Small Businesses & Upzoning: Exploring how ownerships status impacts the way small businesses in Los Angeles respond to upzoning in their neighborhoods

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RES PRC 98t

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March 2026

Introduction

Zoning is a central component of urban planning debates across issue-areas, from housing to transportation to environmental justice. In California, housing demand outpaces supply, driving costs towards unaffordability. Increasingly, scholars have pointed to one solution for the housing crisis: zoning reform, and more specifically, upzoning. Upzoning would loosen land use restrictions to allow developers to build higher-density housing in areas previously zoned for less intensive uses like single family homes. Proponents of upzoning also advocate for mixed-use zoning, like residential over retail developments. California Senate Bill 79 (2025) is one key legislative decision turning these proposals into a reality. The bill makes it easier for developers to build higher density housing near transit stops, a concept known as Transit-Oriented Development (TOD) (*SB-79*, 2025).

Despite upzoning's prevalence in urban planning discourse, much of the debate surrounding upzoning has centered on residential responses to upzoning. The difference between homeowner response and tenant responses to upzoning have been widely studied, whereas small business' response to upzoning has been far less studied.

This study aims to understand how ownership status impacts the way small businesses in Los Angeles respond to upzoning in their neighborhoods. Ownership status is defined as small businesses who own their storefronts and those who lease their storefronts. Given the patterns other scholars have observed amongst homeowners and renters, I suspect small businesses who lease their storefronts will be less supportive of nearby upzoning for fear of upzoning-induced gentrification impacting their ability to afford their lease. Small businesses who own their storefronts may see nearby upzoning as a boost to their customer base, and be more supportive.

Interrogating the existing literature about upzoning, gentrification, and displacement is integral to predicting and understanding small business responses to upzoning. The literature review will provide an overview of existing research on these concepts and how they take shape in Los Angeles.

The findings from the literature review informed my data gathering and research approach. I will conduct a mixed-method study to first understand the relationship between ownership status and views on upzoning. Then, using these findings, I will conduct semi-structured interviews with business owners to better understand the patterns observed in the data.

The patterns and perspectives gained from this research aims to inform policymakers as they continue crafting legislation in our current pro-upzoning legislative era. By integrating small business concerns into policy, policymakers can empower their constituents and reduce community opposition to future upzoning legislation and development projects.

Literature Review

This literature review aims to uncover the central components of the neighborhood revitalization debate, including how upzoning, gentrification, and displacement play out in metropolitan areas like Los Angeles. Much of the literature focuses on residential gentrification and displacement, rather than small businesses. A key tension among stakeholders includes the difference between renter and homeowner responses to upzoning and neighborhood change. As such, I aim to use what the literature understands about renter and homeowner perspectives as a way to frame how small businesses who lease and own their storefronts might respond to upzoning. I first define upzoning and gentrification to provide readers with an understanding of how these concepts take shape in Los Angeles. Then, I establish the relationship between upzoning and gentrification. Finally, I focus on small businesses and their relationship to neighborhood characteristics and use the renter-homeowner framework to predict small business responses to upzoning.

Defining "upzoning" in the context of the City of Los Angeles

There is long-standing consensus among researchers that upzoning broadly indicates the change in zoning classification from less intensive to more intensive through changes in the use, height, or bulk of a property (Bartke & Lamb, 1976; Gabbe, 2017; Kim & Lee, 2025). Much of the literature on upzoning is concerned with residential upzoning and the impact upzoning will have on the affordable housing supply (Manville, Monkkonen & Lens, 2022; Pendell, 2000). Some researchers argue that loosening zoning regulations to allow for higher-density uses will generate a larger housing supply, ultimately driving the price of housing down in metropolitan areas (Manville, Monkkonen & Lens, 2022; Monkkonen, Lens & Paavo, 2020; Pendell, 2000). Other researchers express concerns about upzoning's effectiveness in stimulating residential development (Monkkonen, Manville & Lens, 2024) and the possibility of fast-tracking residential gentrification and displacement (Freemark, 2020).

In Los Angeles, researchers have found that upzoning occurs where there are ample development opportunities – like vacant land – and minimal regulatory stasis. Compared to cities like New York, Los Angeles has upzoned a very small proportion of its land. Between 2002 and 2014, Los Angeles upzoned 1.1 percent of its land area, compared to New York City's 5 percent (Gabbe, 2016; Gabbe, 2017). In Los Angeles specifically, researchers have found that homeowners are key drivers of regulatory stasis, effectively blocking upzoning from taking place (Gabbe, 2017; Monkkonen, Manville & Lens, 2024). Upzoning is least likely to occur in areas with a high volume of homeowners (Been et al., 2014; Gabbe, 2017) and desirable amenities like schools and beaches (Gabbe, 2017). Although LA has historically had restrictive zoning regulations, some researchers argue that the city is entering a new zoning regime where political bodies are less likely to engage in zoning suppression, and therefore more supportive of upzoning (Whittemore, 2012). With the passage of Senate Bill 79 mandating higher density zoning changes in California along transit lines, this regime is likely to be realized.

