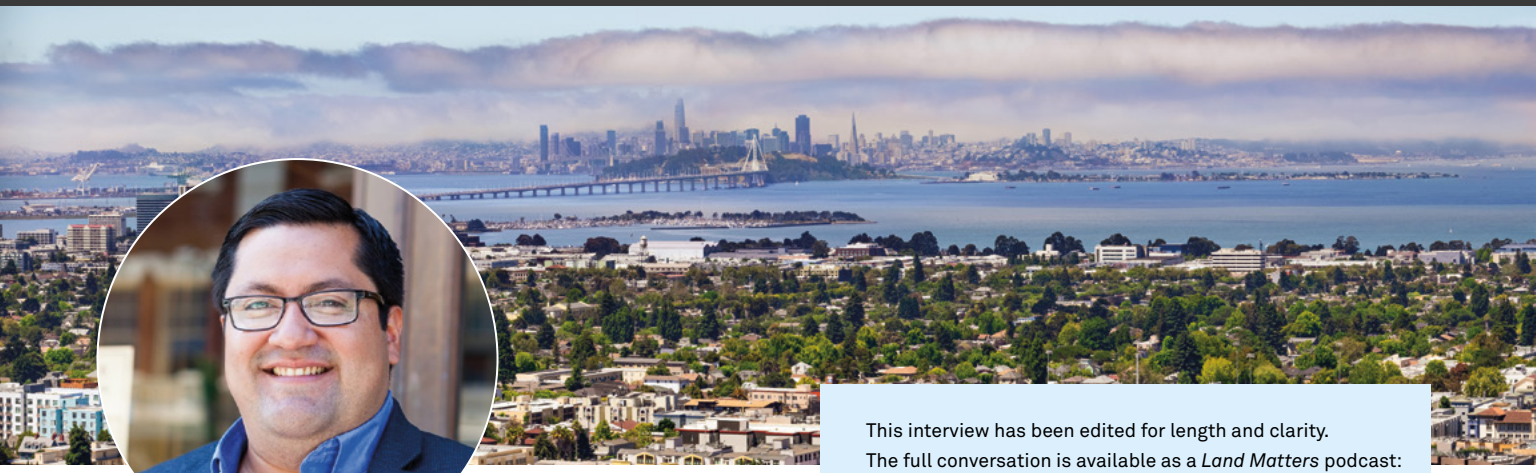

This interview has been edited for length and clarity. The full conversation is available as a *Land Matters* podcast: **www.lincolninst.edu/publications/podcasts-videos**.

Jesse Arreguín was elected mayor of Berkeley, California, in 2016, becoming the first Latino to hold the office and, at 32, the youngest mayor in a century. The son and grandson of farmworkers, Arreguín grew up in San Francisco. At nine, he helped lead efforts to name a city street after activist Cesar Chavez, beginning a lifelong commitment to social justice. After Arreguín graduated from the University of California, Berkeley, he stayed in the city, serving on boards including the Housing Advisory Commission, Rent Stabilization Board, Zoning Adjustments Board, Planning Commission, and City Council.

As mayor, Arreguín—who is also president of the Association of Bay Area Governments—has prioritized affordable housing, infrastructure, and education. He recently met with Senior Fellow Anthony Flint at City Hall to talk about this city of 125,000, with a focus on housing and the task of building more of it. Fittingly, the sounds of construction could be heard outside the fifth-floor office suite.

Addressing Affordability in Berkeley

ANTHONY FLINT: *It seems like Berkeley has become a national symbol of the YIMBY/NIMBY [Yes in My Back Yard/Not in My Back Yard] divide. What should developers be contributing to increase supply, provide different housing options, and increase density at appropriate locations?*

JESSE ARREGUÍN: I think a lot needs to be done by government, and we're seeing a lot of leadership being demonstrated by our governor, by the state legislature, by our attorney general, who established a housing strike force to enforce state housing laws, and by regional and local government. In Berkeley, over the past several years, we have taken significant steps to pass laws to streamline production and encourage a variety of different housing options in our community.

