to build it in an appropriate way, in appropriate places."⁴² Certainly, none of these talking points is particularly unique to Bella Vista but rather common among opposition to supporting unhoused people locally, and could have been developed independently by the speakers. Nonetheless, given that this article was originally shared in Chinese and thus may have been some readers' primary exposure to any information about the project, we believe it had a significant role in shaping opponents' thinking about the site even if it did not directly inform their comments.

A final theme which was galvanized by the WeChat article was the number of signatures opponents had gathered. The article had included instructions for circulating two petitions, one against Mountain View's Crestview and the other against Santa Clara's Bella Vista and White

⁴² Ibid.

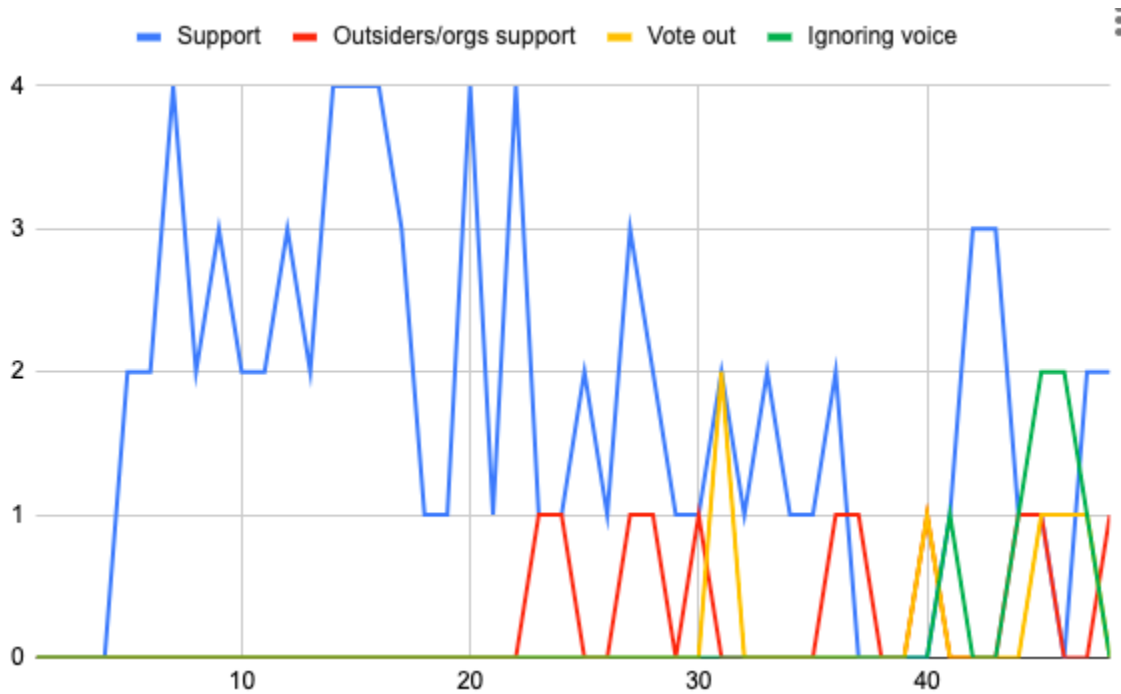
Oak Lane. It encouraged volunteers to have interested parties sign both forms, then send pictures to a designated email.⁴³ According to the opponents at the Board meeting, over 3000 people had signed the petitions, although most commenters did not disaggregate between the two different petitions' numbers and instead presented the 3000 figure as evidence against all three sites indiscriminately. Indeed, 24 comments made reference to these collected signatures in an effort to demonstrate widespread opposition to the sites. The timing of these five themes, as well as of Homekey support messages, is represented in the chart below, in which the x-axis represents the procession of comments while the y-axis represents the number of times a given theme appears in a set of five comments. The chart demonstrates that these themes appeared relatively evenly throughout the meeting.