The impact upzoning has on small businesses in and around upzoned areas is much less studied. Instead, the existing literature regarding small businesses and neighborhood change addresses concerns about gentrification and displacement (Meltzer, 2016). Understanding the way gentrification takes shape is likely necessary to understand small business owners' concerns about upzoning-induced neighborhood change. The relationship between upzoning and gentrification will be established later.

Framing Gentrification

The literature reveals that gentrification is a primary concern in the neighborhood change and revitalization debate, yet there is no generally accepted definition of gentrification, and scholars have contrasting perspectives on its causes and effects. Many scholars identify gentrification as a process where neighborhoods that have historically seen disinvestment receive a sudden influx of investment and redevelopment, drawing households of higher socioeconomic status and educational attainment to move there (Acolin et al., 2023; Chapple & Jacobus, 2009; Zuk et al., 2018). From the coining of the term, the gradual displacement of existing working-class or low-income residents has been considered a key impact of gentrification (Glass, 2010 [1964]; Knieriem, 2023). Since then, scholars have tried to evolve their understanding of gentrification to meet the contemporary moment, including arguing that gentrifiers are not always extremely wealthy, instead there exist "marginal gentrifiers" (Rose, 1984). Some researchers also suggest a more complex set of actors involved in catalyzing gentrification, including government bodies and developers who shape the built environment *before* changes in residential composition (Williams & Hipp, 2022).

Scholars have found that the pattern of gentrification-induced displacement is varied at the residential and commercial level, and the effects of gentrification are often neighborhood-dependent. Some authors argue that gentrification, just like any kind of neighborhood change, happens differently across different cities (Lee & Perkins, 2022). The effects of gentrification are based on the broader demographic and socioeconomic context of a city (Lee & Perkins, 2022) and even a neighborhood (Meltzer, 2016). Lee & Perkins find that residential displacement is positively associated with moderate and intense gentrification, but the rates of displacement are varied across different types of neighborhoods (Lee & Perkins, 2022). For small businesses, Meltzer found that most businesses in gentrifying neighborhoods across New York City remained in their storefronts (Meltzer, 2016). That being said, some small businesses do choose to leave, and their storefronts – if they are ever replaced, as many sit vacant – are most frequently replaced by chains, indicating a shift in neighborhood characteristics (Meltzer, 2016).

Gentrification in the Los Angeles region has largely been understudied, but scholars are beginning to fill in gaps now that there is growing consensus that Los Angeles embodies the range of contemporary urban planning issues that other cities ought to consider as they grow. LA has been characterized as a polycentric and poly-cultural city that is forced to contend with housing accessibility and affordability at the urban and exurban level (Dear, 2002; William & Hipp, 2022). Gentrification takes on multiple forms in LA, causing ripple effects across the city (William & Hipp, 2022). These different forms of gentrification support the prior notion that rates of change and displacement should be measured and assessed at the neighborhood level.

The relationship between gentrification and upzoning

The relationship between gentrification and upzoning has not been well-established, but early studies examining upzoning in New York City point to a positive correlation. Kim & Lee found that, in NYC, upzoning was positively associated with gentrification (Kim & Lee, 2025). Gentrification tended to occur in neighborhoods that were upzoned but only received "speculative investment" without an increase in housing supply (Kim & Lee, 2025). As homebuyers and renters with greater purchasing power enter these upzoned neighborhoods, housing demand increases while supply remains relatively stagnant, thereby causing housing prices to increase (Kim & Lee, 2025). The study also found high rates of gentrification in areas that, prior to being upzoned, had high demand. Although housing supply increased in these neighborhoods, it seems that housing stock did not increase at the rate necessary to curb gentrification (Kim & Lee, 2025). Other scholars studying NYC have found that upzoning is positively associated with a neighborhood becoming whiter, suggesting that upzoning might accelerate gentrification pressures (Davis, 2021).

