

Elimination of Single Family Zoning is Misguided and Counterproductive

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Have we reached the point where people should no longer be allowed to live in single family zoned neighborhoods? HB2001, being strongly pushed by leadership in the Oregon House, would eliminate all single family neighborhood zoning in Oregon cities with a population of more than 10,000 people. These cities contain about 60% of Oregon's population.

The bill would not apply just to new development, but to existing single family zoned neighborhoods. Single family homes in those neighborhoods could now be taken down and replaced with multi-family housing up to quadplexes. Where there was one family and two cars there could be four families with eight cars.

Not surprisingly, many people who made the major purchasing decision of their lives to live in what they expected to be a quiet, less crowded area, are extremely upset when they hear how their neighborhood could be transformed by HB2001.

Single family zoned neighborhoods are far from exclusive enclaves. They make up the majority of residentially zoned land in most Oregon cities and typically are middle class.

The bill would suddenly undo 100 years of planning by local zoning boards that provided a balance of single family zoned neighborhoods with more densely populated zones. Neighborhood schools and utility infrastructure would be inadequate to deal with the population increase causing years of disruption.

What kind of emergency would require such extreme statewide action, even though recently enacted similar legislation in Portland has run into a thicket of problems?

Supporters of the bill hold that increasing density by eliminating single family zoning will allow more housing to be built and lower the price as a result of increased supply, creating more affordable housing. But a quick look at Portland itself shows that it has the highest density in the state and the most unaffordable housing. Lot prices just rise when more housing can be put on them. Builders continue to build what can make them the most money, not what is most affordable.

There is a valid environmental argument for increased density. But environmental arguments that don't take quality of life into account can't be the sole basis of decision making. Resource use would be most efficient if we all lived in 40 story towers, but that doesn't mean we should require that as policy.

Just as we have a mix of people, some of whom enjoy city high-density living, and some who enjoy the “American Dream” of a house with a back yard in a quiet low density neighborhood, we should strive to meet all those needs, and we can.

The fact is that our urban growth boundary is respected nationally as conserving our land while allowing controlled growth. It is working to provide the housing we need for future growth while still offering the full range of zones from single family on up. Hillsboro is not alone in already having planned to meet housing needs for years to come through controlled growth without eliminating the opportunity for people to live in existing single family zones. In fact, even the new huge South Hillsboro development will have single family zones in addition to apartments, townhouses and condos.

Unless we want to subsidize housing for the very large percentage of people working in non-living wage jobs, the real solution for the affordable housing crisis is to raise wages so that housing is affordable without a public subsidy. HB2001 is a false solution to the problem of affordable housing.

HB2001 will not solve the problem it is meant to solve. It will wreck the careful zoning decisions made by cities over the years and needlessly deprive people of what they greatly value.

Ironically, a principal result of HB2001 could be to turn massive numbers of voters against government land use regulation, endangering the very program that has been so successful containing sprawl in Oregon. Legislators can perform a service to the state by not approving HB2001 or any variation of it.

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