However, we also believe that more coordination was occurring at the very time of the meeting. As public comment continued, a few new, distinct themes emerged among the comments. Opponents began to charge that the supporters of the project present at the meeting

⁴³ Ibid.

were nonresidents or just members of large organizations; that they would vote out the Supervisors who approved the project; that the alleged failures of the Homekey site in Milpitas, Hillview Court, would precipitate the same challenges in Mountain View and Santa Clara; and that the Board was ignoring the opponents' voices. These themes appeared in 11, 6, 8, and 7 comments, respectively. The chart below demonstrates the timing of these particular claims.



Particularly of note is the argument that support for these sites was fueled by outsiders. While each supportive caller established that they lived or worked in Santa Clara County, and many in the relevant cities of Mountain View, Santa Clara, or Sunnyvale, later opponents perceived, or sought to influence the Supervisors to perceive, supporters as non-locals, or at least non-hyper-locals, without any stake in the proposed Homekey sites. Yet simultaneously, 95 of the 168 opposed callers to the meeting, or 56% of opponents, spoke in general opposition to all South Bay Homekey sites. Moreover, the article's encouragement to gather signatures for both

petitions from the same signers further demonstrates that the opposition leaders saw value in organizing to oppose Homekey sites collectively, just as proponents do in support.

Ultimately, the Bella Vista case study provides significant evidence for the use of WeChat as a major organizing platform against Homekey, as well as insight into the ability of opponents to pivot their talking points in the midst of an ongoing meeting.

White Oak Lane

The proposed Project Homekey site on the vacant lot at 2035 White Oak Lane in Santa Clara appears notably different from the aforementioned case studies in: 1) degree of coordinated opposition 2) physical circumstances of the site, and 3) failure of eventual Homekey site development. However, in reviewing the themes and rhetoric of coordinated opposition to the development of this particular Project Homekey site, it is clear that many of the tactics and themes utilized by opposition to the aforementioned sites were also utilized in the context of White Oak Lane. Criminalization and villainization of the unhoused residents who would live in the proposed Homekey site, complaints of lack of community outreach and stripping of resident agency, as well as multiple forms of NIMBYISM (not in my backyard ideology) were extremely common and effective in establishing community opposition to the Homekey proposal. Primarily, it is important to state that the proposed site at White Oak Lane is the only site of our Homekey case studies, as well as the only proposed Homekey site in Silicon Valley, to fail — meaning that the funds were never granted to develop the site and 2035 White Oak Lane remains a vacant plot of land to this day. A variety of circumstances and reasons can be cited to have contributed to this failure, but ultimately, the influence of vocal and organized community opposition cannot be overstated in influencing the eventual fate of the site.

LifeMoves and Perceived Lack of Transparency

On November 9, 2021, after nearly three hours of public comments dominated by community members expressing their disdain for the proposed Homekey site, the Santa Clara City Council unanimously voted against pursuing the Project Homekey Site on White Oak Lane as a “co-developer” with non-profit developer LifeMoves.⁴⁴ An important feature of Project Homekey is its openness to a multitude of different applicants, including but not limited to: the California state government, local county governments, city governments, and nonprofits. In the case of White Oak Lane, it was neither the county nor the city of Santa Clara that applied for Homekey funds to redevelop the site, but a nonprofit organization, LifeMoves.⁴⁵ In their plan for a vacant lot of previously designated commercial land at 2035 White Oak Lane, LifeMoves requested \$14 million to develop a permanent housing site that would not only specifically house families with children, but provide onsite staff to offer childcare services and additional supportive services.⁴⁶ Though LifeMoves had recently been tasked by San Jose and Santa Clara County to develop ten other shelter sites in the area,⁴⁷ local residents expressed distrust with LifeMoves and coordinated a great degree of opposition around a perceived lack of transparency with the site, who was developing it, and why community members had not been contacted regarding LifeMoves’ application. In a private Discord server utilized extensively by community members associated with an organization titled “Safe Santa Clara County,” multiple members expressed disdain for LifeMoves, claiming that the organization “does not participate in community outreach” and refused to meet with White Oak residents regarding the project.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Grace Hase. “Santa Clara: Council nixes White Oak Lane site for potential Homekey development.” The Mercury News. November 10, 2021.

