

Rebuilding a Dream

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Why We Hate Housing

EXCERPTS

The power of NIMBY

Political opposition to development of rental housing has become a major reason why affordable housing is in such short supply.

The more difficult anti-housing groups make it, the fewer organizations try to undertake the long, expensive process of development. The delay and cost of endless land-use battles are putting small nonprofit housing developers, including faith-based groups, out of business. Small, for-profit builders are not doing much better.

If current trends continue, only large, publicly traded real estate firms that build properties with hundreds of units for middle- and upper-middle income people will have the financial and legal staying power to build their projects.

No one says that property owners don't have a right to question their elected officials about land-use decisions or to make their views known. Public participation is built into the processes cities use to plan development over the long term and regulate individual projects in the short term.

But in many cases, we are no longer seeing reasonable local debate about specific projects in line with established democratic processes, local codes, and land-use plans.

Opposition to affordable housing has become automatic and increasingly strident. It has gotten stronger and more pervasive, largely because of the housing price slump, which has made property owners much more intent on protecting their real estate values from any perceived threat.

The power of the opposition has become so great that in certain regions of the country, there are few towns where one can build apartments as a matter of right. The old practice of creating zones where land could be used for specific purposes without a lot of legal wrangling is obsolete. Now, every individual case must be approved by a zoning department, a planning commission, and, ultimately, a city council.

Joining the "resistance"

Recently, local concerns about specific developments have been co-opted by an ideological movement that has very broad roots and powerful propaganda.

This movement links opposition to affordable housing development to suspicion of the United Nations. The supposed connection is something called Agenda 21, a voluntary set of guidelines the U.N. issued in 1992 to encourage sustainable development.

Municipal governments in many regions are collaborating to draw up plans that link housing and real estate development with planning for transit, in some cases, with an overall goal of reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Makes sense, right?

Not to people who oppose affordable housing, since a key component of these plans is to zone land near transportation for higher-density affordable and mixed-income housing.

Anti-housing activists are now saying that cities and counties are being directed by faceless U.N. drones to force high-density housing on them in accordance with Agenda 21.

Members of this movement, with inspiration from people like author Glenn Beck, are calling on their fellow citizens to "join the resistance" against planning and affordable housing. Beck and his fans are doing their best to portray the regional planning processes as Soviet-style central planning.

People like Beck either ignore or don't grasp that our governments applied just as much or more power to create today's land-use patterns. Decades of government planning, land-use regulation, and tax policy decisions have created endless acres of sprawling, cheaply built single-family homes and costly, traffic-congested freeways.

Why is the use of government power to encourage higher-density housing a form of fascism when the same power applied to encouraging sprawl is okay?

One answer is that anti-housing activists know full well that density is absolutely essential to create affordable housing options. If density greater than that of single-family homes can be branded as a U.N. plot to take away our freedom, then affordable housing development will be easy to prevent.

Besides, it gives middle-class baby boomers who vote Democratic a perfectly good rationale for opposing provision of housing for lower-income people.

The merger of anti-planning, anti-U.N., and anti-housing motivations creates a very powerful force that makes it increasingly difficult to meet our need for housing.

Debunking myths about housing

Anti-housing activists and their allies in the media take the problems of a small number of old rental housing properties and use them to condemn all affordable housing, often without even considering the specifics of the proposal.

"High-density development is a failed model that harms neighbors while destroying the lives of the folks they (sic) supposedly benefit," wrote a newspaper columnist in California's Marin County, to justify his opposition to a proposed rental housing development in the city of Novato.

Obviously, that blanket statement is ridiculous. There are thousands of apartment properties serving less affluent people throughout America that are safe and well maintained, with residents who make very good neighbors.

Most of today's affordable housing is financed using federal tax credits to attract investors who insist that it be managed professionally. Investors in tax credit properties in recent years include people like Warren Buffett and big companies like Chevron and Google.

This housing is very well managed and very well designed. It has to be, because it is scrutinized regularly by as many as a dozen government and private funding sources on top of municipal building inspections.

Properties built with federal tax credits are examined for compliance with program rules by the Internal Revenue Service and individual state housing finance agencies, not the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD).

Owners know that good management is essential to maintain the value of their property. They don't allow criminal or anti-social behavior. Many have a zero-tolerance policy regarding drug use or criminality.

The elephant in the room

For close to 50 years, the Fair Housing Act has worked well to help prevent landlords and property owners from denying the rental or sale of existing housing to anyone on account of color, religion, sex, national origin, or handicap and familial status.

But it is very ineffective when it comes to how local governments decide what kind of housing can be built in their communities.

Anti-housing activists generally avoid any references to race, whether because, as they claim, it's not an issue, or because they are savvy enough to know it is politically incorrect and illegal to discriminate by race.

The only thing they say about the people who may occupy a proposed development is that they don't want lower-income people to live in their neighborhood. "If they (prospective tenants of affordable apartments) can't afford to buy a house here, they should not be able to live here" is a typical statement from anti-housing activists.

The dirty little secret of the anti-housing movement is that, if a community has nothing but high-priced housing, it has effectively prevented most minority households from living there.

In 2012, the median U.S. income was \$57,009 for white households, \$33,321 for black households, and \$39,005 for Hispanic households. In many metro areas, the income disparity is even greater.

No one can infer the motives of housing opponents as individuals, but the effect of opposition to affordable housing development is clear.

"Good suburban neighborhoods with good schools where jobs are being created are like exclusive private clubs. Most poor minorities have no chance of gaining admission thanks in large part to the lack of affordable housing," said Bart Harvey, former CEO of nonprofit Enterprise Community Partners, a national financier and developer of affordable housing.

Conclusion

It may not matter much if anti-housing groups stop individual developments here or there. But if every community with concerns about housing succeeds in blocking it, or if they start winning repeal of key statutes that encourage affordable housing, we will never meet our housing needs. Nor will we make significant reductions in segregation by race and income.

In 1980, 12 percent of American communities had majorities of their populations who were poor. In 2010, the proportion of mostly poor communities had increased to 18 percent, an increase of one-third, according to the Pew Research Center.

The trend will continue as long as the anti-housing movement grows in strength and determination.

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