

Interview with

**Kevin Ma**

conducted by Michael Kahan

for the “Understanding the History of Housing in Mountain View: Stories of Racism, Anti-Discrimination, and Movement towards Inclusion” project by the City of Mountain View’s Human Relations Commission,

in collaboration with Senior Lecturer Michael Kahan and team from Stanford University.

Mountain View Historical Association  
Mountain View Public Library

Conducted on June 29, 2022

## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of “Understanding the History of Housing in Mountain View: Stories of Racism, Anti-Discrimination, and Movement towards Inclusion” is to document the history of discrimination and efforts to fight discrimination in housing in the city of Mountain View, California. Some of the information collected was shared with the public at an event sponsored by the Mountain View Human Relations Commission, held on July 26, 2022. In order to make the interviews available to researchers and members of the public, they will be added to the historical collection of the Mountain View Historical Association (MVHA) and/or the Mountain View Public Library (MVPL) and made available for public use. They may also be shared with other libraries and collections, including those at Stanford University.

## BIO

Michael Kahan is the co-director of the Program on Urban Studies at Stanford University, and a senior lecturer in Sociology. His interest in the historical transformation of urban space has led to publications on topics including the integration of streetcars in the 1850s, sanitation reform in the 1890s, the geography of prostitution in the 1910s, and redevelopment in California in the 1990s. His teaching includes courses on gentrification and on the history of San Francisco. He holds a B.A. from Yale and a Ph.D. from the University of Pennsylvania, both in history. He has been a resident of Mountain View since 1999.

## ABSTRACT



Kevin Ma is an activist who has worked on issues of housing with a number of organizations, including Mountain View Housing Justice, Mountain View YIMBY, and the League of Women Voters Los Altos-Mountain View, where he currently serves as Co-Chair of their Housing Committee. In this interview, he outlines his work with these organizations, as well as his opinions and actions regarding his work in Measures C and D, as well as MV's future in fair housing.

Date of Interview: June 29, 2022

Interviewer: Michael Kahan

Interviewee: Kevin Ma

**Michael Kahan:** 00:06

All right. Well welcome. Hello, my name is Michael Kahan and I'm an interviewer with the city of Mountain View's Human Relations Commission, in partnership with Mountain View Historical Association on a project entitled: "Understanding the History of Housing in Mountain View: Stories of Racism, Anti-Discrimination, and Movement toward Inclusion". The purpose of this project is to document the history of discrimination and efforts to fight discrimination in housing in the city of Mountain View, California. Some of the information collected will be shared with the public at an event sponsored by the Mountain View Human Relations Commission, tentatively scheduled or which is scheduled I should say for July 26, 2022. Today is June 29, 2022. And I am interviewing Kevin Ma. Kevin Ma is an activist who has worked on issues of housing with a number of organizations, including Mountain View Housing Justice<sup>1</sup>, Mountain View YIMBY<sup>2</sup>, and the Mountain View Los Altos League of Women Voters<sup>3</sup> where he currently serves as Co-Chair of the Housing Committee. For safety reasons during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, we are conducting this interview by Zoom teleconferencing technology from our respective locations. I'm at my home in Mountain View, California. And Kevin, are you also at home in Mountain View?

**Kevin Ma:** 01:49

Yes, I'm in my condo in Mountain View, yes.

**Michael Kahan:** 01:53

Excellent. And we are also joined by the research assistant for this project, and I will let her introduce herself.

**Kamilah Arteaga:** 02:02

Hello, I'm Kamilah. I'm the research assistant for this project in collaboration with Michael Kahan, and Stanford and the Mountain View housing commission. I'm currently calling in from Redwood City from my home that I rent with my parents.

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<sup>1</sup> From MV Housing Justice website: "The purpose of the Mountain View Housing Justice Coalition is to promote the rights of tenants across all rental units, including mobile home spaces; to protect against unjustified rent increases and evictions without cause; to end the displacement of individuals and families occupying naturally affordable housing; to end arbitrary and discriminatory actions by property owners and their representatives; to protect vehicle residents against harassment and exclusion; and to advocate for the development of affordable housing in the City of Mountain View."

<sup>2</sup> Mountain View YIMBY (Yes In My Backyard) is a section of the South Bay YIMBY; from their website, their goals are to "Legalizing Housing, Streamline Permitting, Fund Affordable Housing, and Fix Broken Incentives".

<sup>3</sup> The League of Women Voters of the Los Altos-Mountain View Area is a nonpartisan political organization that encourages informed and active participation in government, works to increase understanding of major public policy issues, and influences public policy through education and advocacy. (<https://www.lwvlamv.org/>)

**Michael Kahan 02:18**

Excellent. I think for the record. Kamilah, I think you should say your full name.

**Kamilah Arteaga 02:23**

Oh, Kamilah Arteaga.

**Michael Kahan 02:25**

Okay. Great. Thank you. All right. So Kevin, I guess just to get us started. Could you tell me your name, just to make sure that we get it correct?

**Kevin Ma: 02:38**

My name is Kevin Ma.

**Michael Kahan 02:41**

Excellent. You mentioned that you currently live here in Mountain View?

**Kevin Ma 02:48**

Yes. One year anniversary, actually.

**Michael Kahan 02:51**

Oh, fabulous. All right. Well, happy anniversary. So you moved here, it sounds like about a year ago. Can you tell us how you first got involved with the issue of housing here in Mountain View?