⁴⁵ Santa Clara City Council. “Council & Authorities Concurrent Meeting Call and Notice of Special SCSA Meeting.” November 9, 2021.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Eli Wolfe. “Coordinated campaign kills interim housing proposal in Santa Clara.” San Jose Spotlight. November 10, 2021.

⁴⁸ Nimby Patrol. “After the NIMBYs that blocked most of the homeless housing last night found out that we had infiltrated their Discord they deleted all their racist and awful messages!” Twitter Thread. November 10, 2021.

During LifeMoves' presentation at the Santa Clara City Council meeting, members of the Discord server additionally expressed concern that none of the LifeMoves presenters were community members who "paid" to live in the neighborhood.⁴⁹ This perceived lack of transparency expressed by the opposition to the site expanded beyond a distrust for LifeMoves, and toward a broader distrust of the Homekey program. Other members of the Discord cited the Bella Vista Homekey site, where apparently the County of Santa Clara (the applicant for the site) did not inform residents of the Homekey site until just weeks before development.⁵⁰ Separately, in a wide-reaching article published on Chinese social media and instant messaging platform, WeChat, author Tian Tian Hui expressed that many Chinese immigrant community members in Santa Clara had only heard of the proposed Homekey sites "through the grapevine" and were concerned with the sudden influx of sites throughout the South Bay.⁵¹ Ultimately, the voices of opposition to the proposed White Oak Lane Homekey site reveal that many community members seem to oppose Project Homekey due to its rather ambiguous application and approval process that seemingly allows for limited community outreach and stripping of community agency.

NIMBYISM and Criminalization:

Similar to the other three case studies outlined in this report, community opposition to the White Oak Lane Homekey site often invoked NIMBYISM: a common sentiment expressed by opposition to affordable/public housing initiatives that asserts one's support for development so long as these new developments are not close to one's own neighborhood. With regard to Homekey opposition, much of the NIMBYISM has been justified by criminalization and villainization of unhoused populations — claiming that the conversion of an old motel or land

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Tian Tian Hui. "Please widely distribution~ Urgent! Homeless shelters will flood the South Bay neighborhood like crazy. And the people don't even know! How to stop it?" Published on WeChat. October 26, 2021.

plot to housing for the unhoused would inevitably bring crime, drugs, and violence. A Change.org petition circulating around the time of the city council meeting on the White Oak Lane site with nearly 3,000 signatures referenced the site's proximity to children's playgrounds and schools as basis for halting the project.⁵² The aforementioned WeChat article similarly engaged in fearmongering as a basis for opposing the White Oak Lane and Bella Vista Homekey sites in Santa Clara neighborhoods, asserting that Homekey sites would present neighborhood children with more "security risks in and out of school." Just paragraphs later, the article states: "We should help the homeless, but we need to build it in an appropriate way, in appropriate places."⁵³ Additionally, coordination among the opposition to various Homekey sites appears evident in the White Oak opposition's reference to a domestic violence incident at the Milpitas Homekey site. Despite Santa Clara County Supportive Housing Director Consuelo Hernandez asserting that domestic violence incidents are widespread throughout the county and have in no way been linked to interim housing,⁵⁴ many local residents cited concerns of violent crime as the basis for their opposition to the proposed Homekey site in their direct neighborhood surrounding White Oak Lane.

Interestingly though, NIMBY sentiments voiced by community opposition were not simply restricted to villainization and criminalization of unhoused populations as was primarily observed in other case studies. In fact, many testimonies at the Santa Clara City Council meeting cited other logistical or physical factors as reasons for opposition to the proposed White Oak site in particular. Primarily, many residents and members of the Santa Clara City Council voiced concerns with the White Oak site's distance from public transportation, as well as its location at a

⁵² Steve Fang. "Protect Homes and Schools from Homeless Housing in Santa Clara County." Online petition published at Change.org. October 29, 2021.

