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## HOUSING MATTERS

# The Takeaway from Minneapolis: Can Density Bring Value?

New Zoning Code Could Offer Lessons for Boston

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If Minneapolis can do it, why can't we?

Urban areas across the country are fighting the problem of prohibitively high housing prices and lack of supply. With cities becoming people magnets

in the 21st century, even middle-sized communities like Minneapolis, Minnesota, are facing the problem. In the first action of its kind in the nation, that city has moved dramatically to do something about it.

At the end of last year Minneapolis decided to get rid of single-family zoning, the predominant U.S. standard for residential neighborhoods, and automatically allow residences with up to three units. Under the new zoning, duplexes and triplexes could become as common as the one-family house.

Big steps toward allowing more density – and less sprawl – are being seriously considered elsewhere, too. In Oregon, a plan has been floated to allow residential structures of up to four units by right in communities with populations of 10,000 or more.

Many communities in Massachusetts have precious little multifamily housing. Among the 351 communities in the commonwealth, the housing stock in over half is made up of at least 80 percent single-family homes.

Boston as a whole is way ahead of Minneapolis, with 80 percent of its housing structures having more than one living unit. Yet some neighborhoods have little multifamily housing. Only 150 new housing units were permitted in Hyde Park between 2014 and 2018; in that same period almost 3,600 were approved in the Seaport.

Suburban communities are not only dominated

by single-family homes on relatively large lots but also are very resistant to multifamily proposals. Minneapolis is demonstrating to the world that creating density is a value proposition. For us in Greater Boston, this is long overdue.

The power of the real estate market continues to shape our communities. An example of this is the suburban house teardown, where a well-worn, modest home is demolished, and all too often replaced with a McModern. There is no gain to the housing inventory, and the developer needs to sell a more expensive home in order to make a profit.

**We too have the power to densify neighborhoods where the opportunity is greatest through small-scale upzoning, ADUs or other tools broadly applied.**

Consider this: If a new structure was built that had three units, the following goals would be achieved: 1) a gain of two net new units of housing, based on creating a three-for-one swap; 2) the creation of three homes, newly constructed that meet modern energy codes – a product type in high demand; and 3) the addition of units of a size more consistent with today's needs – starter homes or empty-nester housing – at non-luxury price points.

To illustrate the current mismatch: According to some forthcoming Metropolitan Area Planning Council research based on Census Bureau data, only 40 percent of three-bedroom homes in Boston and in 12 surrounding communities are occupied by families with a child under the age of 18.

Another option retains the well-worn, modest home and adds additional units or accessory dwelling units (often called "ADUs" or "granny flats") to the same lot – again unlocking the value of the land but spreading its cost across multiple units. And there is hope for increasing the right to build denser structures in the old streetcar suburbs of Boston.

## Waking Up to Danger of Inaction

Amy Dain, a local researcher who is compiling data on existing zoning in 100 communities, is seeing progress in incremental steps toward the increased housing that is needed. In villages or town centers, apartments around or over retail shops are being looked at more favorably, including Dedham Square, Belmont's Cushing Square and Beverly's Rantoul Street.

Other small steps to consider include flexible zoning, where multiple units can be in one building with shared open space, such as a 30-unit development with woods preserved in Lexington; and so-called cottage zoning, which hasn't taken hold widely but allows smaller units and was successful in Concord's Riverwalk.

"The takeaway is these are ideas to gradually increase density while protecting what people cherish in their neighborhoods," including traditional architecture, town character and historic or just older buildings, Dain said. "There's a broad understanding that communities are over restricting, and supply is not keeping up with demand."

Eastern Massachusetts is waking up to the dangers of doing nothing, as market housing becomes unaffordable because we are not creating the housing we need. Awareness of the urgency is growing but missing is the community consensus that has taken root in Minneapolis and other places.

We too have the power to densify neighborhoods where the opportunity is greatest through small-scale upzoning, ADUs or other tools broadly applied. Yes, our history is different from other places, and therein lies our strength. Let's get the word out and do something about it. ◀

Susan Gittelman is the executive director of B'nai B'rith Housing, a nonprofit, affordable housing developer currently working in Boston, Sudbury and Swampscott.

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