**Kevin Ma 03:07**

Sure. So before I was here, living physically in the city of Mountain View, I lived in Palo Alto, in renting a single room for about three years. And inherently, it becomes pretty obvious when you move into the valley that housing is a very important issue. One, because it seems a little exorbitant to spend about \$1,000 for a single room in someone's home that was built in the 1930s, and really the only soft story building in the entire neighborhood. Which is a fancy term of saying if an earthquake happened [makes splat motion with hands]. But inherently it faces a lot of demographic issues, right? There's constant talk about people moving to other states where it's cheaper, to move into other cities where we talk about cities like Sacramento, or Modesto, or the Central Valley where we're loosening our housing crisis by making housing crises elsewhere. Because, people who have jobs have the massive income disparity compared to where they would live, which drives those who over there would have income disparity where rising rents and all of that. Inherently, we see a lot of effects of that locally, we see RVs on the street, people who are part of our community but yet cannot find a stable place of shelter, maybe because they were driven out of all places because they couldn't make rent. Or even other people say like, this rent is not providing any of the equity benefits that you might get from homeownership and that is a joke from people even my generation, new tech workers, that are like, "We are here just to

make money just to buy a home built in the 50s". So, this is not a situation that should be continued in the future.

**Michael Kahan 05:18**

So it sounds like you were already aware of these issues when you were living and renting in Palo Alto. How did that awareness begin to translate into more, kind of political involvement?

**Kevin Ma 05:36**

So in, I believe, after the 2018 election, I believe with the rise of AOC, I decided that, you know, maybe the views that I have, which are more, left of center to left, could be more useful. So I joined my local Democratic Socialists of America (DSA)<sup>4</sup> chapter, which later led me to Mountain View Housing Justice. Because at the time Mountain View Housing Justice was working on a campaign regarding, at the time was a sneaky repeal, which was a term created by them, in reference to a landlord-initiated petition to try to modify the Community Stabilization and Fair Rent Act, or the CSFRA, which was passed in Mountain View, as Measure V in 2016<sup>5</sup>. And inherently, it led me to dive deeper into what are my rights? What are my rights as a tenant, which, as a new tenant, you're not really told these things. You're pretty much just given the lease and say, you know, do whatever. Which is a little different than homeownership, where you're given hundreds of pages of disclosures. Though I mean, even in this valley, there are no contingencies, so it's not that much better. Then that later transferred to my first, I guess, electoral work, which was collecting signatures for the referendum of the RV ban. So at the time city council passed an ordinance to ban RVs along various bikeways and "narrow streets", which did involve hustling because a referendum has a much tighter deadline than just a normal initiative, you have to get those signatures within basically a month. Which we did manage, though it is unfortunate [of the result] that which later became Measure C<sup>6</sup>. That we were more successful with the campaign against Measure D, which was a form of the sneaky repeal that was more city initiated rather than landlord initiated as a form of a, "compromise". But we still felt there are certain issues in that would make it weaker than we actually want it to be. The CSFRA was created as a charter amendment for a reason, not as a regular ordinance. So those are some of our works there.

**Michael Kahan 08:17**

So as you got involved in these electoral campaigns, signature gathering, and so forth, were you just kind of working on your own? Or is this when you started to get involved with some of the organizations in the city?

**Kevin Ma 08:33**

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<sup>4</sup> A left-wing multi-tendency socialist and labor-oriented political organization.

<sup>5</sup> On November 8, 2016, Mountain View residents voted to enact Measure V, also known as the Community Stabilization and Fair Rent Act (CSFRA), to stabilize rents and provide just cause eviction protections for certain Rental Units in Mountain View.

<sup>6</sup> Passing in 2020, The city ordinance restricts the parking of oversized vehicles which exceed 22 feet in length, or 7 feet in width, or 7 feet in height, including boats, large trucks, and recreational vehicles (RVs).

At that time, it was mainly within Housing Justice. Housing Justice was the main, I guess, group, along with some other groups, like the DSA, or the Tenants Coalition<sup>7</sup>. And then eventually led me to other groups such as the League and Mountain View YIMBY. Because, as is perhaps a joke in local politics is all our groups share membership. So a lot of groups, and a lot of people wear multiple hats.

**Michael Kahan 09:08**

Yeah, I guess. Maybe that kind of brings up a question of what do you see as the missions of these different organizations that you're involved in, how are they similar to each other? And where do they differ? What's the, you know, what's the sort of specific distinguishing feature of each organization?

**Kevin Ma 09:37**

The most specific way I can answer that question is using a three-P strategy, which was, I believe, a concept created by the CASA Compact<sup>8</sup>, which was an old, intergovernmental initiative to try to address the housing crisis in 2014, 2012. That means there's a focus on production, protection and preservation, so each group has different focuses on either side of those P's. Mountain View YIMBY as perhaps known from the YIMBY moniker is focusing on encouraging the production of new housing. Because if you've ever been to a planning commission or city council, whenever a land use item comes up, there's usually people speaking for a lot of changes that may or may not tank a project. So that's more on the production side of things. The Mountain View Housing Justice was created from the original Mountain View Tenants Coalition, which somewhat split up after measure V was created. That's much more focused on protection. That's the rights of tenants in terms of controls against exorbitant rent increases, or unjust evictions, or, more recently, questions about what goes into rent, or what happens if my landlord has sold the building to someone else. They want to either tear down their entire thing to make it into townhomes. Or just to, you know, reset rents. The League is somewhere in between, they're focused on more general holistic practices of the city league operates on various position levels. As long as we have a position, that means we have an opening to enter the conversation.

**Michael Kahan 11:40**

What about, so that's, I think that's a nice description of the different goals of these organizations. Do they have different means that they work through, different, you know, sort of tactics and strategies that they use to try to achieve the goals that they're aiming for?

