

Minneapolis' new zoning law is a miracle of sorts; whether it works is another matter

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The Minneapolis City Council has officially approved the 2040 plan, which eliminates single-family zoning throughout the city.
Leila Navidi, Star Tribune

On Friday, Minneapolis' 2040 Plan, which eliminated single-family zoning throughout the city, got the official nod from the City Council. Hours before,

[The Atlantic](https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/10/how-minneapolis-defeated-nimbyism/600601/)

(<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/10/how-minneapolis-defeated-nimbyism/600601/>).

published a piece calling it a “major turning point nationwide.”

“In neighborhood debates about planning and zoning policy, the loudest voices usually belong to people who are satisfied with the status quo,” wrote Richard Kahlenberghes.

“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.”

Kahlenberg says Minneapolis has finally managed to do what most reform movements have not: make the public see the “victims of exclusionary zoning,” and understand that people do suffer when homeowners say, “not in my backyard.”

Proponents of the plan campaigned by reminding residents that single-family zoning has been used as a cudgel against people of color ever since zoning explicitly by race was outlawed in 1917—and that these areas are still overwhelmingly white today.

They also appealed to the market. Outlawing denser housing artificially keeps supply low and prices high. It creates sprawl by forcing families to move farther and farther out for a place to live, creating greater expense for roads and causing more pollution. And it all but ensures young people can’t afford to stay in the city, driving out the up-and-coming generation.

Against all odds and the misgivings of many residents, it worked, creating shockwaves nationwide. Oregon has already passed a similar plan. A fellow with the Brookings Institute called it

“The Most Wonderful Plan of the Year.”

(<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/the-avenue/2018/12/12/minneapolis-2040-the-most-wonderful-plan-of-the-year/>).

Even President Donald Trump’s Housing and Urban Development Secretary,

Ben Carson

(<https://bringhamethenews.com/minnesota-news/hud-secretary-ben-carson-backs-minneapolis-2040-housing-plan>).

, had nothing but good things to say when he visited the city.

Not everyone is starry-eyed. The journal

Architectural Record

(<https://www.architecturalrecord.com/articles/14266-minneapolis-and-the-end-of-the-american-dream-house>).

agreed with the spirit of the plan but qualified it by saying it only “indirectly” addresses the needs of poor residents by relying on developers to carry it out.

“Many experts believe there is little evidence that adding market-rate units will have a trickle-down effect in thriving cities,” it said. “Without a more robust policy to address housing costs for those most affected by the tightening market in Minneapolis, the 2040 plan could produce the result opponents have feared: The wrong kind of new housing and a continuing concentration of poverty.”

That's the specter looming over 2040, the anxiety that haunts many who can't quite full-throatedly endorse it. Denser housing is only accessible if it's affordable, and there's little incentive for developers to invest in projects of that kind. If the city really wants this to work, it's going to have to rein them in.

All that's left is to watch 2040 unfold and see if theory translates to practice. There's a chance it just might be the "turning point" Kahlenberg and others hope it will be, but we won't know until we try.