We've also made a commitment that we are going to end exclusionary zoning. I think part of the reason why Berkeley is a symbol of the debate happening in cities throughout the country is because Berkeley is the birthplace of exclusionary zoning. In 1916, the city adopted its first zoning ordinance to zone the neighborhoods in the Elmwood District as single-family to prevent the construction of a dance hall.

Not surprisingly, many people who would frequent that dance hall would predominantly be people of color. Sadly, in Berkeley, single-family zoning was founded on the foundation of racial exclusion.

My perspective on zoning, on housing issues, has evolved over the years, because the crisis in Berkeley and in California has worsened significantly in the past five years. We have increasing numbers of people who are experiencing homelessness, tent encampments on our streets, working families who can't afford to live in the community they work in, students who can't afford to live in the community they go to school in. The status quo is not working, and we need to take bold action.

I think developers are eager to see leadership on the part of government. We need to meet them at the middle and we have to do what we can to make it easier for them to build. But at the same time, we have to make sure that they are providing community benefits while we are seeing new market-rate construction, particularly in communities where we've seen significant amounts of displacement and gentrification.

We have historically Black neighborhoods where we're seeing homes sell at $2 million. Our Black population has declined from 20 percent in 1970 to seven percent now. I think that is a direct result of the decisions that government made to not build housing, and of the astronomical cost of housing in Berkeley.

AF: *Let's talk about gentrification and real estate speculation, a problem in many cities. Los Angeles recently started a program of land banking parcels near transit stations. Is that the kind of thing that is going to be necessary when you're obviously in white-hot market conditions here?*

JA: I think so, and we are prioritizing public land for affordable housing. We've converted parking lots to affordable housing projects. We have one being constructed right up the street, 140 units of affordable housing and permanent supportive housing—the largest project we've ever built for housing the homeless. We need to prioritize public land for public good. There's no question about that.

I do agree we need to look at land banking. We need to provide money so nonprofit developers can buy parcels to keep them permanently affordable. We need to look at how we can support land trusts, not just buying properties but buying buildings to keep them permanently affordable. That is part of Berkeley's housing strategy. It's not just building new construction, but also the preservation of existing, naturally occurring affordable housing.

I think we need to focus on the three P's, and I say this often: production of new housing; preservation of existing, naturally occurring affordable housing; and protection of existing residents from displacement.

We have working families who can't afford to live in the community they work in, students who can't afford to live in the community they go to school in. The status quo is not working, and we need to take bold action.

AF: *How might a vacancy tax, similar to what we see in San Francisco and Oakland, address this issue of the burgeoning value of land?*

JA: We actually recently placed on the ballot a residential vacancy tax, which is a little bit different from Oakland's; it doesn't focus on vacant parcels, but it's focused on vacant homes and vacant residential units. There are some who have said, "Well, we have thousands of vacant units, and therefore, we don't need to build more housing." That's absurd. We need to

Left: Berkeley, California, with San Francisco visible in the background. Credit: Sundry Photography via iStock/Getty Images Plus.
Inset: Courtesy of Jesse Arreguín.

build housing, and we also need to put housing that is off the market back on the market.

The more that we can address actions by speculators and by scofflaws—I would characterize people who keep properties blighted and vacant for many years as scofflaws—it will address the artificial constraining of the market and will put more units back on the market. We spent a lot of time crafting this vacancy tax and really thought through the situations in which units could be vacant legitimately. The focus is not on small property owners but on owners of large rental properties, because part of what we are seeing is, frankly, speculation of the market.

We hope at some point we don't have to charge a tax, because all the housing is being rented or is being used. That's the goal of the vacancy tax, not to penalize but to incentivize owners of multifamily properties to use the properties for their intended purpose.

I just have to say once again that this is not a panacea, this is not the solution to the housing crisis, and that we need to build new housing. What we have is a crisis that is decades in the making through deliberate actions on the part of government, through racial segregation or redlining, through fierce resistance to building housing, and through policies that have constrained the production of housing.

What we have is a crisis that is decades in the making through deliberate actions on the part of government, through racial segregation or redlining, through fierce resistance to building housing, and through policies that have constrained the production of housing.

