

# Next step: End zoning laws that lead to racial segregation

BY THOMAS BARRIE

The national protests of the past weeks were powerful demands to dismantle systemic racism. The next battles must be fought in the planning of our cities.

The history of racism in America includes a history of spatial injustice. The Civil Rights and Fair Housing Acts of the 1960s were designed to eliminate racism, but did not address zoning laws. Since then, these laws have been applied to accomplish what the acts made illegal – racial segregation and economic marginalization.

The predominantly single-family-zoned and economically and racially segregated cities in North Carolina reflect these histories. Exclusive single-family zoning and minimum lot sizes raise the

price of a home and prevent lower-income people access to the schools, employment, and services of higher wealth areas.

During the post-World War II housing boom, the Federal Housing Administration and GI Bill significantly supported homeownership, but mostly for whites. Redlining by banks and government agencies denied loans to African Americans. Deed restrictions limited the purchase and sale of housing to whites only. Today, African Americans are much less likely than whites to own their home. For those that do, economic zoning artificially suppresses property values in low wealth areas while inflating those in higher wealth ones.

Zoning laws are weapons of exclusion. 'Protecting neighborhoods' is often another way of enforcing discrimination. In his 2017

book, "The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America," Richard Rothstein, writes: "Our residential racial boundaries are as much a civil rights violation as the segregation of water fountains, buses and lunch counters that we confronted six decades ago."

Ironically, Minneapolis is one of a few American cities with a plan to dismantle exclusive zoning. The recently adopted Minneapolis 2040 Plan changes zoning citywide to allow duplexes and quads in all single-family-zoned areas. Grand Rapids, Michigan and Denver, Colorado have also implemented land-use reform, and in 2019 Oregon eliminated single-family zoning for mid to large cities statewide.

Some cities in North Carolina are making open-



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Charlotte city planners are exploring allowing duplexes, triplexes and townhomes in all single-family-zoned areas.

gress. Since Charlotte's first city-wide zoning ordinance was adopted in 1949, it has been used to enforce segregation. Now, planners are exploring allowing duplexes, triplexes and townhomes in all single-family-zoned areas. Accessory dwelling units – commonly called backyard "granny flats" – have been legal since 2012 and the city is studying how more can be built, including effectively promoting them. Durham has some of the more progressive pol-

icies in the state for providing 'missing middle' housing. In Raleigh, ordinances are in process that allow townhouses in more zoning districts and accessory dwelling units city-wide, by right.

These are positive steps, but our time calls for visionary thinking and comprehensive change, not piecemeal approaches. We need to revision how our cities and suburbs are planned. This includes the private zoning and deed restrictions Homeowner

Associations employ and the impediments to equitable housing they present. We should also stop subsidizing the single-family house and the infrastructures that support it, change building codes that cost-burden other housing types, and redirect resources to diverse, adaptable and affordable housing.

Dismantling systemic racism includes systemic changes to our built environment. We should have honest conversations about spatial justice and enact comprehensive land use reform. The built environment of North Carolina cities reflects years of discriminatory codes and practices. Transforming our cities by visionary actions will express our collective commitment to more just, equitable and inclusive state.

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