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CP&DR News Briefs March 10, 2026: Single-Stair Reform; HCD Letters; Weakening NEPA; and More

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State Fire Marshall Weighs in on Safety of "Single-Stair" Buildings

A new report from California's Office of the State Fire Marshal [examines](#) whether the state should allow mid-rise apartment buildings with only a single staircase, a design common in many other countries but largely banned in North America. The report, which was submitted several months late, was mandated by Assembly Bill 835 (2023). Currently, California building codes require apartment buildings taller than three stories to have at least two staircases to provide multiple escape routes in case of a fire. The report, released about two months after its legal deadline, takes a generally skeptical view of allowing single-stair buildings, citing safety concerns and emphasizing the importance of redundant exits during emergencies.

However, it offers recommendations in case lawmakers decide to move forward with changes to the building code. Housing advocates and architects have pushed for “single-stair reform,” arguing the requirement for two staircases raises construction costs and makes it harder to build small apartment buildings on tight urban lots. The report estimates that adding a second staircase can account for about 7.5% to 12% of a mid-rise building’s construction costs.

HCD Launches Site to Catalog over 1,200 Letters Issued on Housing Elements

The Department of Housing and Community Development (HCD) has released a Housing Accountability Unit Letters Dashboard, a site to access all letters issued by the Housing Accountability Unit. Since its formation by Gavin Newsom in 2021 the department has issued over 1,200 letters regarding enforcement and technical assistance to ensure compliance with state housing law. Topics cover ADU ordinances, the Housing Accountability Act, housing element implementation, and Density Bonus Law. All letters are now listed via the Housing Accountability Unit Letters Dashboard and searchable by jurisdiction, date, subject matter, and statutory reference.

Interior Department Drastically Cuts NEPA Protections on Federal Lands

The Interior Department, responsible for public lands and waters, recently rescinded nearly eighty percent of previous environmental regulations under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). A press release from the department cited delays and cost concerns for energy, minerals, livestock grazing, infrastructure, wildfire mitigation, water projects and conservation efforts as the catalyst for the rollback. The Interior also oversees activities including drilling and mining on the nation’s lands and in its waters. NEPA requires the federal government to conduct a thorough environmental review and impact report before approval, and serves as a last protection for health and the environment. Critics of NEPA characterize it as an obstacle in the way of energy, infrastructure and conservation projects.

High Speed Rail Stations May be Slimmed Down to Cut Costs

The California High-Speed Rail Authority is considering redesigning planned stations in California's Central Valley to be smaller and more cost-effective, a move officials say could save roughly \$2 billion as part of efforts to adjust the high-speed rail project to current budget realities. Federal funding cuts led the authority to reevaluate elements of the project and develop its 2026 business plan, which emphasizes cost savings and efficient deployment of resources. Rather than eliminating stations entirely, leaders are looking at "right-sizing" them so they reflect anticipated early use while keeping options open to adjust in the future. The Legislative Analysts Office reviewed HSR's recent supplemental project update report, noting available funding may not cover the cost of the initial Bakersfield-to-Merced segment.

CP&DR Coverage: Population Growth in Inland Areas

State demographers reported that California's population had increased again in 2024 – if only slightly – making the third year in a row the population had gone up. That's a market change from the pandemic years, when the state's population dropped significantly for the first time ever. It's possible that this increase has been driven by Biden-era illegal immigration, in which case it probably won't last. But it's interesting to see *where* in the state the population has been growing. *CP&DR* looked at population growth over the past three years, starting in 2022, which was the end of the pandemic and the low point in California population. The results aren't surprising: Inland population is growing way faster. But the rate of growth in inland areas is way outstripping coastal areas, with one surprising exception: San Diego.

Quick Hits & Updates

A new "**DepaveLA**" analysis found that about 44% of Los Angeles County's 312,000 acres of pavement may be unnecessary and could potentially be replaced with trees, green space, or storm-water infrastructure. Researchers say much of this excess pavement is in parking lots and private property, where design changes like angled parking or small tree wells could remove thousands of acres of asphalt while reducing heat and flooding.

The **Stanislaus Regional Housing Authority** has been designated a “High Performer” by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development under its Section Eight Management Assessment Program (SEMAP), receiving a perfect 100% score for fiscal year 2025. The SEMAP evaluation measures how effectively agencies administer the Section 8 program, including inspections, rent calculations, waitlist management, and proper use of federal funds.

Los Angeles’ encampment cleanup program may displace far more unhoused people than it helps, according to a new study from the UCLA Luskin Institute. Researchers observed that for every one person connected to services, about five people were forced to relocate, with many repeatedly moved during sweeps. Among 51 unhoused residents surveyed, 37% said they had been forced to move more than five times in the previous month, and only one person ultimately obtained shelter through the program.

A policy brief by **SPUR** proposes creating a new downtown revitalization authority to coordinate redevelopment in San Francisco. The group argues that concentrating planning, financing, and project delivery in a single entity would streamline efforts to revive the city’s struggling downtown, including real estate projects, public spaces, and support for small businesses and mixed-use districts.

The Los Angeles Metro Construction Committee approved an additional \$210 million for the long-planned **Link Union Station** (Link US) project, which will add run-through tracks at Los Angeles' Union Station. The project would allow trains to pass through the station instead of reversing, increasing capacity from about 180 to 278 trains per day and cutting dwell times from roughly 20 minutes to about 5 minutes.

The **Riverside County Transportation Commission** approved an \$80 million contract to conduct a Tier 2 environmental study for the proposed Coachella Valley Rail Project, which would connect Los

Angeles, Riverside County, and the Coachella Valley. The study will prepare detailed environmental documents and planning needed to move the 144 mile passenger rail project closer to construction.

New regulations for short-term rentals (STR) in **Del Mar** and **Encinitas** have been approved by the Coastal Commission and will soon go into effect. The ordinance caps the number of STR permits at 129 city-wide with area-specific limits and enforces a three-night minimum stay, among other restrictions designed to balance tourism with housing and neighborhood impacts

San Francisco is creating a tax incentive district aimed at converting vacant and underused downtown office buildings into housing. The program is projected to make roughly 50 properties eligible for redevelopment, producing up to 4,400 new units. Covering key areas such as the Market Street corridor, the Financial District, Union Square, and neighborhoods south of Market, the district offers qualifying projects annual incentive payments for 30 years to help offset conversion costs.

The EPA is proposing a \$24 million cleanup at the previous site of the Lorentz Barrel & Drum Co. **Superfund** site in San Jose, near San Jose State University. The 5-acre site functioned as a steel drum cleaning facility beginning in 1947 until 1987, when owner Ernie Lorentz was jailed following decades of dumping contaminants into the ground and storm drains. Mike Montgomery, director of the U.S. EPA's Superfund and Emergency Management Division, says that about 90% of the cleanup has been completed, and this last effort would serve to clear low concentrations of contaminants that have thus far evaded cleanup.

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