AF: *As a hub of innovation, Berkeley has a thriving economy. Do you believe it's going to be possible for more workers in Berkeley to be able to live in Berkeley, or is there a built-in imbalance that you just have to manage and come to terms with?*

JA: I think it's possible . . . but that's going to require that we build thousands and thousands of units of housing, that we prioritize building housing around our transit stations, that we look at upzoning low-density commercial neighborhoods, that we look at building multifamily housing in residential neighborhoods. Every part of our city needs to meet its responsibility to create more housing. No part of our community can be walled off to new people living here.

I really do think that gets to the core of who we are, who we say we are as a city. Are we a city of equity and inclusivity? If we are, then we need to welcome new people living in our community. We create those opportunities for people to live here: people who previously lived here and were displaced, people who work here but can't afford to live here. And obviously, there's a climate benefit we can give people to not have to drive an hour, two hours to get to Berkeley. That reduces those cars on the road, reduces greenhouse gas emissions, and helps us mitigate the impacts of climate change, and building dense, transit-oriented development is a critical part of taking bold climate action. Our land use policies and our actions to encourage more dense housing are really critical climate action strategies.

Berkeley is expanding its housing supply as part of an effort to address affordability. Credit: Jessica Christian/*San Francisco Chronicle*/Polaris.

A cyclist uses a dedicated bike lane on Telegraph Avenue, Berkeley. Credit: Andrea Kissack/Courtesy of KQED.

AF: *Could you talk about the importance of bicycle and pedestrian safety in your view of how the city functions and how Berkeley is doing in that regard?*

JA: Because we have such high numbers of people who bike to work and walk and use alternative modes of transportation, we need to make it safer and easier for people to get around town. Sadly, we've seen an increasing number of collisions between cars and bicyclists, and pedestrians.

Like many communities, we've adopted a vision zero policy that's focused on reducing traffic injuries and fatalities. We are looking at how we can redesign and reconstruct our streets to make them safer for people who walk and bike. Then, obviously, being the home of the University of California, we have a lot of young people who are constantly walking, biking around, and we need to make it safer for students and for our residents to get out of their cars and to choose non–carbon intensive modes of mobility.

AF: *On climate, what else can Berkeley do? How is this region addressing the climate crisis?*

JA: I think the best way for Berkeley to address the climate crisis is through recognizing, one, it's not a crisis, it's an emergency—and we see the real material effects of it here in California. We've had some of the most devastating wildfires in California history over the last five years, [and] Berkeley is not immune to the threat of wildfire. That's a pretty telltale sign that the climate emergency is here, it's not going away, and we have to recognize that we need to take bold action.

I'm proud that Berkeley has really been a leader in combating climate change. We were one of the first cities to adopt a climate action plan. Obviously, building dense infill housing is a critical part of that.

We do need to promote more electric mobility, whether it's through micro-mobility or through converting heavy-duty and light-duty vehicles to electric, and California's really been a leader at that. While there are very ambitious targets that the state has set to transition our vehicle fleet to electric, we don't have the infrastructure to support that yet. We hope with the new federal bipartisan infrastructure law and the climate law that was just passed that there'll be significantly more resources available that we can leverage to expand that infrastructure in California.

Electrifying our buildings is important too, and Berkeley was the first city in California to adopt the ban on natural gas and require that newly constructed buildings be all-electric. We're also looking at how we can get existing buildings to be electric, which is much tougher. . . . All those things are important, but we also have to adapt to climate change . . . whether it's how we address wildfire risk or sea-level rise. Berkeley's along the San Francisco Bay. We know that parts of our city, unless we do something, are going to see significant flooding and inundation.

That's where I think the regional approach comes in. These [issues] can't be solved by one city. A lot of work's been done at the Metropolitan Transportation Commission and Association of Bay Area Governments—our regional planning agency and council of governments—to bring government agencies together to explore strategies. I think that's an area where regionalism and regional government's going to make a difference.

Anthony Flint is a senior fellow at the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, contributing editor to *Land Lines*, and host of the *Land Matters* podcast.