As upzoning becomes a primary issue in the urban policy debate, some scholars point to variability in its impacts. As previously established, the causes and effects of gentrification are shaped by context-specific factors (Lee & Perkins, 2022; Meltzer, 2016). Some scholars argue that upzoning, and other forms of neighborhood change, is not always detrimental to low-income communities, and does not always cause displacement (Chapple & Jacobus, 2009). Furthermore, upzoning can cause the emergence of mixed-income neighborhoods as middle-income residents move to low-income neighborhoods. Chapple & Jacobus argue that this kind of neighborhood change paves the way for greater neighborhood investment, giving residents access to more resources (Chapple & Jacobus, 2009). Commercial gentrification has perceived negative effects, but retail areas undergoing revitalization also see necessities going into vacant storefronts like grocery stores and drug stores. Residents who might otherwise have to travel far for these necessities now have greater access to them. However, the authors also note that this influx walks a delicate line: if these neighborhoods increasingly attract more affluent residents who replace low-income residents, this becomes gentrification (Chapple & Jacobus, 2009). While there are successful examples of mixed-income neighborhood revitalization, like the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative in Boston (Chapple & Jacobus, 2009), this argument may not hold up if the American middle class continues to shrink, making gentrification a more likely outcome.

Given these findings, I anticipate that support for upzoning amongst small business owners in LA neighborhoods will vary, but skew towards opposition. Even with increased accessibility to necessities being a benefit for community-members, it is not guaranteed that these benefits will generate positive outcomes for existing small business owners. An increase in upzoning-driven housing and retail development may increase property values, driving up rents and property taxes. Without protections for existing small business owners, they may be hesitant to support a policy that has the potential to increase their operational costs or lead to displacement.

The role small businesses play in shaping neighborhood characteristics

While much of the research on upzoning and gentrification primarily center residential-level challenges, commercial businesses are also impacted by these forms of neighborhood change and are equally important to study. Literature has shown that small businesses are impacted by gentrification in varied ways. Some businesses remain in gentrifying neighborhoods (Meltzer, 2016) whereas others close down (Meltzer, 2016; Molina, 2015) or undergo new ownership (Molina, 2015). Small businesses are essential in defining neighborhood life and identity across neighborhoods in Los Angeles (Deener, 2007; Molina, 2015). Molina highlights how local restaurant owners and workers become "place-makers" in Echo Park, providing a space for community members to forge cultural and generational connections (Molina, 2015, p. 71). Furthermore, Deener argues that small businesses in the Abbott Kinney district of Venice have control over the mechanisms of neighborhood identity (Deener, 2007). Together, these authors shine light on the significance of small business in their respective communities. That being said, further research is needed to understand whether these trends persist across other neighborhoods in Los Angeles.

Using renters and homeowners as a framework to anticipate small business reactions to upzoning

We have now established the importance of small businesses in their communities and the possible concerns associated with upzoning. To reiterate, I will differentiate ownership status among small businesses as those who own their storefronts and those who lease their storefronts. There is no prior research on the relationship between ownership status and small business reactions to upzoning. Due to this gap, I will apply the current scholarship's understanding of renter and homeowner responses to upzoning and gentrification to anticipate small business responses.

There has been longstanding consensus among scholars that homeowners, due to a vested interest in preserving their property values, oppose neighborhood changes that have perceived negative impacts on their property values. As such, homeowners, as key stakeholders, become extremely invested in local politics, and influence political decisions to maximize property values. William A. Fischel defined this coalition as the "homevoter" (Fischel, 2001), and scholars have since applied the framework to understand city politics in multiple cities across the U.S. (Been et al., 2014; Dehring et al., 2008). In the case of upzoning, Been et al. (2014) found that neighborhoods with high homeownership rates in New York City had a higher probability of being downzoned and lower probability of being upzoned. Some studies have also found that homeowners in single-family neighborhoods often oppose transit-oriented development in their neighborhood, perceiving its development as a detriment to their property values (Mathur & Ferrell, 2017). However, studies show transit-oriented development actually increases property values (Freemark, 2020; Mathur & Ferrell, 2017), hence my assertion that homeowner opposition to neighborhood change is rooted in *perceived* negative impacts, not necessarily *true* impacts.

The scholarship shows that renter behavior is less cut-and-dry in comparison to homeowner behavior. Although renters are more likely to support development and upzoning at the macroscale, researchers have found they are less likely to support those changes at the microscale where they may feel the direct impact (Connolly, 2025; Hankinson, 2018). Renters in high-rent cities exhibit similar levels of NIMBYism as their homeowner counterparts. This NIMBYism stems from economic self-interest: renters exhibit price anxiety for fear that their neighborhoods will be gentrified and they will no longer afford to live there (Hankinson, 2018). However, as the demand to live in walkable cities has increased, renters and homeowners alike have started to engage in more YIMBYism, seeing that density increases quality of life and property values (Connolly, 2025). But, this support may only be at the macroscale.