⁵³ Tian Tian Hui. "Please widely distribution~ Urgent! Homeless shelters will flood the South Bay neighborhood like crazy. And the people don't even know! How to stop it?"

⁵⁴ Eli Wolfe. "Coordinated campaign kills interim housing proposal in Santa Clara."

particularly dangerous intersection of Lawrence Expressway.⁵⁵ Many testimonials from community members argued that these two factors unreasonably endangered or added difficulty to the lives of the unhoused who would live at the White Oak site, and as such, the Homekey project should not be pursued at this site, but somewhere else.⁵⁶ While some of these concerns may have come from genuinely concerned residents, messages from the Discord server used by many of the residents giving testimonies reveal that the arguments regarding the danger of the intersection, distance to public transit, and potential traffic concerns were actually included in a widely distributed set of talking points for those expressing opposition to the White Oak Homekey site.⁵⁷ These Discord messages from the “Safe Santa Clara County” server additionally revealed that many of the community members invoking NIMBY arguments to oppose the White Oak site were actually doing so because they felt as though Project Homekey sites have not been developed equitably across all neighborhoods. Noting that many members of the opposition were people of color, members of the Discord expressed discontent with a majority of Project Homekey sites concentrating in Santa Clara and Milpitas rather than wealthy, white neighborhoods such as Palo Alto.⁵⁸ While there are many potential reasons behind the unequal distributions of Homekey sites across different cities in Silicon Valley, it remains clear that this particular form of NIMBYISM, as well as those concerning dangerous intersections, traffic, and public transit, differ from the conventional NIMBY arguments regarding potential crime and drug-related fearmongering.

Platforms and Methods of Coordinated Opposition:

⁵⁵ Grace Hase. “Santa Clara: Council nixes White Oak Lane site for potential Homekey development.”

⁵⁶ Santa Clara City Council. “Council & Authorities Concurrent Meeting Call and Notice of Special SCSA Meeting.”

⁵⁷ Nimby Patrol. “After the NIMBYs that blocked most of the homeless housing last night found out that we had infiltrated their Discord they deleted all their racist and awful messages!”

⁵⁸ Ibid.

As illustrated thus far, the community opposition to the proposed Homekey site at White Oak Lane was extremely coordinated and utilized multiple private and public platforms to rally support, disseminate information, and mobilize testimonies at the Santa Clara City Council meeting. In coordinating the hundreds of local residents who spoke in opposition to the Homekey site at the City Council meeting, community members associated with an organization “Safe Santa Clara County” primarily used Discord, an instant messaging, private text and video chat server. Prior to and during the City Council meeting, members of the Discord sent out talking points that those giving public testimonies could reference and edit depending on which points seemed most effective in responding to the few testimonies in support of the Homekey site.⁵⁹ Amongst the aforementioned talking points, members of the Discord additionally proposed: making Project Homekey an election issue to put pressure on city council members to reject the proposal, and framing the White Oak plot of land as an opportunity for environmental restoration rather than affordable housing.⁶⁰

The aforementioned WeChat article echoed many similar points to those expressed in the Discord, but particularly focused on the lack of communication between governments and the community in developing Project Homekey sites. This article, in tandem with some messages on the Discord server, seem to indicate that local Chinese immigrant populations feel as though community outreach and information regarding the details of Project Homekey have not been available to them as a result of language barriers and inaccessibility. Aligned with these sentiments, the WeChat article mobilized residents by providing action items, letter writing templates, and a contact email (@nohomekeysantaclarasunnyvale@gmail.com), to those looking

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Santa Clara City Council. “Council & Authorities Concurrent Meeting Call and Notice of Special SCSA Meeting.”

