
IDEAS

Minneapolis Saw That NIMBYism Has Victims

Single-family zoning hurts a lot of people. In Minnesota's largest city, reformers put them front and center.

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Tomorrow the Minneapolis City Council is slated to do something long considered impossible in American politics: end single-family zoning in an entire city. The council provided preliminary approval to the plan in December by a 12–1 vote.

If the policy is approved, as expected, it could mark a major turning point nationwide. Social scientists broadly agree that bans on multifamily housing are bad for housing affordability, bad for racial inequality, and bad for the environment. Yet there has been a broad political consensus that changing these long-entrenched policies is out of the question. In neighborhood debates about planning and zoning policy, the loudest voices usually belong to people who are satisfied with the status quo. The vaguest of not-in-my-backyard objections from

wealthy homeowners—who attend public meetings and regularly vote—are often enough to thwart the construction of new housing.

What’s happened in Minneapolis is different—and so unusual that my colleagues at the Century Foundation and I undertook a detailed review of how and why reformers prevailed. In Minneapolis, housing advocates have succeeded by shifting the focus of public discussion toward the *victims* of exclusionary zoning. More important, advocates also showed public officials and their own fellow citizens just how numerous those victims were.

[Read more: Why are developers still building sprawl?]

Despite being a city of 425,000 residents, Minneapolis until now has banned duplexes, triplexes, and larger apartment buildings from 70 percent of its residential land; in New York City, by comparison, just 15 percent of residential land is set aside for single-family homes. The city council’s Minneapolis 2040 plan up-zones the city to allow two- and three-family buildings on what had been single-family lots, tripling the potential number of housing units in the city.

Single-family zoning policies have an ugly history. In 1917, after the U.S. Supreme Court struck down policies that explicitly zoned separate residential areas for blacks and whites, many local governments shifted to a new form of exclusionary zoning: policies that banned the construction of anything other than single-family homes. These policies delivered many of the same results, by a different means—they kept out most black people and virtually all low-income people—but the Supreme Court upheld this new practice as legal.

Single-family zoning not only segregates people by race and class, but also artificially increases prices and hurts the environment. By outlawing the construction of duplexes, triplexes, and other multifamily units, single-family zoning artificially constrains the housing supply, driving up prices by government fiat. “When you have demand that is sky-high, and you don’t have the supply to keep up with it, prices rise. Rents rise,” noted Minneapolis’s mayor, Jacob Frey. Moreover, by artificially propping up housing prices and forcing families to move farther and farther out to find homes they can afford, single-family zoning puts more cars on the road for longer commutes, resulting in more greenhouse gases.

In the Minneapolis 2040 plan, the legalization of duplexes and triplexes was part of a package of reforms. The others included an increase in housing density near transit stops by allowing the construction of new three-to-six-story buildings; the elimination of off-street minimum parking requirements, which many experts view as a poison pill that makes the construction of low-cost housing economically unviable; “inclusionary zoning” rules that require new apartment developments to set aside 10 percent of units for moderate-income households; and \$25 million in additional public funding for subsidized housing.

Predictably, the proposal to end single-family zoning and adopt other reforms triggered a major backlash from wealthy white homeowners. Critics called the elimination of single-family zoning a gift to developers, who would change the “character” of neighborhoods by overbuilding. Especially in wealthy Southwest Minneapolis, red signs bearing the slogan DON'T BULLDOZE OUR NEIGHBORHOOD proliferated—even though no one was proposing to bulldoze anything. Several members of the Minneapolis City Council voiced initial reservations about the plan. One said the proposal would be received “like a lead balloon” by his constituents.

[Read more: The contradictions of housing policy.]

Yet housing advocates had laid the groundwork for reform several years earlier. In 2014, the Minneapolis City Council voted to allow in-law apartments to be built in areas zoned for single-family homes. At the time, opponents insisted that these alternative dwelling units would become “houses of prostitution.” When such fears weren’t realized, allowing duplexes and triplexes in single-family neighborhoods seemed like less of a leap, City Council President Lisa Bender told Slate last year.

Next, Minneapolis elected new, younger leadership in 2017. In Minneapolis, fights over zoning didn’t break down to liberal versus conservative so much as to young versus old, Janne Flisrand, an advocate of zoning reform, told our team. Electing a mayor and city-council president who were in their 30s meant leadership understood that the single-family zoning made housing unaffordable for young people, that a policy with racist origins was unacceptable, and that the practice’s promotion of urban sprawl and climate change was intolerable.