**Kevin Ma 12:01**

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<sup>7</sup> Taken from their Facebook page in 2022 (<https://www.facebook.com/MVTenantsCoalition/>): "A coalition of tenants, homeowners, activists, people of faith, business owners, teachers and tech employees seeking stability and dignity for renters."

<sup>8</sup> From CASA website: "The Committee to House the Bay Area (CASA) was brought together by MTC (Metropolitan Transportation Commission) and the Association of Bay Area Governments (ABAG) to help identify game-changing solutions to the Bay Area's housing crisis"; From 2017-2018 they worked on the CASA compact, which was the report of their findings.

Yes, given the situation, right. The Housing Justice took the electoral route, because at the time, that was the only real choice you had, if the council passed something, the only thing you can do to it is either put it on the ballot first, or sue. Which both happened, just one before the other. Mountain View YIMBY focuses more on trying to get people into these meetings where usually the only people who show up to a meeting are people who have strong concerns for something. So, they're different in that sense. I mean, they can share other things like in the RV ban meeting, Mountain View Housing Justice and friends were at the meeting in person, which was one of the reasons why the meeting lasted until three in the morning. Mountain View YIMBY perhaps could think of an initiative in the future, but inherently a lot of these strategies are pretty similar. Just the differences are, who is in the groups. They share a lot of people but they're not totally overlapping.

**Michael Kahan 13:16**

Yeah, that was actually going to be my next question. Do they appeal to sort of different groups of people to participate?

**Kevin Ma 13:25**

Yes, there's probably some demographic differences, mainly because outreach is a difficult question to handle. Mountain View Housing Justice has done flyering about tenants' rights. But again, that's kind of hard to necessarily gain new people, because tenants are trying to make their means to be able to actually remain in the city. Whereas inherently, for Mountain View YIMBY, the message is we need to make things faster, less held up by council is attractive to those who are facing the issues of the consequences, but not necessarily those who are, let's say charitably benefiting from the situation.

**Michael Kahan 14:23**

Just for the record, can you explain the name of Mountain View YIMBY? What does that name signify?

**Kevin Ma 14:31**

YIMBY stands for Yes In My Backyard. This is a reference to the term NIMBY, Not In My Backyard. Which is the concept of people opposing broadly societally beneficial projects, just because they may perceive an impact in their area, which may or may not be true. This was one of the things that both groups were supportive of, who were in the room, was the Crestview Hotel acquisition, for example, where there was quite a bit of news over that project.

**Michael Kahan 15:09**

Do you want to explain about what that project is?

**Kevin Ma 15:14**

Sure. So during the pandemic, the state created a new program called Homekey, which would provide funds for local governments to be able to purchase property to be able to turn into some form of shelter or affordable housing. In this case, Crestview, which is a residential hotel - which I've heard previously



was used for rentals, long term rentals, rather than a “boutique hotel” - was purchased by the city of Mountain View. The owner actually reached out to the city first and, are you interested in it? The city said, we are, but let's first find a funding source. And so they worked with the county to get the funds from the state which have been granted to turn the property into long term supportive housing. It's still open exactly who's going to be in it, that's up to future questions. But there was a lot of concerns at the time, a lot of misconceptions, which kind of follow anytime an affordable housing project comes along. People question the kinds of people in it and the behavior that they think may be associated with it. Which is why Supervisor Simitian<sup>9</sup> at the time proposed some kind of annual reporting scheme to demonstrate to people that it is not what people perhaps might perceive a project would be.

**Michael Kahan 16:51**

I want to rewind a little bit to what sounds like was your first point of involvement politically on these issues which was if I'm understanding correctly, was the RV ban trying to fight the RV ban by collecting signatures for what ultimately became Measure C. Can you just talk a little bit more about what that was like? What was it like to gather the signatures? Do you remember sort of what it was like to be part of that campaign? What stands out in your mind from that involvement?

**Kevin Ma 17:48**

The involvement at the ground level was that, for one, since we did manage to get a pass, [it indicated] there was enough people who wanted to ask more questions about this topic, right? That's why I believe one of the more common ways we got people to sign was saying, let this be a vote, let's have the people actually vote on this topic to actually figure out what is the on-the-ground popularity about removing oversized vehicles. There were a few cases where it felt a bit unsafe. You know a person intimidating people to get off the property because signature collectors are not necessarily always the most friendliest of people. Or the opposite, people are not necessarily that friendly to signature collectors if they are walking in the neighborhoods. Paid signature gatherers don't really walk through neighborhoods, paid signature gathers just stick around with shopping centers for a reason. I guess the deadline just gives you a certain sense of urgency that says, you need to go out and go. Because it was doable right? We did get it done. It was doable. It just took a lot of reaching out to networks, I guess. I mean, the real answer is that organizing is never clean. It's usually bursty-er than we would like. Those are my top level thoughts.

**Michael Kahan 19:38**

What about the campaign against the sneaky repeal, Measure D, is that one that you have specific, you know, thoughts about as well?

**Kevin Ma 19:51**

I came relatively late on that conversation. The term sneaky repeal was already pretty well known at the time. Which is what likely led to Measure D compromise measure. I mean, the real nail to the coffin was Measure D because Measure D was the weaker form. So if the weaker form died in a massive defeat,

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<sup>9</sup> County of Santa Clara District 5 (includes Mountain View, Palo Alto, Los Altos, etc.) Supervisor, Joe Simitian

then the original thing would probably not stand a chance. Measure D was city-led, which gave it the institutional push like, hey, the city has supported it. I mean, Measure D, like the letter D, is useful in that context, because it is a quick quote, quick quip, “D is for deception”.

