


# Minneapolis Confronts Its History of Housing Segregation

 [slate.com/business/2018/12/minneapolis-single-family-zoning-housing-racism.html](https://slate.com/business/2018/12/minneapolis-single-family-zoning-housing-racism.html)

## Recently in Metropolis

Minneapolis will become the first major U.S. city to end single-family home zoning, a policy that has done as much as any to entrench segregation, high housing costs, and sprawl as the American urban paradigm over the past century.

On Friday, the City Council passed Minneapolis 2040, a comprehensive plan to permit three-family homes in the city's residential neighborhoods, abolish parking minimums for all new construction, and allow high-density buildings along transit corridors.

"Large swaths of our city are exclusively zoned for single-family homes, so unless you have the ability to build a very large home on a very large lot, you can't live in the neighborhood," Minneapolis Mayor Jacob Frey told me this week. Single-family home zoning was devised as a legal way to keep black Americans and other minorities from moving into certain neighborhoods, and it still functions as an effective barrier today. Abolishing restrictive zoning, the mayor said, was part of a general consensus that the city ought to begin to mend the damage wrought in pursuit of segregation. Human diversity—which nearly everyone in this staunchly liberal city would say is a good thing—only goes as far as the housing stock.

It may be as long as a year before Minneapolis zoning regulations and building codes reflect what's outlined in the 481-page plan, which was crafted by city planners. Still, its passage makes the 422,000-person city, part of the Twin Cities region, one of the rare U.S. metropolises to publicly confront the racist roots of single-family zoning—and try to address the issue.

"A lot of research has been done on the history that's led us to this point," said Cam Gordon, a city councilman who represents the Second Ward, which includes the University of Minnesota's flagship campus. "That history helped people realize that the way the city is set up right now is based on this government-endorsed and sanctioned racist system." Easing the plan's path to approval, he said, was the fact that modest single-family homes in appreciating neighborhoods were already making way for McMansions. Why not allow someone to build three units in the same-size building? (Requirements on height, yard space, and permeable surface remain unchanged in those areas.)

The U.S. Supreme Court struck down race-based zoning in 1917, but nine years later, found it constitutional for a Cleveland suburb to ban apartment buildings. The idea that you could legislate out not just gritty industrial facilities but also renters spread rapidly. In concert with

racism in real estate, police departments, and housing finance, single-family zoning proved as effective at segregating northern neighborhoods (and their schools) as Jim Crow laws had in the South.

Opening up Minneapolis' wealthiest, most exclusive districts to triplexes, the theory goes, will create new opportunities for people to move for schools or a job, provide a way for aging residents to downsize without leaving their neighborhoods, help ease the affordability crunch citywide, and stem the displacement of lower-income residents in gentrifying areas. Homeownership in Minneapolis diverges along racial lines, with minority groups' rates lagging between 20 and 35 percentage points behind that of whites. More rental supply citywide, in addition to a new \$40 million slice of the budget for affordable housing, is expected to help tenants find a foothold. The mayor, for what it's worth, is a renter himself—maybe the first tenant-mayor in the history of a city where (like in most American cities) the majority of people live in rental housing.

City Council President Lisa Bender says the plan didn't require a huge leap of faith. The city had already permitted accessory dwelling units. It had already loosened parking requirements near transit. And then, too, there's the living history of a Minneapolis that grew *before* single-family zoning. "Our city originally developed along streetcar lines, so we have many neighborhoods that have a rich diversity of housing type and land uses, including duplexes, triplexes, and smaller multi-family buildings," she said. "So we were able to keep pointing back at those neighborhoods and say, 'This is a pretty incremental change.' "

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Obviously, not everyone agreed. Residents submitted 7,000 comments on the draft plan, which was released in March. The initial proposal to permit four-unit buildings citywide was pared down to triplexes. (A last-minute plan to bring that down to duplexes failed in November.) A lawsuit brought by two birding groups and a brand-new organization (misleadingly) called "Smart Growth Minneapolis" threatened to halt the vote at the last minute, before a judge ruled on Thursday it could proceed. "This is a revolutionary approach to the zoning process," explained Jack Perry, a lawyer for the plaintiffs who tried to halt the plan's passage. "They're getting rid of all R1 and R2 low-density zoning, and I think everyone has accepted this as the most ambitious upzoning proposal anywhere in the U.S. by far." Unfortunately for the plaintiffs, comprehensive plans in Minnesota are explicitly immune from environmental review.

