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UNCOVERING JAPA

Is Single-Family Zoning on the Way Out?



In December 2018, the City of Minneapolis made national headlines when it proposed a new comprehensive housing plan that called for upzoning all single-family residential zones to allow duplexes and triplexes to be built in these districts. The city council approved the plan this past October.

This was a huge shift for a city that had previously zoned 70 percent of its land for single-family uses, especially in an American planning context unique for the large amount of land given this single-family designation.

Challenging Single-family Zoning for Equity

It raised a question with national implications: If this could happen in Minneapolis — and if other places like Oregon are considering similar state-wide initiatives — why not elsewhere?

This question and the general efficacy of single-family zoning is explored in two viewpoints in the *Journal of the American Planning Association*: "It's Time to End Single-Family Zoning" by Michael Manville, Paavo Monkkonen, and Michael Lens, and Jake Wegmann's "Death to Single-Family Zoning."

Both pieces in *JAPA* (Vol. 86, No. 1) argue for the end of single-family zoning, and for planners specifically to lead this charge as those who work most closely with zoning codes. Central to both arguments are how socioeconomic and racial inequality and transportation inefficiency are exacerbated by the single-family classification.

Manville, Monkkonen, and Lens focus pointedly on single-family zoning's racist and classist history. They trace this history through early zoning-focused Supreme Court decisions like *Buchanan v. Warley* (1917), in which the Court struck down explicitly racial zoning practices but in the wake of which single-family zoning emerged as a quieter way of achieving racial segregation, and the famous *Village of Euclid v. Ambler Realty Co.* (1926) case.

The impact of these century-old decisions can still be seen in the racial and class makeup of cities in the United States while building and minimum lot size requirements commonly found in single-family zoning codes (re)produce segregated landscapes by concentrating homeowner wealth already disproportionately controlled by upper-class white Americans.

Critiquing Single-family Zoning for Equity

In doing so, zoning excludes lower-income groups who cannot afford that much land or housing and, as the authors note, it keeps lower-income residents from accessing the high-quality resources and opportunities that are deeply tied to where we live.

Wegmann presents similar arguments around zoning's exclusionary history and adds that the sprawl produced by single-family zoning encourages higher rates of automobile use and thus higher emission levels. These arguments together appeal to a wide array of potential advocates including those fighting for racial reform, environmental justice, and infill development. Wegmann notes that advocates are picking up steam in several municipalities even outside Minneapolis.

Both pieces also carefully consider common arguments used to support single-family zoning:

- American consumer preferences favor single-family homes
- New development risks damaging residential neighborhood aesthetics
- Upzoning can lead to the displacement of current renters or even longtime residents

Although these are political challenges, the authors of both pieces find that they do not outweigh the overall benefits of eliminating single-family zoning. They also propose that eliminating single-family zoning can be paired with other policies to mitigate the worst of these effects.

CONCURRING VIEWPOINTS

The issue of JAPA features seven commentaries from academics and practicing planners.

Among those in agreement with the two viewpoints discussed above are two planners from Minneapolis, **Paul Mogush and Heather Worthington**, who demonstrate how the general arguments rang true locally, led to the city-wide upzoning, and provided insights for other cities.

Anaid Yerena argues that to uphold the AICP's goals for social justice, eliminating single-family zoning is not a question, but an imperative, even if it will be politically difficult in most places.

OPPOSING VIEWS

Other commentaries in the same issue of JAPA offer critiques.

Arnab Charkaborty asks if the proposed rewards of eliminating single-family zoning (higher density development, lower housing costs) are worth the uphill political battle. Drawing on experience in Maryland, **Gerritt Knaap and Nicholas Finio** explain that even in this bastion of innovative planning there is little political appetite for this policy change.

Lane Kendig argues that the issue is not zoning's racist or classist history, but rather Euclidean zoning in general which only allows certain uses per district, and thus the solution lies not in changing the rules of zones but instead in embracing performance or form-based zoning.

Glen Searle and Peter Phibbs express concern that infrastructure in many places would not be able to keep up with infill development. Drawing on experience with extensive upzoning in Australia, they propose that other interventions would do much more to help affordability.

In a particularly insightful commentary, **Harley F. Etienne** wonders if the preferences that have been built up and reinforced by single-family zoning over the past century are too ingrained within American ideology and the built environment to do away with, and the solution lies instead in expanding these homeownership goals to the middle- and lower-income households.

Manville, Monkkonen, and Lens and **Wegmann** effectively counter these critiques ("*fix the infrastructure*" is a personal highlight). Like their original viewpoints, their counterpoints are worth reading in their entirety.

A STUDENT'S PERSPECTIVE

I am reading these pieces at the end of my first year of planning school, during which the major question that arose in each core studio review was: Should planning practitioners be visionaries or pragmatists? (The answer is, of course, always "both/and.")

These two viewpoints show a visionary way forward for land use planners to begin righting the wrongs of U.S. exclusionary zoning history and consider how broad coalitions can be formed to support these efforts.

At the same time, the commentaries raise important questions about the ultimate impact of ending single-family zoning on housing affordability, asking how we can make this a measurable change for lower-income households as much as a symbolic one.

Top photo: A cluster of cottages is one example of "missing middle housing." Photo by Mark McClure from the [Sightline Institute Missing Middle Homes Photo Library](#) (CC BY 2.0).

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