



Opinion: Equity, Affordability, and Upzoning

By Chris Jones

What if I told you that eliminating single family zoning would make things worse for low-income families and families of color in Sacramento?

Sacramento's 2040 General Plan Update proposes major changes to zoning codes that would essentially eliminate single family zoning within city limits and allow duplexes, triplexes and fourplexes to be built in traditional single-family neighborhoods.

A main pillar of the argument for an end to single family zoning in Sacramento is the idea that by increasing density in places like Land Park and East Sacramento will allow for lower- and middle-income families to live in a neighborhood that is typically out of their price range, making neighborhoods more diverse and dynamic. Seattle, Minneapolis, Chicago, and several other cities both in the US and abroad have embraced the idea that forced upzoning leads to more diverse, dynamic neighborhoods and reduces racial disparity.

The devil, however, lies in the details. Does upzoning increase housing affordability? Does it increase diversity? Unfortunately, it looks like the answer is no on both counts.

Regarding the idea that upzoning increases supply and makes housing more affordable, there is evidence that it in fact does the opposite. In 2013 and 2015, Chicago created a natural experiment by upzoning large sections of the city, allowing higher Floor Area Ratios (FAR), eliminating parking requirements, and increasing allowable housing density.

Yonah Freemark from MIT studied (Upzoning Chicago: Impacts of a Zoning Reform on Property Values and Housing Construction) the results of this upzoning over the next five years, and his conclusion was that first, there is strong evidence that upzoning increases the property prices for existing single-family homes and that second, there was no evidence for short or medium term increases in housing unit construction.

We need more affordable housing in Sacramento, how can we in good conscience make the problem worse by knowingly enacting a policy that produces no new housing, and worse makes the existing housing more expensive?

I don't think we'll find anyone who thinks that a diverse and dynamic neighborhood is a bad thing. In fact, it's one of the arguments in favor of this upzoning. Advocates say that White families make up over 70% of residents in some of the most privileged neighborhoods such as East Sacramento, Land Park, and Curtis Park in a city that is overall only about a third White. This argument is not borne out by research.

At New York University, Ignacio Aravena, Anastasia Lopatina, Alexia Nazarian, Doug Rose, and Yinan Yao conducted a study (Zoned Out? Examining the Effect of Upzoning on Neighborhood Demographic Trends: A Fixed Effects Analysis) on the effects of upzoning on demographics and the results were equally damning analyzing the impacts of forced upzoning in New York City, they found that upzonings changes made between 2000 and 2007 led to a five to nine percent increase in the share of White residents.

The implication being that the housing which was created, did not go to lower income families of color, but were mainly occupied by White residents. If the idea behind forcing higher density is to allow families of color to move into these "privileged" and "majority white" neighborhoods, then how do we justify pursuing a policy that decreased diversity when used elsewhere? Ironically, it won't be Land Park and East Sacramento that bear the brunt of redevelopment and gentrification unleashed by upzoning. Diverse and relatively affordable neighborhoods like Oak Park will be the first places targeted for new construction.

Sacramento is a city that is poised to see huge growth over the next 20 years. We have major freeways, strong health and government sectors, and we are well positioned to absorb families fleeing the extortionate cost of living in the Bay Area.

We need to grow, but in a way that enables everyone to take part in that growth. The ideals of increasing affordability and diversity are good ones, but we need to really examine whether the changes proposed in the 2040 General Plan Update are going to get us there, or if they're just empty words to make us feel good. I think we can do better than empty words.

Chris Jones has been a resident of Colonial Heights in Sacramento since 2016, where he participates in several community organizations including the Colonial Heights Neighborhood Association, and Hope for Sacramento, a homelessness advocacy group. Chris currently holds a BS in Information Technology and an MB. He works as a Project Manager in the Healthcare/IT field.

This article was first published in the East Sacramento News on February 4, 2021.