

Inclusionary zoning combines social justice, community health

Jon Ostar is with the Coalition for Affordable and Safe Housing.

The Coalition for Affordable and Safe Housing is a collaboration of a broad range of racial, environmental and social justice organizations and public health advocates working to restore local control over affordable housing policies to promote inclusive, healthy and safe communities.

BY JON OSTAR
CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST

On May 24, Oregon House Bill 3531 got its first public hearing in Salem. HB 3531 repeals the statewide prohibition on inclusionary zoning. Inclusionary zoning is a practical tool that allows local jurisdictions to require that affordable housing units be built along with market-rate housing. In return, cities and counties can provide developers with variances and benefits, such as density bonuses, fee waivers and permit expeditious in order to offset the cost of including housing units at affordable levels. The appeal of inclusionary zoning is that it allows local communities to customize a housing policy that meets the needs of their residents. This tool is an effective response to "exclusionary" development practices, which, combined with urban renewal policies, prioritize market-rate urban development at the expense of affordable housing.

Inclusionary zoning is not a new practice. The tool was first used in 1974 in Montgomery County, Maryland, where the inclusionary zoning ordinance has created over 10,000 affordable housing units over the past thirty years. The use of this tool is also widespread. It is estimated that there are approximately 400 local jurisdictions across the country using some version of inclusionary zoning policies. The popularity of the tool is due to its flexibility: from the number of affordable units required to the income levels which qualify for the housing, jurisdictions can tailor the tool to meet their local needs. It can work for urban, suburban and rural areas alike. The tool is also effective as an alternative housing creation opportunity that relies on a public-private sector partnership rather than on federal dollars or public subsidies.

Unfortunately, the Oregon Legislature banned the use of mandatory inclusionary zoning policies in 1999. Oregon is one of only two states in the entire country with a statewide prohibition on inclusionary zoning, the other being Texas. While the Legislature allows local jurisdictions to

engage in a "voluntary" policy - in which cities or counties can offer incentives to encourage developers to set aside units in new market-rate development at affordable levels - such voluntary practices have had little to no success in creating inclusive housing development. Without the ability to require private developers to participate in creating affordable housing, cities and counties are not able to generate enough affordable housing stock to meet local demand. Inclusionary zoning is particularly effective at creating "workforce" housing within new developments - housing for working-class families, such as teachers, nurses, police officers and service industry workers - freeing up limited public money to address the needs of our most vulnerable people. In the 10 years since the ban was put into place, housing advocates have been unable to overcome the substantial influence of the homebuilders and realtors lobbies who oppose even this common sense market regulation.

But things are different this time around; the Coalition for Affordable and Safe Housing (CASH) took up the fight this year. CASH is comprised of diverse stakeholders focused on racial, environmental and social justice and health equity, including the Community Alliance of Tenants, Urban League of Portland, Latino Network, Center for Intercultural Organizing, OPAL Environmental Justice Oregon, Upstream Public Health, Housing and Land Advocates, Multnomah County Health Department, Coalition for a Livable Future and others. We understand that housing choice is about opportunity: opportunity to access living-wage jobs, transportation, schools, healthy food options, social services and recreation - all the things we need to live healthy, quality lives. We know that our current development practices and policies are not working for all of our communities: housing prices in "healthy" neighborhoods are beyond reach for most people of modest means, working-class and poor folks are pushed further out from the urban core, and those that live in "zones of opportunity" are successful, while those that don't are

sacrificed.

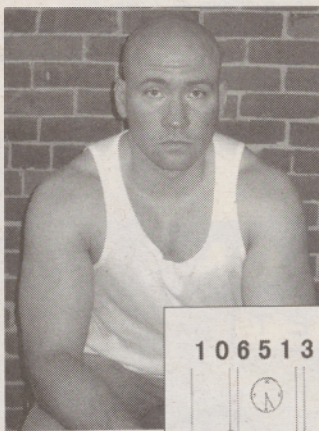
Inclusionary zoning will not by itself save us from our housing crisis, but it is a proven tool that is part of broader solutions. When used in tandem with other development practices, it is effective in creating housing choice and equal opportunity. It can help stem the tide of gentrification to ensure that those who live with the burdens of blighted

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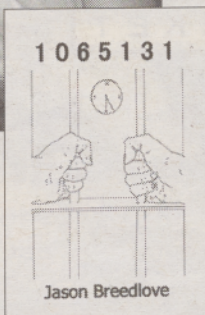
communities get the opportunity to enjoy the benefits of renewal and revitalization. Inclusionary zoning is an important element of a "systems" perspective - there are many interconnected factors that contribute to opportunity, success or failure, and inclusive housing complements transit equity, food justice, economic development, availability of health care, and many other determinants of health that affect our lives.

The public hearing in May was just the first step - bringing together a dynamic group of stakeholders to change the affordable housing conversation. Affordable housing is not about technical details, red tape and developer profits. It is about basic human rights, community health and social justice. Inclusionary zoning impacts local communities, and the decision whether or not to adopt such a policy is a matter of local control in the truest sense. We need you to join the conversation and build toward a critical mass of community members who believe it is well past time to return the ability of local jurisdictions to take necessary measures to meet the housing needs of their own community members. Contact your elected representatives to make sure they know about HB 3531, and keep an eye out for community roundtable discussions and future legislative developments.

If you are interested in getting involved with the effort to repeal the ban on inclusionary zoning, please contact Jon at jon@opalpdx.org. There is plenty of work still to do.



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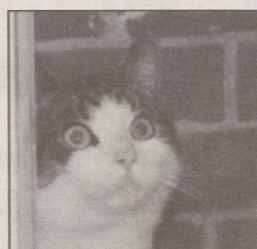


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