**Michael Kahan** 20:48

How do these laws affect you personally? Do you feel that it's a personal issue or that you've been impacted directly by rent control or the RV ban or by any of these specific policies?

**Kevin Ma** 21:12

For that campaign, not really, because again, at the time I was living in Palo Alto, where rent control, or any discussion of rent control was really not going to happen anytime soon. Renter protections at all were basically delayed four years, as in, Palo Alto only got actually working on it starting last year with a grant. It was more of a case in my eyes to help the neighboring community because it is somewhat true that tech money does exacerbate things. As a tech worker, there's some thoughts about that.

**Michael Kahan** 22:03

Well, let me ask this question in a different way. We didn't really talk about what led you to move from Palo Alto to Mountain View. So can you describe, how did you arrive at that decision?

**Kevin Ma** 22:18

So that decision was made about the time of the pandemic, this time last year. I guess that a thing other people who would be able to be purchasing property at my age would be my parents' cash at their retirement. Which I guess is a signifier of the classic case of familial wealth kind of sticks. Which is why I recognize it is very much a privilege for me to be able to actually purchase something here.

**Michael Kahan** 22:53

You've alluded a couple of times to being a tech worker. Can you just tell us a little bit more about your occupation, your professional life?

**Kevin Ma** 23:03

My professional life? I'm a software engineer working on security applications.

**Michael Kahan** 23:14

Another kind of, I don't know, maybe big picture question. You know, this project that we're working on, started off with the goal mainly of documenting a history of racial and ethnic discrimination in housing. The measures that we've been talking about so far, you know, rent control and RVs, I think a lot of people would see those as maybe economic issues. I'm wondering if you see an intersection there. Is there some ways in which rent control, regulation of RV parking and so forth? How does that impact the kind of racial and ethnic inclusion or exclusion in the city?

**Kevin Ma 24:19**

They have a heavy intersection. Inherently, it is well known that wealth and race do have a correlation with one another. During the rent control efforts, a lot of the speakers were from the Hispanic community in Mountain View. Those who live in the apartments, you know, the ones around California (Avenue), those are the ones who are getting the most amount of impact regarding any of these rent increases ever happening at a time. For instance, I do show up to a group called Cafecito<sup>10</sup> at times. So that's the group from St. Athanasius that's mainly Hispanic. They discuss, you know, the high cost of living, how that's impacting them. Their current main issue is a bit about their landlord not really breaking up their utility bill in a way that makes sense, into questions about an unjust rent increase that is still ongoing. But there was a reason why Mountain View Tenants Coalition had a lot of people from the Day Worker Center<sup>11</sup> supporting the original Measure V campaign. Which and they are still active, they're focused, along with Mountain View Housing Justice at times on the future policy push on COPA [Community Opportunity to Purchase Act].

**Michael Kahan 25:58**

Are there other groups that you would think of that have supported the measures that you've been involved in? Who are kind of the allies in this work?

**Kevin Ma 26:17**

So for the original rent control, I guess it leads to a bunch of the messy politics of local politics, which is mainly about ego at times. Inherently for rent control, there's a lot of support from renters, which is one of the benefits of a renter friendly, renter majority city is you can actually push policies that benefit those who usually are ignored. There's a reason why, for instance, the state only passed decent, or these, you know, nonzero renter protections only just a few years ago, right? Something like that. The main issue with politics is it's very hard to necessarily engage people one on one except without kitchen table issues. So for rent or rent control, it's an interesting thing. It's just not necessarily one you might get way into just because you do have a life to live and politics is not necessarily one that most people would choose. I wasn't here in 2016, so I can't really answer exactly what was in there, but for Measure D at the time, it was Housing Justice, the League. Actually, I don't remember if the League actually took a position. I joined the League only about a year ago too, because I was in the Palo Alto League, which is a separate one.

**Michael Kahan 27:58**

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<sup>10</sup> Cafecito Con Aroma de Justicia; taken from their Facebook page in 2022 (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/164696707425124/>): "Cafecito invites our Community to share their Concerns and Find a way to Develop our voice for Justice with Compassion and Passion in a Safe environment."

<sup>11</sup>From website: Serving the MV and surrounding communities since 1996, "The Day Worker Center of Mountain View is a non-profit organization that connects the day worker community to employers in a safe and reliable environment in addition to offering various programs for workers and community members such as providing healthy meals, ESL classes, technology classes, providing workshops about worker's rights and much more. Our vision is a world of diverse communities where day laborers live with full rights and responsibilities in an environment of mutual respect, peace and harmony."

I guess the flip side of this question is, who have been the opponents? Are there groups, individuals interests, you know, that have posed opposition to the work that you've done in this area?

**Kevin Ma 28:17**

I'll split that to basically questions against the YIMBY, Mountain View YIMBY, and questions against Housing Justice. Opposition to Mountain View Housing Justice is pretty obvious. It's going to be landlords. Every time you go to an RHC meeting, that's the Rental Housing Committee which was created by the CSFRA, there's something controversial. You know the people who would show up to speak in opposition; there's only so many of them and they make themselves very well known. From the Mountain View YIMBY side because that is production, and the reason why we're called YIMBY is because the opposition was already there. The opposition is an opposition to change. That's why that common refrain you hear from any housing project is "When I bought my property 30 years ago, I was expecting it to stay the same as it was 30 years ago". Or you got people who have certain questions over impacts. Common impacts are trees, or parking or traffic or water use, garbage. That was the kind of things you heard over the 555 West Middlefield project<sup>12</sup>, a project was seven years long. For the time [planning] period. For a building for a project that was actually zero displacement, it was actually replacing parking lots with more apartments, but, with seven years of changing councils with people neighboring the project who don't like changes, you can kind of tell why things take so long. It's our duty, or our visions are to try to address those issues, which is why Mountain View YIMBY is focusing currently on the housing element.