Crucially, advocates made racial justice central to their message. In Minneapolis, policy makers pointed out that the maps that redlined majority-black areas as ineligible for financing in decades past had a lot of overlap with maps that distinguished between single-family and multifamily zones. “Zoning is the new redlining,” said Kyrra Rankine, an activist who pushed for the 2040 plan. By emphasizing the racial-justice angle on single-family zoning, progressives were able to include civil-rights groups and community groups in the coalition for reform in a way that has not always happened elsewhere.

Advocates also allied with organized labor. Although unions traditionally focus on wages and benefits for members, SEIU Healthcare Minnesota—an offshoot of the Service Employees International Union—became a key part of the coalition for zoning reform in Minneapolis. Citing the ways in which single-family zoning priced housing out of the reach of working people, the union drove home the idea that strict local land-use rules have real-world consequences. Union members explained that because the city had become unaffordable, they had to move to the suburbs and take two buses to get to work, which was a major hardship.

City planners and advocates also made public input on zoning-reform decisions easier. Research by Boston University’s Katherine Levine Einstein and her colleagues has found that older, relatively wealthy white people tend to dominate zoning and planning meetings, giving outsized voice to NIMBY forces. In Minneapolis, city staff went to street fairs, festivals, and churches to gather input on zoning reform from people in low-income and minority communities. They didn’t speak in jargon-laden terms about “increasing housing density,” but instead asked big questions such as “Are you satisfied with the housing options available to you right now?” and “What does your ideal Minneapolis look like in 2040?”

Advocates recognized more broadly that language matters a lot in policy debates. The umbrella organization pushing for the Minneapolis 2040 reforms called itself “Neighbors for More Neighbors”—a name that brilliantly evoked the shared humanity of those who want to be included in exclusive neighborhoods.

Finally, the scale of the reforms matched the severity of Minneapolis’s housing-affordability problem. After building on incremental support for in-law flats, and then painstakingly seeking input from residents, advocates also realized that the reform plan needed to go big. Rather than seeking the elimination of single-family

zoning only in certain parts of the city, they sought to eliminate it in every community citywide. In this way, no neighborhood felt singled out. Minneapolis's director of long-range planning, Heather Worthington, says taking reform citywide turned out to be a political advantage: "If we were going to pick and choose, the fight, I think, would have been even bloodier." Ultimately, reformers in Minneapolis succeeded in reframing the discussion about zoning rules not as a neighborhood matter, but as something that affects the life of the entire community.

[*Read more: The future of the city is childless*]

Whether this same approach would bear fruit elsewhere in the country is another question entirely. Is Minneapolis—which *Forbes* rated as one of the most liberal cities in the country—a unicorn in housing policy? Or can reforms of single-family zoning garner bipartisan support in more conservative communities?

Evidence suggests that zoning reform can make for unlikely political bedfellows. President Donald Trump's Housing and Urban Development secretary, Ben Carson, has an otherwise troubling record on fair-housing issues, but Carson visited Minneapolis and said he would like other cities to follow suit and eliminate single-family zoning. As Christian Britschgi declared in the libertarian magazine Reason, "Free marketers should celebrate the vote" in Minneapolis as a form of government deregulation.

And in July, a bipartisan group of legislators in Oregon passed a statewide ban on single-family zoning in cities with a population of at least 10,000 residents, overcoming the opposition of the League of Oregon Cities. Indeed, new polling suggests zoning reform is popular. In a 2019 poll, voters were asked, "Would you support or oppose a policy to ensure smaller, lower-cost homes like duplexes, townhouses, and garden apartments can be built in middle- and upper-class neighborhoods?" Supporters outnumbered opponents by two to one.

Ultimately, the legalization of duplexes, triplexes, and apartment buildings isn't just an abstract decision; rather, it upholds fundamental democratic values affirming basic human dignity. It is humiliating for local governments to tell people of modest means that they are not welcome in a certain community and that their children do not belong in its public schools. When a community lets homeowners' fears of imaginary bulldozers dominate the discussion about housing, single-

family zoning is the inevitable result. But if the victims of single-family zoning speak up, as they did in Minneapolis, they may begin to bury an anachronistic practice that has done so much harm for so many years.

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