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NEWS

Triplex change slated for 2040's first day

MICHELLE BRUCH / MBRUCH@SOUTHWESTJOURNAL.COM

OCTOBER 16, 2019

UPDATED: OCTOBER 18, 2019 - 3:22 PM



The city rezoned 3450 Grand Ave. in 2017 to allow construction of the pictured triplex. Under the Minneapolis 2040 plan, triplexes would be allowed by right in every neighborhood.

Minneapolis may soon allow duplexes and triplexes citywide. The City Council will take a final vote on the Minneapolis 2040 plan in the coming weeks, also voting on a change to allow three units inside the dimensions of a single-family home and a measure to add affordable housing as part of new development. All could become effective as soon as Jan. 1, said Council President Lisa Bender (Ward 10).

The [2040 plan](#) sets a sweeping policy agenda, touching everything from pursuing racial equity (by reducing evictions) to ending traffic injuries (by reducing speed limits). More housing capacity would aim to absorb a population that's predicted to grow from an estimated 428,483 in 2018 to 485,000 by 2040.

Joining actions focused on affordable housing and renter protections, the zoning amendment to allow duplexes and triplexes in every single-family neighborhood is one of the first changes the city would formally adopt under Minneapolis 2040. That's a starting point because so much of the city is devoted to single-family homes, creating a wide discrepancy between the old and new comprehensive plans, said Jason Wittenberg, Minneapolis code development manager.

"We wanted to make sure that issue got addressed as quickly as possible," he said.

Next year, city staff will begin a rezoning study to match the plan's guidelines for building height and scale. Those changes would allow the tallest and densest development in Downtown, near transit stations and along main thoroughfares like Lake Street and Hiawatha Avenue.

"That will likely affect every property in the city," said Joe Bernard, planning project manager in the city's Long Range Planning Division.

The plan has attracted widespread national attention, sparking similar efforts in other states including Oregon and California. "Cities Start to Question an American Ideal: A House With a Yard on Every Lot," [a New York Times headline stated](#) in June.

"I'm not sure there's a city in the country where we can steal exactly how to do this. We need to innovate here, and we're innovating along with other cities around the country," Bender said. "So we need to take our time to make sure that we're doing things well, and that we are incorporating all of the plan's goals — especially race equity, especially climate change — really following through on those commitments that we've made to our constituents."

Stolen yard signs

In Minneapolis, the 2040 plan continues to be contentious.

The groups Smart Growth Minneapolis, Audubon Chapter of Minneapolis and Minnesota Citizens for the Protection of Migratory Birds continue to challenge the 2040 plan in court, alleging that it would cause environmental harm.

And a recent bid to create a conservation district for about 25 homes in the West Calhoun neighborhood, an area that would open to 10-story buildings under the 2040 plan, was met with 178 pages of public comments. Some were fiercely opposed, fearing “hundreds of copycat applications” and “death by a thousand cuts for Mpls 2040.” And some were fiercely supportive, saying that if “fine, beautiful, historic homes are demolished, the damage is done and cannot be undone.”





A view of homes in the proposed conservation district on Ivy Lane, Zenith Avenue South and 32nd Street West.

From his apartment window on Sept. 22, Lyndale resident Devin Hogan watched someone steal his “Neighbors for More Neighbors” lawn signs from the corner of 34th & Nicollet. When Hogan opened the window and yelled, he said the person looked him in the eye, hesitated, then tucked the signs under their arm and quickly walked away.



“This is how I always put it in my head: There is more to life than opposing places for people to live,” Hogan said. “The 2040 plan really isn’t that radical in some ways.”

He pointed to projects like Fullertown Flats in Tangletown, where zoning at 4736–4740 Grand Ave. currently allows the four-story building by right, while the 2040 plan calls for just 2.5 stories on the site. In Whittier, city officials recently approved a five-story building at 26th & Blaisdell where 2040 zoning would only allow three stories.