**Michael Kahan 30:29**

Tell us more about that. What is the housing element for those who might not know and how does Mountain View YIMBY want to try to influence the housing element?

**Kevin Ma 30:44**

The housing element is a document that every jurisdiction in the state needs to create as part of a city or jurisdiction's "general plan". That is the document, the overarching document that says what does the city want to look like? Where should there be open space? Where should there be transportation improvements? Where should there be emergency routes? How should the city address natural disasters? All of that goes into the general plan. The housing element is a section of it that is odd in that it is the one section that requires the state to sign off. Everything else is the city's own accord to do and implement, which one may or may not do. The housing element is a procedure that happens every eight years that the city drafts a version of it and sends it off to the State Housing and Community

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<sup>12</sup> Adopted May 12, 2022, the proposed 555 West Middlefield Project's purpose is to: "demolish existing surface parking lots, recreation facilities, and common amenity areas, while retaining 402 existing residential units, to construct 323 new residential units, three new subterranean parking garages, new common and private open spaces, and a new amenity building/leasing office at an existing multi-family residential complex on a 14.5-acre project site. The project also includes a request for a Heritage Tree Removal Permit to remove 51 Heritage trees and includes the proposed dedication of 1.34-acres to the City for a public park. The project site is located on the west side of Moffett Boulevard between West Middlefield Road and Cypress Point Drive".

Development, or HCD, for short, for review. The difference from previous years is that previously, HCD did not actually have much discretion over how to reject the document. It was basically, oh, you created one, stamp. But now HCD has been given authority to address problems and to say, “No, this is not a valid document.” Which was added only relatively recently, in about 2018 to 2022 timeframe. If you don't submit a housing element, you get penalties. Menlo Park for the longest time didn't actually have a housing element at all, until a lawsuit required it to do so. It is fundamentally a contract, it's a contract of the city saying, one: we will build X amount of housing to be able to match state housing targets. The state says we want a certain level of growth in the population, because that's an economic driver. Otherwise, we'll be all turning ourselves into retirement homes. Do you have enough land to build the houses we say you should be having? Which was a discussion that was actually happening all over the Bay Area. The Bay Area was the one as a whole to decide this jurisdiction gets this amount that jurisdiction gets that amount in terms of certain benefits, certain criteria, such as jobs and transit and resources. You want to build in places that have high richness. We've seen questions about school districts or just being near your job. You want to build housing there. There's a section of programs to address issues that are hampering the production of housing. Is asking for a one-acre minimum for a large apartment building too restrictive? Is requiring so much parking an impediment to housing? Those are the things that Mountain View YIMBY were pushing to address.

**Michael Kahan** 34:12

So you would like to see there be fewer obstacles to new housing?

**Kevin Ma** 34:18

Yes, because the current aggregate of constraints is the reason we're all talking about the housing crisis. This has been a long running issue. It just only gets worse every year. Every year you see the state issue its new income, median income numbers, and they just go up and up and up. That's the thing we tie what defines affordable housing to, or subsidized affordable housing.

**Michael Kahan** 34:48

That kind of leads me to a question I've been wondering about. Is there any tension between the goals of YIMBY and of Housing Justice? Historically, maybe 5, 6, 7 years ago, there was a lot of tension in San Francisco, for example, between YIMBY activists and people who, I guess identified more as anti-gentrification activists. Do you see that play out at all in your involvement here in Mountain View?

**Kevin Ma** 35:34

There is, at times, some disagreement, but not at the level of SF, which is a place where everything gets thrown into extremes. Which is why at the state level, there has been compromises to try to address that issue. One of the big things that people on both sides, at least locally, was a bill passed last year called SB 330. Also known as the Housing Crisis Act. Which was a kind of an omnibus bill to address different portions, it addressed the production side of things saying, [while] a city set zoning regulations and other guidelines above it, you as a project should not be asked to do more than what the law

specifies. That's why we call it objective zoning standards. Or restrictions like, you cannot have more than five meetings for a single project, we cannot just can't constantly just defer this project forever and ever. Other things like that, that was one portion of the bill. Another portion of the bill was about displacement. Where if you are demolishing a building with rent control units, you need to create a building with at least that many regulatory units. Which, for a lot of people in the end displacement space is a very interesting topic. If you know anything about how rent control works in California, there's a bill called Costa-Hawkins, which basically prohibits new rent controlled buildings created after a certain date. This is a way you can actually create a rent controlled building that is newer than, you know, the date of 1995. You aren't stuck in a building where over time is just going to be more and more crappy. There's a reason naturally occurring, affordable housing usually indicates they're naturally affordable because of a certain lack of amenities. We tried to address those issues. That is why one of the common things in the housing [element] discussion locally was a local right of return policy. To address questions of like, we do need to build new buildings, which may require us to take over an older building. If a small two story apartment building that is rent controlled, could be turned into something larger with more units, as long as you make sure that people who live there aren't going to be displaced out, that is fine. There's always a small question. There are still some central questions just to figure out like, you know, how trustworthy are these promises? The law is the law, but therefore, implementation of law is a different question at times.

**Michael Kahan 38:39**

If the current work of YIMBY, it sounds like it is really focused a lot on the housing element. Where is the focus of Housing Justice? I guess, and of the League of Women Voters right now. What do you see as the current priorities for those organizations?

