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# How changes to single-family zoning laws can ease the affordable housing crisis in Denver

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In Colorado, its largest city has a plan called Blueprint Denver that addresses the crisis by using zoning incentives to encourage the construction of affordable, mixed-income housing, especially in transit-rich areas.

By Laura Newpoff – Contributor  
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In 2019, Minneapolis adopted a plan to abolish single-family zoning to pave the way for multi-family structures to be built anywhere in the city. At the time, it was an unprecedented step among American local governments to address an affordable housing crisis that has its grip on cities from coast to coast.

Shortly thereafter, the state of Oregon followed suit by passing a law that allows duplexes, triplexes, quadplexes, cottage clusters and townhouses to be built on land that had been zoned for single-family structures. California lawmakers, too, continue to work on housing production legislation that would bring more density to single-family neighborhoods.

The moves have the intent of addressing the dramatic housing shortages that have egged on the affordability problem. Simply, there's a lot of demand, not enough supply and incomes aren't keeping pace with soaring rents and home prices.

Affordable housing activists hope more cities and states do what Minneapolis and Oregon did, but know it will take the kind of rare and progressive leadership those lawmakers showed to reverse 100 years of exclusionary zoning laws entrenched in almost all American cities.



"In Denver, it's the people in the housing and development community that are working to come up with creative solutions to this problem," said Brian Connolly, with Otten Johnson.

"The action lawmakers took in Minneapolis and Oregon was very bold," said Brian Connolly, a shareholder with Denver-based Otten Johnson Robinson Neff + Ragonetti PC, who specializes in land use, zoning, planning and development. "We are seeing a lot of public discussion about housing affordability right now. Progressive leaders know that stable housing is so important to families and is linked to educational outcomes, physical and mental health and well-being and the ability to hold down a job. Stable housing should be important to everyone."

## Roadblocks persist

In Colorado, its largest city has a plan called Blueprint Denver that addresses the crisis by using zoning incentives to encourage the construction of affordable, mixed-income housing, especially in transit-rich areas.

The plan, however, may not go far enough in a city that has seen population growth of nearly 20% since 2010 while the housing stock has grown by only 9%. Exacerbating the problem are home prices and rents that continue to soar, making the city one of the most expensive places to live in the country.

Connolly said while Blueprint Denver does encourage more density in some places, it doesn't call for it city-wide. In fact, he said the plan protects existing single-family neighborhoods from additional density that could be gained by allowing a garage to be converted into a guest house, for example.

"In Denver, it's the people in the housing and development community that are working to come up with creative solutions to this problem," he said. "They have plans for micro apartments, row house developments and concepts like pod-style living. But, even so, they continue to face roadblocks."

He's referring to the city's recent decision to ban slot homes, among other things, that allowed for more density in single-family neighborhoods. "That greatly reduces the capacity to add any meaningful density to the urban core," Connolly said. "The zoning code amendments and policy decisions over the past five years have actually made housing more unaffordable in Denver."

## Greater stability for communities

Making it easier for developers to bring multi-family projects online is critical to Denver's future and puts it in a better position to compete with other cities that are trying to recruit and retain businesses and the workers who come with them, Connolly said. That won't happen if more housing doesn't come online that people can actually afford.

According to the Joint Center for Housing Studies at Harvard, more than half the nation's renters are cost-burdened, meaning they spend more than 30% of their income on rent. In Denver, year-over-year, rents are up 3% and an 841-square-foot unit has an average rent of \$1,663, according to RentCafe.com.

The Colorado Division of Housing estimates that the city needs 26,735 additional rental units for those who are considered "extremely low income," 11,900 units for those in the "very low income" bracket and 3,340 for "low-income" individuals.

"We need more people to be involved in the conversation and to push elected city and state leaders toward rational decisions about how we build and where we build housing," Connolly said. "The solution shouldn't be to constrain the market's production of housing units in ways that ultimately reduce or make the production of units more expensive."

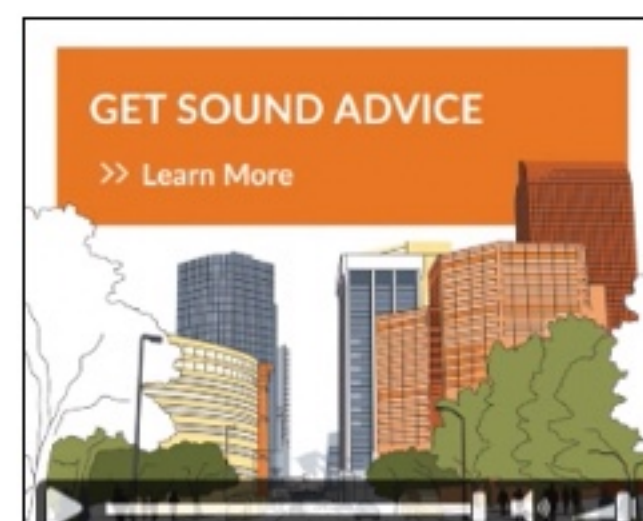
Zoning laws that would allow multi-family projects on land where only single-family has been permitted would bring more supply to the market, which likely would drive down rents, giving developers more freedom in how they design projects and give property owners the right to use their properties in creative ways by adding accessory dwellings or converting garages and attics into living spaces.

"The only way to get ourselves out of this problem is through the construction of housing," Connolly said. "Communities that make it easier, not harder, to develop these projects will create a greater level of stability for their citizens and become more attractive places for companies and their employees to thrive."

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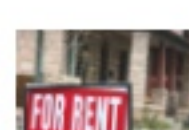
Laura Newpoff is a freelance writer for The Business Journals Content Studio.



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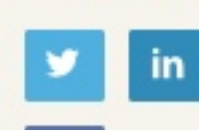
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