Given these patterns in homeowner and renter behavior, I anticipate that similar patterns will emerge in small business owners' response to upzoning. Small business owners who lease their storefront may be mildly supportive of upzoning at the macroscale, as greater development increases storefront availability and may reduce lease costs. However, they may not support upzoning efforts that directly impact their neighborhood, worried that it will drive up the cost of their lease. I do think small businesses who own their storefronts may have more variation in their support for upzoning. Increased development can drive up their property values which has both positive and negative impacts – if the business owner chooses to sell their storefront they could make a high return, but an increase in property values may cause an increase in property taxes. For both small business owners who lease and own their storefront, they may perceive upzoning as a pathway for more market competition as new businesses populate new storefronts. It is also possible that business owners across ownership statuses will see upzoning as a path towards an expanding customer base.

This study will attempt to understand how small businesses across the ownership spectrum respond to nearby upzoning, and investigate whether there is a difference in response between businesses that own their storefronts and businesses that lease their storefronts. Concerns about gentrification seem to dominate the conversation about neighborhood change and revitalization. As California aims to increase its housing supply to meet high demand, the state has adopted plans to upzone through Senate Bill 79. As the major metropolis in California, Los Angeles sits at the intersection of these key urban planning debates. Addressing the housing accessibility and affordability challenge requires looking at the problem holistically, small businesses are a part of that picture, too.

Data and Methods

To understand the relationship between ownership status and responses to upzoning, I plan to conduct a mixed-methods study.

First, to understand whether there is a correlation between ownership status and responses to upzoning, I would like to conduct a multivariate regression test. After exploring existing datasets, I decided that it would be difficult to disaggregate many of the U.S. Census datasets relevant to the study of small businesses. The U.S. Census Bureau's Annual Business Survey uses many industry and type-specific size standards to define small businesses by, many of which are not applicable to the types of small businesses I'm interested in studying. With these restrictions in mind, conducting my own survey and defining small businesses as having fewer than 100 employees would suffice (this would include employer and non-employer businesses).

Additionally, I will have to operationalize "upzoning" so that survey respondents understand the term. Upzoning will be operationally defined as "a planning policy that allows for higher-density buildings, including multifamily units and mixed-use residential over retail buildings."

Before conducting the survey, I will have to identify neighborhoods with proposed or active upzoning and isolate 2-3 neighborhoods in Los Angeles to limit the size of the data set and increase feasibility. I would likely choose neighborhoods most impacted by Senate Bill 79, which mandates upzoning within a half-mile of major transit (*SB-79*, 2025), which would include Downtown LA, Hollywood, Koreatown, and Century City. (Streets for All, 2025). Then I would use the LA City Listing of Active Businesses to identify businesses within those neighborhoods to survey.

Below is a preliminary list of questions I will ask in the survey:

1. Do you own your storefront or property?
2. Number of employees
3. Length of ownership or lease
4. Type of lease
5. Industry
6. Annual receipts and revenue
7. Would you support a planning policy that allows for higher-density buildings, including multifamily units and mixed-use residential over retail buildings in your neighborhood? (Likert Scale Answer Choices)
8. How confident are you in your understanding of what the consequences will be of this planning policy?

I would first conduct a few pilot studies using friends and a few small business owners to test the quality of my survey design. Once refined, I would conduct the survey with as many small businesses within targeted neighborhoods as possible. The survey design and data gathering process should take three months to complete. Using the data gathered, I would conduct a regression analysis using ownership status as the independent variable and support for upzoning as the dependent variable. Cleaning and analyzing the data will take two months to complete.

To better understand the results from regression analysis, I would also include a qualitative research component. This would take the form of semi-structured, in-depth interviews with small business owners across both ownership statuses. Here, I would be curious to understand the reasons why small business owners support or oppose upzoning in their neighborhoods. I would like to interview 10 small business owners, half of whom own their storefronts and half of whom lease their storefronts. Scheduling, interviewing, coding, and analyzing the qualitative data will take six months to complete.

While I do not foresee too many reflexive challenges with this research method, approaching the interview process with kindness and thoughtfulness will be very important. Crafting interview questions that aim to gather information that centers the small business owners and their thoughts will be integral in both ensuring the quality of the data and building the trust of small business owners.

Implications and Next Steps

This research aims to inform policymakers crafting upzoning-related legislation to consider small businesses in their legislative framework. Existing literature highlights how small businesses are integral to neighborhood identity – this alone makes them worthy of consideration and consultation. Furthermore, small businesses are a key constituent base that are impacted by neighborhood change. As such, they have the organizing power to potentially influence legislative and permitting outcomes – either through lobbying or public comment. By investigating small business concerns about upzoning in Los Angeles, I hope to provide policymakers with a framework to craft legislation that extends protections to existing small businesses as the city addresses its housing shortage. Hopefully integrating these concerns into the policymaking process can ease tensions and generate more community support for upzoning and development.

Although I do not plan to pursue this research, if I were to move forward with it, I would first have to do a few pilot studies with my survey to refine the survey design.

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