

Middle housing could provide new generation with alternative to ‘McMansions’

OPEN FORUM

By Chris Dearth

The Multnomah Neighborhood Association has dedicated considerable energy to fighting City Hall for decades.

I’m sure they mean well, but if opponents are successful in defeating the proposed “middle housing” amendment to the Comprehensive Plan, currently before City Council, we could actually see a continuation and acceleration of the current negative housing trends we all oppose.

See “Open Forum: ‘Middle housing’

amendment would make new zoning code meaningless,” by Martie Sucec, The Post, October 2016.

Opponents to housing reform, including the neighborhood association, protest against “rezoning”.

In fact, the middle housing plan is not re-zoning at all but a proposed zoning *overlay* (similar to a design overlay) and is a pragmatic effort to address many of the ills they have fought for years: disproportionately large, expensive, “McMansions” we see replacing some of the deteriorating housing stock in our neighborhoods.

I’m not sure reform opponents are as upset at the proposed housing measures as much as they are disturbed by the pace of change in the housing market we see throughout Portland.

No question the Portland housing world is changing fast, and planning policies must adapt to meet those challenges.

In my observation, the great majority of the neighborhood association is composed of boomers (like Martie and me) who purchased our homes in the 1980s and 90s when Multnomah was a sleepy little “village.”

Not represented by the neighborhood association are younger families, renters, singles, and a more diverse population who find themselves priced out of this homogenous community.



This stacked duplex is an example of the missing middle housing in Portland. An amendment to the Portland Comprehensive Plan would allow duplexes, triplexes and accessory dwelling units in single-dwelling zones. From “Missing Middle Housing” by Daniel Parolek. Photo courtesy of Opticos Design, Inc.

Sadly, long gone are the days when a middle-income family could buy a modest starter home here for \$100,000 with five percent down.

Nowadays most of us long-time homeowners—let alone a younger, more diverse generation—couldn’t afford to buy our own homes.

We must find ways to open our community to a wider range of economic and racial groups.

The proposal put forward by our neighbor, Portland City Commissioner Steve Novick, would do just that.

It is a progressive measure designed to restore the “missing middle” of modest housing between expensive houses on large lots at one extreme (the status quo) and apartment complexes at the other extreme.

It proposes to encourage a mix of affordable homes once available throughout Portland.

Instead of \$800,000 monstrosities, middle housing would simply allow—not force—a mix of housing types ranging from more affordable duplexes, triplexes, accessory dwelling units, cottage clusters, etc.

It would also scale down new

single-family homes to be more compatible with the homes in existing neighborhoods. Ironically, this is exactly what the opponents say they are seeking.

We all can all agree that the housing status quo is not acceptable.

The question is what is a constructive, achievable solution? Simply opposing every new proposal out of City Hall is not the solution.

I would hope that the neighborhood association and others can work constructively with Commissioner Novick and others to find ways to encourage affordable housing in Multnomah.

Otherwise we’ll continue to see restricted, unaffordable housing options exclude more and more of the new generation we desperately need to diversify our community.

Chris Dearth is a 25-year resident of Multnomah Village. The Post welcomes reader response. Please stick to one subject and limit letters to 300 words and guest columns to 500 words. We reserve the right to edit submissions for brevity, clarity, punctuation, spelling and libel concerns. Email editor@multnomahpost.com for more information.

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