**Kevin Ma 39:08**

Housing Justice right now is focused on the impacts of the current RV ban discussions. The RV ban, as I mentioned earlier, has now turned in to the court system. The update from yesterday is that it was given another three months until August to enforce it. Right now, just basically continuing to buy time, staving off it. Monitoring that, overseeing the RHC [Rental Housing Committee] and its work because the RHC is not necessarily done with its work. You probably saw the [Mountain View] Voice articles last week. There's still current debate over questions about what is rent, which do need to be addressed sooner than later. That's the main focus there, obviously including general tenant education. You kind of need to keep the gains, you've got them because they can be easily lost. The League is mainly there to provide us perspective on any of the housing issues, topics that are coming up. That means the housing element, maybe certain projects that come up. Maybe it's the work plan. There is some motion to try to discuss questions about the jobs-housing balance, specifically, because there was a project on Castro Street at Wells Fargo, in a building where the Chamber of Commerce Building is. Sobrato [the Sobrato Organization, real estate developers] is proposing a larger office building. People were questioning about this, given that one of the reasons why prices are so high there is because there's a lot of jobs that are planned, but not the homes where the people in those jobs are planned. They thought it was a bit

reckless to be building 100% office with no commensurate impacts, or no commensurate mitigations for the housing. There's some talk there. Other than that, it's mainly providing our perspective and making sure that the League and its duties for equity and fairness are kept in the discourse.

**Michael Kahan 41:46**

What do you see as the biggest accomplishments in the work that you've done? I mean, when you think about the involvement that you've had, over these recent years. What do you see as the most important achievements?

**Kevin Ma 42:11**

Politics is not really much about individual achievements, I am not that big of a power player, I don't have that kind of money or power for that. It's mainly just there to give an extra push to already existing initiatives. Measure D was a group effort to defeat. Measure C was a group effort to put on the ballot, even though we're in lawsuit level. Local politics are very much about you just need to be there. Otherwise, things will just, you know, pass on by. It's an area where the more people, the more impact they can actually do. Unlike perhaps national politics, where you are kind of wanting to know in or for presidential years not even useful because it's California, there's no way we're going to vote for a Republican at the presidential, [electoral] college level. For local issues, there's an impact. Mountain View Housing Justice will be putting Measure C on the ballot. Previously, Measure V was on the ballot because Measure V was running against another measure [put] on [by] the council at the time. For Mountain View YIMBY will be getting past the finish line for various projects. So 555 is a project that took a long time to check in and to talk to people behind the scenes to say, hey, like we need to get this done. The housing element, because for whatever reason, the housing element does not get that many comments despite how important of a tool it can be.

**Michael Kahan 44:16**

How has your involvement with this issue changed? I mean, I realize it hasn't hasn't been a very long time that you've been involved, but do you think your involvement has changed or your thinking about this issue has changed over this time?

**Kevin Ma 44:39**

Thinking is a constantly evolving issue. When I joined this, I had no clue what a housing element was or single stair reforms, stairwell reforms<sup>13</sup> or parking. You just kind of absorb the information over time. As for involvement, I guess that's just a question like, how much time are you willing to dedicate. With the pandemic, it does shift your time from perhaps going to events to like actually thinking about these

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<sup>13</sup> Most U.S. building codes mandate two stairwells in multi-story buildings. Some argue that this requirement reduces housing affordability. See Henry Grabar, "The Single Staircase Radicals Have a Good Point," *Slate*, December 23, 2021, <https://slate.com/business/2021/12/staircases-floor-plan-twitter-housing-apartments.html>, accessed January 13, 2023.

things now. Again, most of the politics that are local is just, showing up and saying something. That can be done at home, at times.

**Michael Kahan** 45:29

Yeah, that's such an interesting point. I feel like, if this interview gets deposited at the Mountain View History Center, people could be listening to this, maybe at some distant point in the future. What was it like to be an activist at this moment, when we're experiencing this global pandemic and suddenly, so many events that used to take place in person, were changing to an online format? Can you just describe what it is like to be an activist, and to be trying to influence the government in this moment, where I think you've seen both sides. Your early involvement was pre pandemic and now, we're in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. I'm curious if you could just describe, what is it like to try to be an activist during that transition?

**Kevin Ma** 46:47

I guess the biggest impact of the pandemic is that it's very hard to get new people. Inherently, a lot of spontaneity matters for you to know about these things. People usually don't think about, "I want to do housing politics;" that's usually not how it works. Usually how it works is, you know, there's just a broader awareness and then a random chance rather than a happenstance of like, hey, you know, there's a group working on this campaign. Early in the pandemic, for instance, you couldn't really knock on people's doors to talk about rent control because there's a worry about you getting them sick or you getting yourself sick. Which we're still slowly trying to learn how to deal with now that the pandemic is at least at a level where people are perhaps, thinking it's over too early. I guess it's not really quite an independent issue. The main issue is there has to be an opportunity to act upon. The housing element is an opportunity to act upon because it just happened that this year was the eight year cycle change, where it's even coming up as a topic. Rent control happened... the current discussion about the whole rent question that's on the Voice. That is technically a pandemic question, because only during the pandemic did the rents actually drop for a period of time. It's hard to tell. I guess the main issue with the pandemic situation is just how to meet people. There's only so many people you can meet online, just because online, everyone just balkanized themselves into their own site into their own circles. It's also hard to handle meetings online. You lose a certain level of personal connection.