to take action against the White Oak site — all of which were available in Chinese.⁶¹ The contact email cited in the WeChat article was additionally cited in the Change.org petition garnering nearly 3,000 signatures, indicating even further that opposition to the White Oak site was coordinated by a dedicated community across various platforms. In the petition description, additional letter writing templates are listed, with regularly updated information regarding various Homekey sites throughout not just Santa Clara, but Sunnyvale and Mountain View.⁶² Immediately following the city council meeting on November 9th, in which the City of Santa Clara voted against pursuing the proposed White Oak site, organizers of the Change.org petition released a petition update recapping the meeting, thanking supporters, and issuing next steps toward organizing against Bella Vista and other future Homekey sites. Additionally, the petition had originally included a link to the Safe Santa Clara County Discord, indicating widespread coordination of community members organizing across Discord, WeChat, and Change.org to mobilize local residents against not just the White Oak site, but any and all future Project Homekey sites in the South Bay.

Core Themes of Opposition:

The four case studies can be understood with three core themes discovered through the various narratives and forms of opposition: 1) criminalization of unhoused populations, 2) lack of transparency and community agency, and 3) various forms of NIMBYism.

Criminalization of unhoused populations. All of the case study sites saw opposition that believed the unhoused populations serviced by Project Homekey would alter the character of their communities, bringing the dangers of increased crime, substance abuse, and untreated mental illness. Current residents believed their safety would be undermined by the completion of each

⁶¹ Tian Tian Hui. “Please widely distribution~ Urgent! Homeless shelters will flood the South Bay neighborhood like crazy. And the people don’t even know! How to stop it?”

⁶² Steve Fang. “Protect Homes and Schools from Homeless Housing in Santa Clara County.”

project, carrying the underlying assumption that the incoming residents at a site would be violent and uncontrollable criminals. As such, the proximity the sites would have to neighborhood children was cause for concern. Residents expected the incoming residents, as compared to individuals with stable housing, to be much more likely to expose children to secondhand smoke, for example, suffer from substance abuse, and perpetrate crimes against vulnerable populations in the original community. The fact that this rhetoric was even applied to the potential residents of Shores Landing, which as mentioned above is housing for extremely low-income senior citizens, a population not at all associated with violent crime, lends itself to the second theme of opposition focusing on the lack of clear information about the Homekey projects.

Lack of transparency and community agency. Both the Milpitas and the Redwood Shores case study sites remarked about the speed of the conversions as being too fast, and the sense that the projects were being rushed contributed to the animosity against them. Residents organized in opposition to the Homekey conversions felt as if they had no say in the process and were unable to influence the outcome, which additionally generated distrust of the process and pessimistic evaluations of the conversions' impact on the community. Government officials and the housing developers in partnership with them were not clear enough about the processes involved in the conversion of a site into affordable housing to satisfy many residents, and their late or otherwise deemed inadequate communication made this worse. Residents got the sense that officials were hiding information from them about the selection process as well as the potential dangers associated with the various sites. All of this was worsened in the presence of language barriers, as the community members opposing the White Oak Lane conversion emphasized, where residents felt not only unheard but additionally that there was never any attempt to be understood nor to be helped to understand.

Various forms of NIMBYism. The distrust engendered by the lack of transparency paired with the villainizing stereotypes about the unsheltered caused extreme scrutiny to be paid to the location of the Homekey sites. NIMBYism in its most traditional sense was employed by opposition at all the sites; residents agreed that the projects were needed, but they argued that a richer city somewhere else would be a better fit for them. Within that, there was a racial element wherein community members addressed the predominance of Homekey sites in neighborhoods of color and/or immigrant backgrounds while whiter areas remained seemingly excluded from the selection process, and this contributed to a sense of unfairness that fueled their NIMBY arguments. There were additional more novel articulations of NIMBYism that focused on issues with pre-designated land use, traffic concerns, accessibility of public transportation, the ability of incomers to integrate into the existing community, present amenities/resources in the community or lack thereof, and more. Even when the articulations were framed as concern for the wellbeing of those the Homekey site would serve, these NIMBY arguments still tended toward dehumanization and demonization of unhoused populations and did not offer viable alternative solutions.

