

Abolition of Single-family Detached Zoning



CASE STUDY | APRIL 2024



Photo credit: Tela Chhe

1. Background

Single-family zones – which cover three-quarters of residential areas in many Northern American cities - can produce harmful side effects such as inflated land values, racial and economic segregation, and urban sprawl. In response, many communities are looking at ways to introduce “missing middle” housing into existing single-family neighbourhoods. One of the most notable reforms in recent years was the [Minneapolis 2040 Plan](#), implemented at the beginning of 2020. Housing policies in the plan made headlines as it meant Minneapolis became the first major city in the US or Canada to abolish single-family-zoning, allowing duplexes and triplexes to be built on most residential blocks. The Plan also included several provisions related to denser housing, including eliminating parking requirements and upzoning transit corridors and downtown areas.

Policy/program

Abolition of single-family detached zoning

City

City of Minneapolis (2021 population 425,336)

Gentle Density Types Involved

- Duplexes
- Triplexes

The Minneapolis 2040 Plan policy triggered intense interest in the planning and development world, with supporters claiming it would lead to a major increase in affordable, small-scale housing while opponents claimed it was a misguided approach that would overrun the city with buildings out-of-character for many single-family neighborhoods. In the past, such debates had usually been won by NIMBY movements that rejected neighbourhood change, but in Minneapolis, progressive forces prevailed. Since then, a number of other cities (e.g., Sacramento, San Francisco, Austin, Charlottesville, Boise, and Vancouver) and whole states and provinces (e.g., Oregon, California, Washington, Maine, and BC) have taken measures to abolish single-family zoning.

2. Key Players

City

- The two mayors in office during the preparation of the 2040 plan (Betsy Hodges and Jacob Frey) were firmly in favour of increasing densities in single-family zones and overcoming racial segregation.
- Council President Lisa Bender is widely credited with having championed the housing policies in the 2040 plan and delivering a 12-1 council vote in favour of the plan.
- The city's planning department, led by director of long-range planning for the City Heather Worthington, conducted an extensive public engagement campaign that mobilized advocates for more inclusive housing policies.

Stakeholders

- Neighbors for More Neighbors, a grassroots YIMBY group founded in 2017 to address Minneapolis' affordable housing crisis, rallied popular and council support for upzoning policies.
- The for-profit housing industry supported the upzoning policies in the 2040 plan but did not play an active advocacy role.
- Grassroots opponents of the upzoning policies were not politically organized and did not have strong support on council.
- A handful of opponents organized a court challenge to the housing policies in the plan and have recently achieved an injunction to stop implementation of those policies.



Stone Arch Bridge, Minneapolis. Photo credit: Eastman Childs

3. Description of policy/ program/project

Between 2010 and 2020, the population of the City of Minneapolis grew 12 percent to 425,000, fueled by a thriving economy. However, the city was adding population faster than it was adding housing, with the result that home-sale prices and rents began to rise. Many perceived the spike in housing costs to be a threat to the city's prosperity, as young people were finding it harder to afford living there. Meanwhile, the issue of racial segregation had moved to centre stage in Minneapolis, sparked by the realization that the city had some of the worst racial disparities in the nation. The dire situation was highlighted by local university researchers who mapped historical patterns of redlining and racially restrictive covenants, showing that neighborhoods with restrictive covenants are still pre-dominantly white today and still zoned as single-family.

By 2016, when the city launched an update of its comprehensive plan, land use and race had become major issues in the city. Planners made an effort to reach out beyond the neighborhood associations – with their phalanxes of older, white homeowners – to connect with the 52% of residents who are renters, many of them young and keenly interested in lower housing costs but also climate change, transportation and racial justice. Meanwhile, Neighbors for More Neighbors was mobilizing the grassroots (e.g. through walking tours of low-density neighbourhoods to show how incremental change could be positive). Tapping these sources of approval helped build support for upzoning on council.

Packaging the upzoning proposal with a variety of other measures designed to help the poor and middle-class – including a major boost in public spending on housing programs, an inclusionary housing policy, and promised rent control measures – brought other progressive forces on side. Planners tempered concerns that the single-family upzoning measure would give free-reign to developers to bulldoze and densify leafy neighbourhoods by pointing out that the big companies behind high-rise, multi-unit apartment complexes are not interested in building duplex or triplexes. To overcome the remaining opposition, planners recommended that the proposed upzoning be moderated from a maximum of four to three units per lot.

Following two years of contentious public debate, Minneapolis City Council approved the 2040 plan in December 2018. After the regional council reviewed the plan, it came into effect on January 1, 2020. Regulatory amendments to permit duplexes and triplexes in formerly single-family zones also came into effect on that date. Whereas the old zoning ordinance allowed only single-family homes on 70% of the city's residential land, the new ordinance allowed up to three units (attached or with a detached ADU) on virtually all of this land, whether through subdivision of existing houses, building additions, or new construction. Of note, however, is that while the unit-number ceiling was raised, the floor area and building dimensions were not – the additional units had to remain within the same envelope allowed for single-family dwellings (although a small floor area premium was available if at least one unit involved meets the city affordability criteria). More extensive zoning changes to effectuate the densification policies in transit corridors and downtown areas were not adopted until January 1, 2021.