**Michael Kahan** 49:04

Do you have any thoughts about how Mountain View has changed over time? I mean, you've only been here one year so maybe this is a funny question. Do you think the city itself has changed or is changing in ways related to housing?

**Kevin Ma** 49:32

It's hard to tell, as you said, it's a little hard to tell because I've only been in the area roughly three years in the valley, previously, I was in Berkeley and San Diego. From what I've gathered from the piecemeal information of the past it is different. Mountain View used to be a community for "working class



people”. People you can meet at the store, barber shops, or in Palo Alto’s case, a cannery. Inherently, whenever you look up at Zillow, you can tell that it is perhaps very different than it was previously. You have ridiculously expensive houses. Obviously that's perhaps relative to questions about neighboring jurisdictions like Los Altos Hills, but a sign where the median wage worker is still floating here and then housing prices just go up and up and up. You're just imagining a great shift over time. The only people who can move here are, you know, tech workers, or lawyers, not even doctors. Even doctors, you get occasional notices from Sutter or Kaiser saying, like, I have a child, I have decided to move to Oregon, because I cannot afford here. Which is referencing what I said earlier about, you're just finding an early retirement home. The only things that matter, here are the things that you had when you bought, like no changes whatsoever. That's inherently counter to what it should be, counter should be a city is a dynamic place, the neighborhood character of now was not magically created in a laboratory. It just happened to be a cultural progression that you just happen to be there. I guess that's why we're here. Our job is to pick a city that is for us, otherwise, the sum of individual choices is an exodus.

**Michael Kahan 51:49**

Do you think, I guess maybe this is already clear, but do you think housing in Mountain View is more fair or less fair than it has been in the past?

**Kevin Ma 52:11**

It has changed. It is not the explicit past where you know, there were deed restrictions or racial covenants or blockbusting. We just switched out to more facially race and cost neutral questions. If you have the money, you can afford it, but... that puts a lot of discussions elsewhere. Every time you hear about an affordable housing product, the first thing that comes out the other side is drugs or sex offenders. It really shows something about a society, where the first thing you think about others is their worst case scenario. Now is that everyone? I mean, not obviously, you know, the people who do show up to those meetings are a minority. Most people are here just to live their day to day and maybe talk about the housing crisis in, a joke, or, a property tax bill. I guess the phrase is less blatant, but the impact is still here, and still happening.

**Michael Kahan 53:33**

What do you think that we all can do to make Mountain View a more inclusive community?

**Kevin Ma 53:43**

Bluntly, make it cheaper to live here. Twitter is where you get a lot of these, echo rooms, but the one that kind of sticks out in my mind right now is about the current talks about abortion after I guess the fall of Roe. We talk about making California a sanctuary state, a sanctuary state for those who need reproductive rights. A sanctuary state for people who want to be protected, regardless of their immigration status. If the only people who can live here are people who can afford \$2,000, \$3,000 rents, who can afford a million dollar homes. You're not really doing that. You're just saying something and then not actually following up on that. I think a lot of the people decided on the Afghanistan refugee

policy. Basically the federal government said, we're not going to be relocating people to California. It is too expensive there. Go somewhere else. I don't really think those are the values you should be handling.

**Michael Kahan 55:07**

Do you have any records or materials related to the work that you've done that you'd be able to share or contribute to creating some kind of archive of this work.

**Kevin Ma 55:24**

There are others who are much better at keeping track of information. I didn't have any lawn signs, I have barely any material from electoral periods, because, again, signature gathering means you need signatures. I guess that's kind of perhaps ironic because the things we want to fight for are homes that are physical buildings, they have to exist somewhere. The actual day to day rooms are ephemeral, they're usually like a Zoom meeting, or quick notes or letters that get sent to a council packet that are incredibly hard to find again in the future. There's not really much lasting. We're not here to make a monument or a float. We're here to get something done.

**Michael Kahan 56:16**

Well, I guess in a way that also brings up another question, which is, are there other people that you would suggest that we speak to who've been involved in these issues?

**Kevin Ma 56:32**

The ones that come to my mind are our mayor, Lucas Ramirez. He is, I believe, at this point the sole renter on our council. Which is again, given our renter majority nature of the city, is a bit of a disparity. Emily Ann Ramos, that's our Vice Chair of the Rental Housing Committee right now, former past chair, because she's seen thick and thin. Lenny Siegel, former mayor, has been in this fight since the original rent control fights back in '60s or '70s back when the original discussion about condo conversion or a minimum amount of apartments was the topic at the time. Joan MacDonald was with Advocates for Affordable Housing, and was one of the original proponents of Measure V. Those are the ones that come to the top of my mind.

**Michael Kahan 58:09**

Terrific, thank you. Well, before I ask, maybe a final question. Let me just see if Kamilah is there and if she has other questions she wanted to ask or follow up on?

**Kamilah Arteaga 58:27**

Yes, I am here. I'm just eating chips, so I didn't want to seem rude.

**Michael Kahan 58:33**

Okay.

**Kamilah Arteaga 58:34**

I did have one more question. I guess you've talked about this a little bit in terms of state laws and initiatives that you would like to have locally. Are there anything past like, rental control and maybe just past things that are happening right now. Are there any long term future things say 5, 10 years in the future that you can imagine that Mountain View would be investing in or that you think you should invest in?

