

The *Atlantic* Article “*Minneapolis Saw That NIMBYism Has Victims*” is Mostly Wrong!

This is in response to Richard Kahlenberg’s piece about Minneapolis. Mr. Kahlenberg’s article is frankly, mostly wrong. I can say this because I have been here, on the ground, in Minneapolis, during this whole discussion to up-zone the City.

Mr. Kahlenberg starts with the idea of “exclusionary zoning,” his definition for the zoning that protects single family homes. As usual, there is no discussion of the role of single-family homes in our society. Single family homes exist primarily to provide housing for children. In Minneapolis, one out of every five persons is a child under the age of 18. 80% live in single-family homes. This is not surprising as the marketplace is simply not producing new housing for families with children. 70% of new housing is one bedroom or less and virtually all the rest is two bedrooms. The average family has two kids. They have to live somewhere and if it is not in existing single-family homes, where? But Mr. Kahlenberg never talks about the need to preserve housing for children. In fact, Mr. Kahlenberg never talks about children at all despite them making up 1/5 of the population of Minneapolis.

Mr. Kahlenberg talks about racist zoning laws from 100 years ago but not about the systemic racism of the marketplace today. Families of color are larger than white families. 20% of families of color have four or more children, twice the rate of white families. Families of color are twice as likely as white families to be multi-generational. Yet virtually all of the housing being produced in Minneapolis is two bedrooms or less. When we talk about a crisis of affordable housing, that crisis is first and foremost about families of color with children, yet no market rate housing is being built for them. The tiny number of 3- and 4- unit new housing are breathtakingly expensive. We need to preserve housing for families of color with children, but Mr. Kahlenberg never talks about that either.

Mr. Kahlenberg never explains problem he is trying to solve. Mr. Kahlenberg talks about NIMBY and makes it sound like developers have been struggling to find land for market-rate housing, like San Francisco and Seattle. Minneapolis added over 25,000 housing units over the last five years under the old zoning. We still have great swaths of developable land. I have car dealerships (plural) within walking distance of my house. Minneapolis is projected to grow only 10% over the next twenty years and our old zoning laws could easily provide for this. In fact, development is now slowing after a spurt to make up for the Great Recession. Minneapolis isn’t California where zoning laws suppress development. NIMBY is not a problem here. So, what is the problem anyway?

Mr. Kahlenberg talks about how up-zoning will curb urban sprawl and address climate change. But that isn’t true either. Under our old rules, we clustered development at transit nodes, in our downtown and around the University of Minnesota. This created walkable, transit-supportable neighborhoods. Under the new rules, developers can build wherever they can hustle up a piece of land, which does not create walkable, transit-supportable density.

Mr. Kahlenberg seems to imply that existing zoning kept people of color out of predominantly white neighborhoods. Yes, that happened 100 years ago but not today. People of color are free to rent or buy anywhere in the City. But if he had spent time here, he would know that people of color are not jonsing to rent a swanky new duplex in the white parts of town. People of color live in neighborhoods they love, and they want help making their neighborhoods better. Mr. Kahlenberg offers nothing for them.

Mr. Kahlenberg talks about needing to produce affordable housing. Construction costs have doubled since 2009, meaning no new unsubsidized affordable housing is being build. Up-zoning will not change this. All new housing is expensive compared to existing old single-family homes. Microunits are going for \$1200 a month, about what a \$250,000 30-year mortgage would cost. To put this in perspective, the median value home here in Minneapolis is \$275,000. Protecting single family homes is protecting affordable housing.

If you wanted to buy a home and build wealth, you would struggle to find one, because over the last five years, for every 1 ownership unit built, 12 rental units were built. This has been exacerbated by corporations buying up homes and turning them into rental. North Minneapolis, where we have our highest percentage of people of color and highest concentrations of poverty, half of the single-family homes are corporately owned. Not building new ownership properties coupled with corporatization of existing ownership housing leaves people without opportunities to build wealth. No better way of keeping people poor then keeping them on the rental treadmill.

Mr. Kahlenberg also makes straight-out false statements. 3-6 story buildings have been allowed at transit nodes for decades. There has never been a “ban” on multi-family housing - we added about 25,000 new multi-family units in the last five years under our old zoning schema. Eliminating off-street parking in Minneapolis means producing housing that parents with children, the elderly and persons with disabilities can’t use because we have a real winter here. The “inclusionary zoning” rules he touts mean that developers have to set aside 8% of their units at 80% of AMI, which is \$80,000 a year here, not exactly a big deal. The new zoning rules do not make public input easier; it eliminates it from most new development.

And last, Mr. Kahlenberg is just dead wrong that it was “wealthy white homeowners” who opposed the up-zoning of the City. That is just a trope to incense progressives, as is the comment about triplexes becoming “houses of prostitution.” Opposition has come from every quarter of the City and across all groups. Public comments were 80% against this plan. (StarTribune) Opposition groups have cropped up all over the City. Communities of color, in particular, see harvesting lower value starter homes and turning them into corporate rentals as a tool of gentrification. Their concerns mirror the successful opposition to this agenda in San Francisco last year.

The question for Minneapolis has never been about whether we would grow – we have never been a NIMBY city. The question has been about HOW we will grow. Do you sacrifice housing needed by children and people of color when there are dozens of square miles available for development? Do you throw away the opportunity to cluster development into walkable and transit-supported communities so developers can make even more money by putting housing

wherever they want? Do you accelerate the corporatization of housing and keeping people poor by not producing new ownership opportunities and harvesting existing ones? We are now a majority renter city, and last year that meant a transfer of \$1.6 billion dollars from the pockets of Minneapolis residents to corporations (primarily). That is how you keep people poor.

If this really was about progressive values, it would be about protecting the poor, protecting families of color and protecting children. About building wealth and helping people reach the middle class. The reality is that this is a libertarian agenda to reduce regulations on developers, increase corporate home ownership, and make the wealthy wealthier – albeit wrapped in progressive words like climate change and racism and income inequality. You stoke it by feeding intergenerational warfare, by telling Millennials that they got screwed but now they are to get to take from those who got all the goodies before them. But who wins? Developers who make more money. The irony is that all those Millennials are starting to have kids and can't find housing. And now, all those advocates are either buying single family homes in the City. Or moving out to the suburbs. And that is just back policy.

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