4. Outcomes

Since the Minneapolis 2040 comprehensive plan came into effect in the beginning of 2020, about 60 units per year have been approved as duplexes and triplexes in the former single-family zoned areas. Although not insignificant, this represents a tiny portion (about 2%) of the total units approved through that period. New unit counts are higher in the upzoned transit corridors and downtown areas, where low-rise buildings of 20-50 units have become far more common. All told, about half the housing approved since the plan was put in place would not have been permitted (at least without lengthy rezonings) under the regulatory regime that prevailed before 2020.

These outcomes suggest that the 2040 plan is having the intended outcome overall, despite the low output of units from the formerly single-family zoned areas outside of transit corridors and downtown. Although the duplex and triplex output may seem disappointing, it's important to keep in mind that this unit trend is in keeping with the long-term projections of the 2040 planning team, who estimated that about 1000 duplex and triplex units would be produced over 20 years, or about 50 per year. Planners expect the current trend to increase gently over time as awareness of the zoning changes spread and legal issues with the 2040 plan are resolved (the plan has been the subject of litigation in the courts and the city is currently under an injunction to stop implementation of the housing policies in the plan).

5. Lessons learned

Facilitators

- The extensive – even unprecedented – public engagement campaign was crucial in mobilizing popular support and building a coalition of labour, housing and racial justice advocates to win over reluctant councilors.
- Having a steadfast champion for reform in the position of Council President was decisive in achieving near-consensus in the council vote on the 2040 plan.
- Minneapolis was one of the first cities in the US to use built-form maps to communicate proposed land use regulation and zoning. The on-line maps allowed residents to preview what zoning changes could look like in their neighbourhoods once the proposed policies were enacted. This is a powerful way to demystify land use policies and planning regulations.
- Adopting goals for the city that enjoyed a wide consensus before proposing any specific planning policies helped defuse opposition to reform as controversial policies could be shown to be aligned with the agreed-upon goals.
- Combining upzoning with other policies and public investments to support compact, affordable housing is important to convincing potential allies to support reforms and to achieving reform goals in practice.
- Eliminating parking requirements in residential zones makes densification more financially feasible and leaves decisions up to the property owners and developers depending on local circumstances. Although it has helped in the lower density zones, this measure has primarily facilitated missing middle development along transit corridors and in downtown areas where access to transit is better, neighbourhoods are more walkable, and parking demand is not as robust.
- Reducing the maximum density in single-family zones from the four that was originally proposed by the planning department to three took much of the wind out of the sails of opponents to the housing reforms as did the requirement that denser housing forms would need to fit into the same building envelop as a single-family home.

Challenges

- The modest outcomes in the SF zones shows that simply allowing duplexes and triplex is a necessary but not sufficient measure to produce significant densification in these zones. It's also important to consider whether multi-family units can compete with single-family homes if the latter remains financially attractive to property owners. Aligning regulations and incentives to tip the scales towards denser housing could help balance out the high prices fetched by single-family housing.
- While the fact that the single-family upzoning reform was not paired with any increase in allowable height or size for the structures themselves helped gain acceptance, it also limits the options for achieving financial viability. Multi-family buildings have to replicate kitchens, bathrooms, entries, etc., which reduces living space compared to single-family units. Allowing multi-family buildings to have a larger floor plate could boost the demand for duplex/triplex conversions and render them more profitable.
- The legal challenges that have faced implementation of the housing policies in the 2040 plan have created a climate of uncertainty that may be discouraging investment in higher density construction.
- The construction of small multi-family housing types has been severely restricted in Minneapolis for decades with the result that architects, developers and investors do not have experience designing, developing and financing these types of buildings. As awareness of the housing reforms spreads and experience is gained in this sector, the perception of risk may diminish.



Photo credit: Josh Hild

6. Next Steps

- The city will soon begin work on the next review of the comprehensive plan, during which planners will likely consider the feasibility of increasing maximum unit numbers and floor areas in former single-family zones.
- The State of Minnesota is currently considering [legislation](#) to explicitly exempt city comprehensive plans from the type of litigation that has led to the injunction against the Minneapolis 2040 plan. This will ensure that plans that increase density can't be held up in court and ease uncertainty in the market.

7. Resources

- | Erick Trickey, 2019. How Minneapolis Freed Itself From the Stranglehold of Single-Family Homes. Politico Magazine, July 11. <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2019/07/11/housing-crisis-single-family-homes-policy-227265>
- | Alex Schieferdecker, 2022. How Minneapolis Could Become A Missing Middle Housing Factory. Streets mn, August 24. <https://streets.mn/2022/08/24/how-minneapolis-could-become-a-missing-middle-housing-factory>
- | Heather Worthington, 2020. The Minneapolis 2040 Comprehensive Plan: Community Engagement and Policy Development Addressing Housing. Technology, Architecture + Design, 4:1, 120-123.
- | Patrick Sisson, 2019. How Minneapolis's radical zoning plan becomes policy. Curbed, Jan 9. <https://archive.curbed.com/2019/1/9/18175780/minneapolis-2040-real-estate-rent-development-zoning>
- | Matthew Maltman, 2024. A Detailed Look at the Outcomes of Minneapolis' Housing Reforms. One Final Effort, April 17. <https://onefinaleffort.com/blog/a-detailed-look-at-minneapolis-housing-supply-reforms#:~:text=Blocks%20within%20the%20Minneapolis%20city,an%20impact%20on%20the%20market>