In general, the [2040 plan directs building heights](#) of at least 10 stories and no maximum to Downtown’s central business district, 10- to 30-story buildings near Downtown and along high-frequency transit routes, six stories along high-frequency transit corridors, and three to four stories along transit routes farther from Downtown. Zones allowing up to three stories would provide a transition to residential areas that mirror the scale of single-family homes.

For example, the plan would upzone areas along the Midtown Greenway, major intersections like Lake & Hennepin and blocks surrounding the future West Lake light rail transit station. The plan would downzone some blocks that are not on major streets while upzoning other blocks that successfully lobbied to downzone in the 1950s–80s, removing a patchwork of zoning in neighborhoods like The Wedge and Whittier.

Triplexes under scrutiny

The Cedar-Isles-Dean Neighborhood Association is questioning the practicality of triplexes in single-family zones, based on one “real world example of what development under the proposed 2040 plan might actually look like” at 2820 St. Louis Ave. Schaefer Development did not immediately comment on the proposal.



2820 St. Louis Ave.

“That triplex required five different variances,” said board member Evan Carlson. “I really challenge the city to give us some actual renderings of what this hypothetical triplex would look like on a normal Minneapolis lot [without] variances.”

Southwest Minneapolis resident Bruce Brunner previously constructed a triplex on a vacant lot at 3450 Grand Ave. S., and he’s waiting for 2040 adoption to determine how to finish off a basement at another building. It’s much easier to convert a single-family home into a duplex than a triplex, he said. Triplexes fall under commercial building code, requiring fire-rated and sound-rated walls and flooring, taller ceiling heights and architectural renderings.

“Is it possible? Yes. Is it very difficult? Yes,” he said.

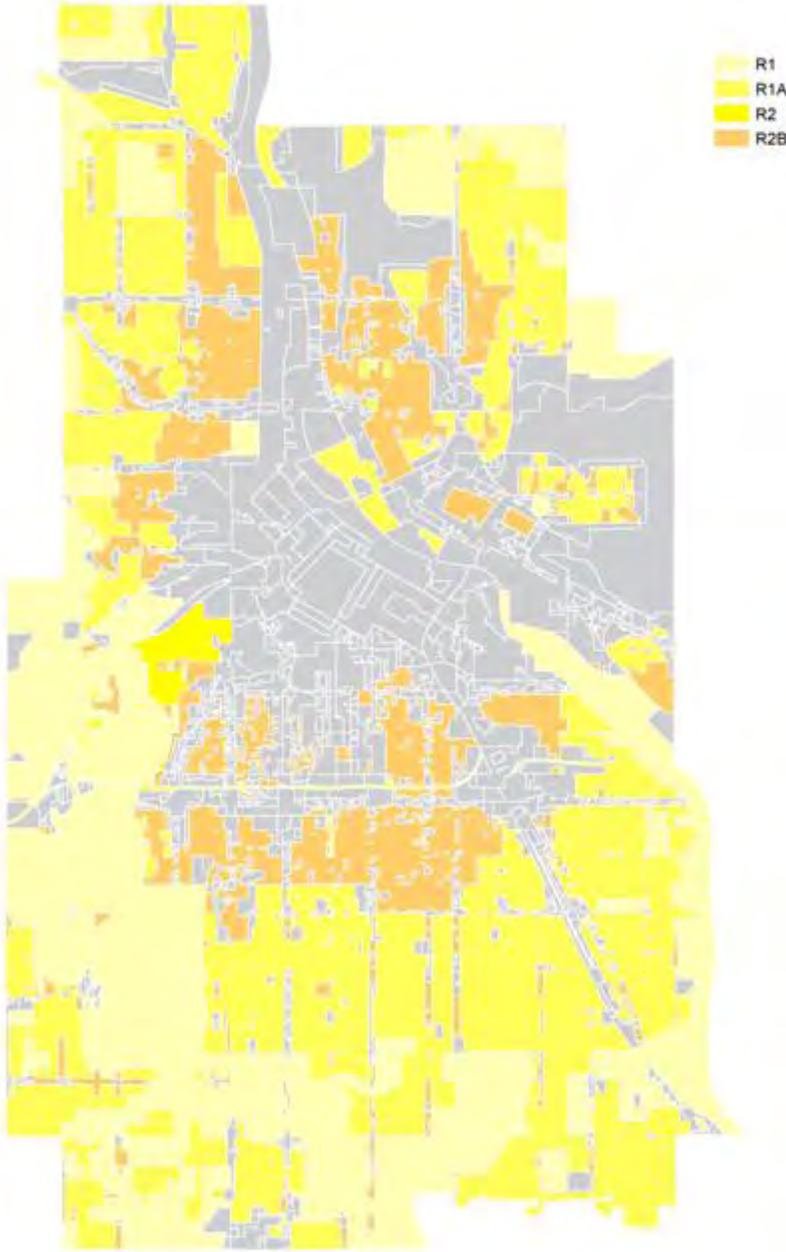
It makes more financial sense to build a triplex from the ground up, he said.