Navigating Opposition and Conclusion:

In researching and analyzing the core themes and methodologies of local community opposition to various Project Homekey sites throughout Santa Clara and San Mateo County, this report ultimately seeks to provide SV@Home with 1) deeper understanding of organized opposition to Project Homekey, and 2) potential avenues of navigating this same opposition in the future. Examining the similarities in rhetoric and strategies utilized by opposition to all four case study sites, this report concludes that there currently exists a network of community members throughout multiple cities organizing through digital infrastructure to oppose Project

Homekey sites whenever possible. While this of course does present a rather daunting challenge for local governments and organizations like SV@Home to implement Project Homekey and providing housing for unhoused populations, it is important to contextualize this opposition and acknowledge that the site at White Oak Lane has been the only Project Homekey site in the area to fail. As such, this analysis of organized opposition to Project Homekey can be understood through a forward-looking lens. Based on the core themes of opposition noted in this paper, we recommend a series of potential initiatives for local housing organizations and governments to adopt to counter similarly organized opposition in the future.

The first recommendation comes in the form of broader, more expansive community outreach conducted by local governments and organizations regarding Project Homekey sites. A core theme of opposition across all four case studies was local residents feeling a lack of transparency or agency over these decisions. While it appears as though some outreach may have been conducted for Round 2 Homekey sites, including Bella Vista and White Oak, it is clear that an overwhelming majority of residents oppose Project Homekey initiatives in some part because of a perceived lack of transparency and agency. Workshopping sessions or planning groups with local residents to perhaps collectively choose Project Homekey sites or educate local residents on the details and true impacts of Project Homekey, might reduce this opposition in the future, and at the very least, lessen the validity of the opposition citing a lack of community outreach efforts. Linked to this recommendation of expanded community outreach programs regarding Project Homekey is the prioritization of language accessibility. In the cases of both Bella Vista and White Oak, a large portion of the opposition consisted of Chinese immigrant populations with seemingly limited English proficiency who expressed outrage over only hearing of the Project Homekey sites in their neighborhood after nearly all decisions had been made. Distributing

materials and updated information on Project Homekey developments in multiple languages grants these communities access to accurate information, thus reducing the saliency of misinformation on social media platforms such as WeChat. If local organizations and governments want to implement Project Homekey on a broader scale with less opposition than in recent times, these immigrant communities need to be specifically reached out to, as to build trust and provide adequate, accessible resources on developments in their neighborhoods.

From a logistical perspective, it would additionally benefit local organizations and governments to more deliberately select Project Homekey sites without immediately visible “complications” or “concerns.” A comparison between Bella Vista and White Oak reveals the importance of this particular point. Bella Vista, despite encountering the same organized opposition of Santa Clara residents as White Oak, passed partially because it was a relatively perfect site for Project Homekey. It was an old motel ready to be converted, close to public transit, and was not situated at a dangerous intersection or on a previously commercial spot of land as the White Oak Lane site was. Because of these factors, local residents opposing Project Homekey were not able to latch onto any specific concerns with Bella Vista, but were able to mobilize a seemingly more legitimate and successful campaign against White Oak. In this way, appropriate site selection for future Project Homekey initiatives would significantly reduce the opportunity for coordinated opposition to take hold.

Ultimately, even if these recommendations have already been implemented with little success or simply appear not feasible, it is worth noting that local housing justice organizations can learn a great deal from the methods and platforms utilized by Safe Santa Clara County and other organized opposition to mobilize residents at local county and city council hearings. Live message servers such as Discord, online petition sites, and fundraising pages proved rather

successful in garnering attention and attracting local resident opposition to Project Homekey. Should SV@Home or other organizations seek to mobilize community members in favor of Project Homekey or other progressive housing initiatives, these tactics and servers could be of great value. In the coming months and years, community opposition to programs such as Project Homekey will inevitably continue to form, and we hope that this report provides some insight into how this community opposition is organized, as well as what tactics progressive housing organizations like SV@Home can use to navigate, lessen, or counter these voices.

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