**Kevin Ma 59:21**

The main one there is, with the YIMBY hat on, is to create more housing. Rent control is an idea that as CSFRA [Community Stabilization and Fair Rent Act] indicates is to make a community stable. The main issue there is, if there are not that many homes to be there, then the leverage you have as a renter is limited. You cannot negotiate with a landlord if the rent vacancy rate is near zero. Then they could just say, oh, you [want me to] lower your rent, like I'll just kick you out. You're gonna find somewhere else cheaper on your own then, and the answer to that is not going to happen. That is the main issue. Housing and where people are relative to their environment is one of the pressing issues of our time, it's an economic issue. You cannot have a community where the only people who are, you know, making incomes of \$200,000 or more. That's not really a community, that's just a place you stop for the night and then go elsewhere. It's an environmental issue. Most of the emissions at this point from our society are from driving. The reason they're driving long distances is because they can't afford to live near where they work. That is a societal issue. The main issue is it really destroys social cohesion, if you just treat everything as a fixed box in time. You're not there to meet your neighbors. You're there to sleep, raise kids, drive everywhere you want, and then just heavily limit your social interactions. That's incredibly disruptive to society. That we're only basically now figuring out, right, that's like one of the punch lines of urban planning YouTube, is that America and Canada is very much at the extreme of trying to segment society into these well defined boxes. Where elsewhere in the world, in Asia or Europe, it's a much more cohesive ordering of people. The quote I remember from that is, during the whole Berkeley debacle, which is a case where someone sued the school for not handling its enrollment figures correctly<sup>14</sup>. When assigning places like we don't want Berkeley to be like Jakarta or a bunch of Asian cities. Which actually have decent transit, does have people who live where they work. There's a certain level of what is America then, if America is just a monument to car culture? And basically Neo-feudalism<sup>15</sup> at times?

**Kamilah Arteaga 1:02:41**

Thank you, that was a lovely answer.

**Michael Kahan 1:02:46**

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<sup>14</sup> From <https://www.npr.org/2022/02/23/1082622847/uc-berkeleys-enrollment-fight> : "A 2019 lawsuit by neighbors of the UC Berkeley campus has resulted in a judge cutting incoming enrollment by about 30%."

<sup>15</sup> The contemporary rebirth of policies of governance, economy, and public life, reminiscent of those which were present in many feudal societies

Kevin, is there anything else that we should have asked you or that or that you would like to share?

**Kevin Ma 1:03:03**

Perhaps this is along the lines of Mountain View YIMBY is, I guess the question of process and governance. In every of these meetings, there's usually a question about was the community involved? Last night, the council was discussing a particular change to the rent stabilization law for mobile homes, which itself was a parallel fight that was long for various reasons. A few other council members were already discussing, like, you know, was there enough outreach to this change, which is probably beneficial? About, you know, how does this impact people because I've gotten people who've talked to us, like, does this threaten my rights. Which is mainly an outreach problem. There's always a question about this hypothetical community. Does this hypothetical group of neighbors, or the classic case will be people questioning, "why are removing design reviews from councils? Isn't that like, anti-democratic because we should be empowering our elected bodies to be deciding what is good for the city". The kind of issue with that viewing is that the people who show up to these meetings are incredibly disproportionate. Who is willing to be able to wait hours at night or even in the middle of the day to discuss a project that they're not nearby? Why should a council care about the colors of a wall? Should there be a step back on this building at this particular location? Should there be glass instead of wood material? I don't know, it's like.. we don't need to be so bogged down into these details to do something broadly good. So this question yesterday was about a question about should mobile home park owners be able to negotiate a separate agreement to be there in place of the rent stabilization ordinance the city passed last year? Because of a chaotic meeting, that originally happened the first time it was ratified. What happened is, the city convened landlords, or the park owners and park residents, both the renters of mobile homes or renters of the space of the mobile home. Basically, they could not get to an agreement, because every park wanted something differently. The park owners were proposing something that park residents were deciding was not worth it. There's still council members that say if we just give more time, maybe something will happen. Like every time we have a controversial project, it's always, oh, we'll like give you another four months to figure something out. There's a reason why at the end of 555, what other people voted for is, the project is not what I wanted, because the decision about what I wanted was made before I got into Council. At some point, you just got to say this process is broken. There are times you have to think about the broader picture and not about, oh, this project is less than what I think is, the amount of parking required, is like a bad project. You need to fix that kind of structure.

**Michael Kahan 1:07:16**

What happened with the mobile homes and the question of whether the rent control can be overridden by the memoranda?

**Kevin Ma. 1:07:32**

Not quite overridden, more of a, you need to make an MOU [memorandum of understanding] that is as effective or whatever that term means. What happened, I believe at the meeting last night was that it was

removed, that provision was removed five to two. After a failed three to four motion before to change it to something in favor of one of the parks.

**Michael Kahan 1:07:54**

Got it. All right.

**Kevin Ma 1:07:56**

That's, there's a lot of the four-three votes, let's say.

**Michael Kahan 1:08:04**

Well, thank you so much for taking the time to speak with us. I just have a few short demographic questions, if I could conclude with. What would you say is your racial or ethnic identity?

**Kevin Ma 1:08:21**

Chinese-American.

**Michael Kahan 1:08:23**

What would you say is your gender identity?

**Kevin Ma 1:08:28**

Cis-male.

**Michael Kahan 1:08:30**

Do you mind telling us your age?

**Kevin Ma 1:08:34**

25.

**Michael Kahan 1:08:36**

All right. Kevin, thank you so much again for taking the time to speak with us. This recording, as we've said, is going to become the city's property. I believe it will be deposited with the Mountain View History Center and possibly parts of it will be used at the event on July 26. We'd love to have you there if you're available. The event will be at 6:30 I believe, on the 26th, in the community center over in Rengstorff Park. All right. Thank you again. Have a great afternoon.

**Kamilah Arteaga 1:09:25**

Thank you.