The City Planning Commission approved the triplex zoning code amendment Oct. 7 in a 6-1 vote. The nay vote came from Alissa Luepke-Pier, who said she’s not opposed to density, but she worries about outside real estate investors exploiting communities like North Minneapolis, denying homeownership and furthering disparities in wealth the 2040 plan aims to fix. Converting family-size housing into efficiency units would hurt North Side neighborhoods where many residents are under age 18, she said.

“It seems to me that if we honor what we stated was our No. 1 goal of the comp plan, we should at least get the inaugural one right,” she said.

Planning Commission President Sam Rockwell said in response that the triplex amendment is part of a broader package of policies that include raising the minimum wage and adding renter protections.

“From an equity standpoint, this isn’t something that should be seen in a vacuum,” he said.



Four zoning districts indicated above would open to triplexes under Minneapolis 2040. Two districts, R1 and R1A, would open to duplexes. Image courtesy of City of Minneapolis

What’s next

In the months since approving the 2040 draft, council members have restricted tenant screening, capped renter security deposits, embedded racial equity goals into all city work and asked city staff to start looking into caps on rent increases. Some council members are looking at energy efficiency in the building code. The council is also considering a permanent inclusionary zoning policy that would take effect Jan. 1, aiming to produce more affordable units as part of new development.

“That was a huge priority for the council to say that at the same time that the comprehensive plan would take effect, allowing more housing to come into our city, that it include affordability,” Bender said.

Another council priority in the pipeline could change regulation of “intentional community cluster developments.” An initiative that began with Hennepin Healthcare and the homeless advocacy group Street Voices of Change would build a micro-home community for 15–30 people, perhaps designed as a common house with showers and a kitchen surrounded by tiny houses with beds and composting toilets. The group is currently looking to acquire a site, according to the city.

Following a rezoning study, city staff expect to change the entire city’s “built form” guidelines, revising maximum building heights, bulk requirements and setbacks.

Bender said the timeline for implementation is not yet finalized, and she wants to make sure new development is tied to other goals like transportation infrastructure and affordable housing.

A multiyear process would also implement a new Land Use map — adding more places for commercial space, for example, so residents can find what they need closer to home without using a car. The map would protect land designated for industry and jobs in portions of Windom and Northeast Minneapolis, where housing would be off-limits.

“Where the rubber hits the road most directly is with development review,” Bernard said.

Following the rezoning study, city staff expect to see fewer exceptions to zoning requirements. Bernard said developers seeking exceptions would need to make the case that they’re furthering the goals of Minneapolis 2040. The new built form map would already meet goals for more housing, he said, so staff would pay more attention to factors like a project’s affordability and access to jobs.

The City Council is currently scheduled to formally adopt Minneapolis 2040 on Oct. 25. The amendment that would allow three-unit homes in single-family areas may go before the city's Zoning & Planning Committee on Oct. 31, followed by the full City Council on Nov. 8.

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