

Portland must plan for healthy, diverse neighborhoods

BY JOHN MULVEY
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Portland's housing crisis needs immediate action to help people who are struggling. But it also requires longer-term strategies that will undo the decades of structural neglect that our city, state and federal leadership – and us, collectively – have allowed to happen.

Portland needs to plan for a more equitably housed city.

Portland became a national leader in the 1990s and 2000s for its enlightened city planning. We're a city with walkable neighborhoods, great parks and the best bike system anywhere. The result is that the children of the nation's wealthy are arriving here every day to purchase a piece, price seemingly no object.

The people who planned the city we have today, and the public who supported and paid for it, didn't pay sufficient attention to housing as an element of their city of the future. What was once called the "most European city in America" is in the Stone Ages compared to the great cities of Europe and the moral responsibility they've always accepted for sheltering their people.

Portland is currently considering its Comprehensive Plan, which will regulate how the city grows over the next 20 years. There's a draft, and the public has been commenting on various aspects of it for many months. Now there will be another draft and the City Council will tinker with it for the next six months or so before passing it this summer.

Portland isn't planning for multifamily development

One big problem with the draft plan is that it doesn't include enough places that are zoned for multi-unit development, which is where a large number of the Portlanders of the future are expected to live.

At a Comprehensive Plan public hearing at Parkrose High School last month, local developer Eli Spevak raised this concern. Presenting a historical analysis of zoning changes in inner southeast Portland, Spevak showed the council how the first zoning ordinance from 1923 allowed multi-unit development in almost all of the area.

"That's why so much of Southeast Portland is built out with small plexes and things like that – because it was legal to put them all over Southeast Portland," Spevak said.

Referring to the colors used on the current map, Spevak compared today's

John Mulvey is a member of the East Portland Action Plan Housing Committee and the Inclusionary Zoning Coalition. He's been homeless since February.

draft: "One of the housing types that we most need now is small plexes, and you legally can't put them anywhere that's yellow on the map. If you flip over to today's zoning code draft, you see yellow everywhere and you see little fragments of blue."

The current plan doesn't include enough blue – the development that everyone agrees we're going to need the most.

Spevak's analysis shows us that the areas of town that have become the most desirable are the ones with a mix of densities – apartment buildings, duplexes and single-family homes all on the same street.

Much of the testimony from the public has been against this "residential upzoning." Many people are alarmed at the prospect of multi-story developments going in next door – and rightly so. Let's face it: What happened to inner Division Street is horrifying.

But they're wrong to oppose density. Walk through any of the most desirable areas of inner Portland and you'll see tasteful and charming apartment buildings everywhere. The council can and should insist on dense zones with well-designed multifamily housing in all city neighborhoods.

Oregon needs to require real planning for housing

In some states, courts can force cities to redo their plan if it isn't adequate to account for the housing needs of people at all income levels.

Decades ago, California's legislators recognized that their state's population was going to grow, and they integrated strict housing planning into their requirements for local governments. City comprehensive plans are required to account for the jurisdiction's share of future population growth, at all income levels, and judges can and do throw plans out if they're inadequate on this element.

No plan equals no development, so by connecting housing to overall land use, cities in California are on notice that without a real strategy for affordable housing, no other development can legally move forward.

In New Jersey, the courts have interpreted their state constitution to

include a requirement for affordable housing and to prohibit cities from using zoning to effectively redline out low-income people. "All persons are by nature free and independent, and have certain natural and unalienable rights, among which are those of enjoying and defending life and liberty, of acquiring, possessing and protecting property, and of pursuing and obtaining safety and happiness." New Jersey Constitution, Article I, Section I, Paragraph 1.

In the 1970s, New Jersey passed its fair-housing law, which institutes strict requirements on cities to explain exactly where they will house their "fair share" of future residents, including the poor. Last year, New Jersey was one of the few states in the country to see a decline in the number of homeless people.

Oregon's Land Use Goal No. 10, which governs planning for housing, only requires cities to certify that they have an adequate supply of buildable land to accommodate population growth.

Using data from 2005 and 2007, Portland's Bureau of Planning and Sustainability has already found that "currently zoned land capacity in Portland is sufficient to meet housing demands."

This may be all that state law requires. The current draft plan includes excellent policies for fairer housing in Portland, many of which were proposed by the activists at Anti-Displacement PDX. Still, they are aspirational guidelines and may prove difficult to enforce. If Oregon had New Jersey's or California's state law, there's a decent chance Portland's comprehensive plan would be thrown out by the courts for having an inadequate plan for housing. Oregon needs to require all local governments in the state to have real, meaningful and enforceable strategies for housing at all income levels.

Portland needs inclusionary zoning, fast

This February, the state legislature will consider, again, a bill to eliminate the state's pre-emption on inclusionary zoning. These are programs that require some units in a new development to be kept affordable. It's not controversial anywhere else in the country, and most developers recognize that

they won't be significantly hurt by this bill. We created a great city to live in. A program like inclusionary zoning can capture some of that value that our community created and dedicate it to the community's need. Inclusionary zoning isn't a panacea for the housing crisis, but it's a tool among the range of tools that we'll need to truly address the problem.

What was once called the "most European city in America" is in the Stone Ages compared to the great cities of Europe and the moral responsibility they've always accepted for sheltering their people.

Two things that an inclusionary zoning ordinance does that make it urgent for Portland right now: It protects neighborhood diversity and it takes advantage of a building boom. That makes inclusionary zoning critical to have in place before low-income and people of color are displaced and before properties start getting bought up and permitted for development. In much of Portland, these things are happening right now, and we can't wait.

We'll know next month whether the state will allow inclusionary zoning in Oregon. Rep. Alissa Keny-Guyer (D-Portland) and Sen. Michael Dembrow (D-Portland) are introducing legislation to do that. Call your legislators and encourage them to support it.

But what then? The Portland City Council will need to enact a city ordinance. In the normal course of things, an inclusionary zoning ordinance would be part of what's called the "Mixed Use Zoning" project and would come before the council sometime in the summer of 2017.

That's too long to wait.

The council needs to consider an emergency ordinance as soon as the result from Salem is known. One way – maybe not the only way – would be to bring mandatory inclusionary zoning as an amendment to the Comprehensive Plan this spring.

Oregon has a legendary land-use system that has protected green space and prevented our state from the sprawl that other western states have seen over the past half-century. Walkable, desirable neighborhoods, better transit and non-motorized transportation, and better health for our people are just a few of the outcomes of 45 years of our smart-growth system.

But smart-growth fails if it's only available to the wealthy. City leaders need to take bold action now to ensure our city stays a place where everyone can thrive.

street roots

Give a one-time or recurring donation today
streetroots.org



Street Roots is a 501(c)3, nonprofit organization. Your donation may be tax deductible.