The claim of that lawsuit—that a denser, more populous city might be an environmental hazard and should require environmental review—will sound familiar to pro-growth advocates in California. There, local NIMBYism has pushed housing demand into the desert, lengthening commutes and helping to turn transportation into the state's largest contributor to greenhouse gas emissions.




In Minneapolis, however, environmentalism was largely seen by officials as an argument in favor of the plan. "There's this obsession with the color green," observed Nick Magrino, who sits on the city's planning commission. "People say, 'My lawn is going to go, and that has green in it!' You're either going to get three units there, or three units distributed on torn-up wetland. It seems like at best a misunderstanding of how ecological systems work, and at worse a bad-faith plan." An earlier reduction in required parking has already produced more "missing-middle" housing, he said, including market-rate studios starting below \$1,000 a month. The new plan should only further that trend.

Several things made this possible in Minneapolis, observed Paula Pentel, coordinator of the University of Minnesota's urban studies program. First was the election of a very progressive city council dedicated to making room for more housing in the city. Second was the emergence of various activist groups who came out to community meetings, put up lawn signs, and generally voiced their support for reforming the system wholesale. Third was the city's extensive years-long effort to make sure public outreach didn't involve only the usual suspects. Instead of waiting for residents to come to planning meetings, planners found residents where they were—at weekend street festivals, for example.

Did anyone change their mind? That's not clear. But, Magrino says, the stake of single-family homeowners isn't so high. Nobody's losing their house. Nobody's losing their lawn. Someone might, at some point, lose their parking space—but by then, the hope is, there will be plenty of stuff within walking distance.

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# Minneapolis, Tackling Housing Crisis and Inequity, Votes to End Single-Family Zoning

 [nytimes.com/2018/12/13/us/minneapolis-single-family-zoning.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/13/us/minneapolis-single-family-zoning.html)

By Sarah Mervosh

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In a bold move to address its affordable-housing crisis and confront a history of racist housing practices, Minneapolis has decided to eliminate single-family zoning, a classification that has long perpetuated segregation.

The Minneapolis City Council voted last Friday to get rid of the category and instead allow residential structures with up to three dwelling units — like duplexes and triplexes — in every neighborhood. Minneapolis is believed to be the first major city in the United States to approve such a change citywide.

Peggy Reinhardt, 75, an advocate who supported the decision, hopes the change will mean more housing options around her Uptown Minneapolis neighborhood. She sees young couples in apartments who cannot afford to scale up to \$400,000 houses, while elderly residents nearby are “house rich and cash poor” and have few options to downsize in their neighborhood.

“It’s that missing middle,” she said.

As cities across the country contend with an affordable-housing crisis that has led to gentrification and homelessness, few have been willing to take on single-family zoning, a way of living that is fiercely protected by neighborhood groups. Portland, Ore., is working on a plan to allow fourplexes in nearly all single-family neighborhoods, and Seattle is considering rezoning 6 percent of its single-family neighborhoods to include more housing.

In Minneapolis, the decision came as part of a sweeping plan to propel the city into the future by addressing issues like housing, racial equity and climate change. The plan, called Minneapolis 2040, drew thousands of public comments, “Don’t Bulldoze Our Neighborhoods” yard signs and a last-minute lawsuit, but ultimately passed on a 12-to-1 vote.

It will now go to a regional planning agency for review. City officials expect the zoning changes to go into effect sometime next year.

A sign opposing the “Minneapolis 2040” plan outside a home in the Kenwood neighborhood in Minneapolis. Credit Jenn Ackerman for The New York Times

Experts say adding density to single-family neighborhoods is a powerful tool to address housing affordability and chip away at segregation. While going so far as to eliminate single-family zoning may not be politically possible everywhere — the Minneapolis City Council is made up of 12 Democrats and one Green Party member — success there could offer one model of what is possible.



