

The “San Francisco-fication” of Minneapolis

By Ismail Khadar

This winter, Minneapolis approved a draft for its 20-year plan – aptly called the “Minneapolis 2040 Comprehensive Plan.” It is the blueprint which the relatively few development players in Minneapolis will use when constructing their figurative stage. The backdrop of Minnesota winter (the plan was passed by the City Council on December 7, 2018) is something that should lean over your shoulder almost intrusively if you muster up the courage to read it.

The comprehensive plan highlights the pressures Minneapolis will face in the coming years. It focuses particularly on the need for more housing, while artfully neglecting to say who will enjoy those new homes. If you look around the city, you may see that most new constructions are condos, apartments, and other high-density housing units accommodating the modern and wealthy urbanite. While the plan makes performative gestures, acknowledging the need for public housing, it doesn't address community needs. The City Council passed a resolution supporting the ongoing effort to privatize public housing in Minneapolis the same day that they passed the Comprehensive Plan, demonstrating how the black and brown, poor and undocumented will, as always, absorb the brunt of the government's negligence. Let us not assume, however, that this is an oversight in the grand scheme of the housing crisis.

Minneapolis has one of the tightest rental markets in the country and consistently ranks among the most expensive rental markets with the average price of a one-bedroom being \$1,382. This is just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to affordable housing in the city. Frozen wages, coupled with the increasing cost of living, have sparked a national trend spreading eastward from Silicon Valley, displacing poor people in its midst. The “San Francisco-fication” of Minneapolis is impending! Rents are too high for people who are already working two, perhaps three, jobs. A 2017 report from the Minnesota Housing Partnership and National Low Income Housing Coalition found that it would take “70 hours per week at minimum wage to afford rent for a single-bedroom home” in the Twin Cities.

Why is this happening and who are the players at the table? If you are privy to local movements, you may have heard about two groups called NIMBYs and YIMBYs: NIMBY stands for ‘Not in my backyard’ whereas YIMBY signifies ‘Yes in my backyard.’ NIMBYs got their start in the 1970s when white middle-class retaliation

toward industrial zoning in their neighborhoods resulted in moving plants to places where NIMBYs wouldn't have to worry about poisonous fumes. YIMBYs have a more recent and subversive origin. With the swelling of inner cities by those suburbanites' grandchildren, who we called 'hipsters' in the 2000s, local governments have been preparing for the need to expand. With little space, High-Density Housing (HDH) has been an attractive solution. Middle-class inner-city homeowners are being muscled out by developers and have thus appropriated the NIMBY acronym to fight against HDH encroachment. YIMBYs, in an ingenious move, retaliated by painting new development as an intelligent move for all by using internalized assumptions about apartments and duplexes as inhabited by the poor, immigrants, and people of color, thus vilifying NIMBYs as backward conservatives and lending little help to the aforementioned renters. In this sweeping wave of neoliberalism, no person is secure in their home.

Let us focus on Minneapolis in particular. Numerous sources, including the 2040 Plan, imply that by building more housing, the cost of housing will fall overall. Good thing, right? Wrong. By playing off of our implicit bias that only the young and disenfranchised rent, then renting an apartment or triplex would be cheaper than renting in a city full of single-family homes. However, this thinly veiled 'solution' does not address the fact that renting is a losing game for tenants.

The nail in the coffin for single-family home inventory within Minneapolis came with the abolishment of single-family zoning in the city in December through the passage of the new plan. Previously, zoning laws in the city prohibited construction of buildings that were not single-family homes in certain areas, thereby restricting the gross inventory of housing units. With the abolition of this zoning law, Minneapolis has become a free-for-all for developers and property management companies. Worse off are those who are not represented by NIMBYs, a group which historically had the resources and resilience to recoup their losses. It is those of us who struggle to make ends meet and may not even have full citizenship yet. As we speak places like Elliot Twins public housing near downtown U.S. Bank Stadium, a community inhabited by low-income black, immigrants, seniors, and people living with disabilities is being privatized through the Rental Assistance Demonstration. This HUD program is part of a nationwide gentrification and privatization push coming from the Trump administration.

Glendale Townhomes public housing is next on the chopping block, soon to be followed by more single-family homes and high-rise buildings. In a matter of years, public housing all over Minneapolis will be gutted and butchered, its residents displaced, by the cold hands of Minneapolis housing politics. Ladan Yusuf, Campaign Organizer of Defend Glendale & Public Housing Coalition (a city-wide campaign to save public housing) connects these plans with the racist and anti-poor Trump administration: "In Minneapolis, Mayor Jacob Frey, and City Council President Lisa

Bender's approval to dispose and privatize over 730 single-family homes that are public housing where over 5,000 low-income black, immigrants, and Muslim families with children live does not only fit Frey and Bender's plan, but it also fits the current Trump/Carson agenda to displace public housing residents, and destroy black and brown communities for developers to profit."

Minority-owned small businesses in Minneapolis are also disappearing. Prominent minority-owned small businesses have been lost to gentrification, including Village Wok (formerly located near the University of Minnesota). Even longtime institutions like Marla's Caribbean Cuisine are facing displacement due to ever-increasing rents. In 2018, minority and small businesses located on 14th and Nicollet in Ward 7 were displaced, leading to job loss. The plan throws gas on this fire by upzoning the entire city. Although the city has attempted to brand this plan as a part of their strategy to eliminate racial disparities, a recent MIT study of upzoning shows that it will have the opposite effect and that the YIMBY's narrative is mistaken. The study tracked changes following an experiment with upzoning in Chicago, finding that rents actually went up following the change in zoning. This will have a disproportionate impact on black and brown businesses and communities, due to the entrenched racial disparities that already afflict Minneapolis.

In the Twin Cities metro area the black Area Median Income (AMI) is \$33,436, and majority white AMI is \$94,300. As such, there's a deep need for affordable housing within black communities, which are disproportionately impacted by disparities in income and stable housing indicators, particularly seniors and families with young children. Seniors on a fixed income such as Social Security receive \$9,000 a year, or \$750 a month. The average income of a working poor family of four in public housing is \$20,656 per year.

The City of Minneapolis and its developer network are using this \$94,300 AMI to calculate the current rents and the rents that the plan is pushing. Instead of focusing on the AMI standard based on the income of wealthy, white residents, we should develop an equitable plan that accommodates our most vulnerable communities. According to Mayor Frey and City Council, renters that make 60% to 80% of their AMI of \$94,300 will be considered "affordable," and developers that rent to (majority white and wealthy) who make 60% to 80% of this AMI will receive all kinds of affordable housing funds and tax credits. Meanwhile, low-income renters of color who make less than 10% to 35% of that same \$94,300 are being pushed out of Minneapolis because they can't afford the current rents. Roda Osman, a writer and a community activist who grew up in Minneapolis, said, "this is not a plan, it is a plot."

Despite the fact that the plan is being presented as a remedy for racial disparities, it will actually exacerbate racial inequality by displacing low-income communities of color making the "San Francisco-fication" of Minneapolis inevitable.

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