“Minneapolis is not alone in being a city with a history of intentional segregation,” Mayor Jacob Frey said in an interview this week. “I’m hopeful that we’re not alone in undoing it.”

## How zoning is a proxy for race

Single-family neighborhoods rose to prominence across the country after the United States Supreme Court ruled in 1917 that zoning based on race was unconstitutional.

“Single-family zoning became basically the only option to try to maintain both race and class segregation,” said Jessica Trounstone, an associate professor of political science at the University of California, Merced, who has studied segregation.

In addition, generations of racial disparities in wealth accumulation, exacerbated by federally backed lending practices that discriminated against African-Americans, meant that most homeowners were white. “So if you make a particular part of the city homeowners only, then you essentially make that neighborhood restricted to whites,” Ms. Trounstone said.

Today, Minneapolis has a growing population of about 400,000 and is about 60 percent white, according to census statistics. The racial disparities are stark: Black and Native American babies in Minneapolis die at three to four times the rate of white babies. White residents, on average, make far more money than people of color. And nearly 60 percent of white households in Minneapolis own their home, while less than 25 percent of African-American, Native American and Hispanic households do, according to the city.

In its Minneapolis 2040 report, the city took the remarkable step of acknowledging — in writing — its own role in perpetuating that inequity.

### Image

Multiplex buildings stand alongside single-family homes in the Tangletown neighborhood in Minneapolis. Credit Jenn Ackerman for The New York Times

Michael Lens, an associate professor of urban planning and public policy at the University of California, Los Angeles, said the city’s willingness to own up to the past was a necessary — but unusual — step in moving forward.

“It’s essential — and frequently not on the table,” said Mr. Lens, who is from Minneapolis’s twin city, St. Paul. “I think that’s great. ‘Minnesota nice’ in action.”

## Yes, in my backyard?

About 50 to 60 percent of Minneapolis is zoned as single-family only, according to city officials. In some cases, duplexes and triplexes have been grandfathered in and already exist in those neighborhoods.

Even still, “we don’t have enough homes for people who want to live here,” said Lisa Bender, the City Council president, who supported the plan. “Increasing our housing supply is part of the solution.”

That means allowing triplexes in every neighborhood and another key change: making it easier to build multifamily housing near transit corridors.

Janne Flisrand, a co-founder of the group Neighbors for More Neighbors, said that the zoning changes would help people like her: She bought her fourplex in Minneapolis in 1996 and has rented out three of the units to pay her mortgage. “I want to open the door for a Janne of 2018,” she said.

But many residents, particularly those who live near transit, fear they will “wake up one day” with a tall apartment building next door, said Lisa McDonald, a former City Council member who worked with the group Minneapolis for Everyone to oppose the plan.

Image

A sign in support of the zoning changes in the front yard of a duplex in the Kenwood neighborhood of Minneapolis. Credit Jenn Ackerman for The New York Times

She said she wanted the city to slow down — to prepare an environmental — impact statement and change zoning on a limited basis instead of citywide.

“We’ve tried very hard to work with the city to say, ‘Let’s find a rational approach to this,’” she said. “And instead, what the city has basically done is say, ‘If you’re not for this plan, you’re a racist and an elitist.’”

The city also faces a lawsuit over environmental concerns, which is pending.

## What’s next?

Mr. Frey, the mayor, remains confident that the plan will go forward.

“Sometimes,” he said, “the only thing people hate worse than the status quo is any change at all.” But he argued that solutions to the city’s problems should match the historical harm that was inflicted.

“Efforts to allow for a beautiful diversity of people throughout our city and in every neighborhood didn’t end with Brown v. Board of Education,” he said.

Mr. Lens, the U.C.L.A. professor, said it could take years to know whether the changes to single-family neighborhoods in Minneapolis have been successful.

But perhaps the best measure of the change, he said, would be no perceptible change at all.

“A lot of people that lived there for a long time and even some people that right now are upset about this kind of decision,” he said, “are going to look around their neighborhood and say: ‘This has been a good thing. This is still a great place to live.’”