

Why Minneapolis Just Made Zoning History

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The ambitious Minneapolis 2040 plan will encourage more dense housing development in single-family neighborhoods.

On Friday, the Minneapolis City Council voted to support a comprehensive plan promising sweeping changes to the city's zoning. Minneapolis 2040 comprises 14 goals, largely centered around housing, to achieve a vision for equitable growth and social stability over the next two decades. The plan is explicit in its recommendations for undoing racial and social barriers that have negatively affected the city's communities of color.

Endorsed by a nearly unanimous vote, Minneapolis 2040 is the most ambitious upzoning guide yet passed by an American city. Since 75 percent of the city's residents live in areas zoned for single-family homes, it promises to bring dramatic change to the fabric of Minneapolis. The plan has spurred fierce debate, which will no doubt continue as zoning guidelines are passed into law and single-family neighborhoods begin to introduce duplex and triplex apartments.

As cities nationwide engage in their own epic struggles over reforming zoning rules to allow more affordable development, CityLab spoke with Minneapolis Mayor Jacob Frey about how this hard-fought housing victory happened, and what happens in Minneapolis next.

Racial equity appears as a common thread in several parts of the Minneapolis 2040 guidelines. How does the city's history inform the plan?

Minneapolis has a long history going back 100 years of redlining and intentional segregation. We literally have maps at the city that identify north Minneapolis as a slum for blacks and Jews. We need to make sure that the precision of our solutions match the precision of the harm initially inflicted. And that harm was precise.

When did the plan for 2040 start?

Over a year ago. We're required by law to have a comprehensive plan every decade or so. This comprehensive plan goes beyond the basics of infrastructure and building height. We're allowing for a diversity of housing options in every neighborhood. We are gearing toward having a beautiful urban dynamic on the street, where you walk down the block with a thousand different tastes and smells and sounds and people. These are aspects that make a city wonderful and exciting, and we should lean into that vision.

Minneapolis passed, almost by unanimous vote, an ambitious plan where many other cities and even states have failed. What's the difference?

You had a mayor and a city council that ran on many of these ideals. You had an extensive public engagement process. Of course, there was disagreement and controversy along the way. Over time, we were able to generate a decent consensus that resulted in a 12-1 vote.

In the run-up to this vote, you have said that "affordable housing is a right." Yet residents in Minneapolis are very divided when it comes down to the implementation—where affordable housing is actually placed. And it's not just Minneapolis: Residents of almost

every major urban area in America are having some kind of battle over this issue. Do you think there's resistance to the idea that affordable housing is a right?

There's always resistance, of course. It doesn't mean that it's not the right thing. I believe strongly that housing is a right. I believe that everyone should have a safe place to go home to at the end of the night, to rest their heads on a pillow and rejuvenate for the next day. Clearly that right is not afforded to everyone.

Moreover, I believe that affordable housing should be in every neighborhood. There's a right to live in a great city. We should have a beautiful diversity of people, of socioeconomic background, in every neighborhood.

How do you respond to the criticism that Minneapolis 2040 doesn't go far enough to create affordable housing?

The comprehensive plan is one tool in a toolkit. I place affordable housing into two overarching segments. The first being subsidy: You need a subsidy to bridge the gap between whatever constitutes the market rate and the affordable rate. In my recommended budget, which just passed, we placed \$40 million to affordable housing efforts. That's about three times the previous record in our city. The time is right for not just talk, but action, and we're putting money where our mouth is.

By the way, that subsidy is not just going to the traditional affordable housing at the 40 and 50 percent of area median income levels. It's going to deeply affordable housing—30 percent of area median income levels—so that people who are experiencing homelessness have that next rung on the ladder to pull themselves back. Right now, that rung is sadly missing.

"Cities evolve. That evolution can be embraced in a holistic fashion that accommodates people who need homes."

The second piece is supply. A whole lot of people want to live in Minneapolis right now. They want to live in and around an urban core. We're proud of that. But we don't have the supply to accommodate that demand. When you have demand that is sky-high, and you don't have the supply to keep up with it, prices rise. Rents rise. That's what we're seeing. It's got to be a two-prong solution—both supply and subsidy.

Who are your advisors? Who do you look to for advice on how to pass an ambitious and maybe unprecedented plan? Who do you call on this?

If we're talking about housing, [strategic policy advisor] Peter Ebnet on my staff. Andrea Brennan, our city housing director. There are colleagues on the city council we worked with. Certainly urbanists, who largely agree with these concepts, but also people who disagree. We welcome feedback, ranging from "this policy is beautifully transformational" to "this policy sucks."

Going forward, threeplex housing will be allowed across much of the city. But that wasn't the initial plan. Can you tell me about the decision to abandon the fourplex allowance? Is there a way to quantify how big a concession this is? Does this add costs or delays to the ultimate goal?

I don't think it adds a delay or necessarily cost. There was a move to generate consensus and incorporate feedback from neighborhoods throughout our city. At the end of the day, the 12-1 vote on the city council reflects that consensus.

Do you have any plans in place to win over the plan's opponents going forward?

One big piece is on communication on what was passed—on the factual plan that was just passed. There were at least two drafts and over 100 amendments. I couldn't even recite all of the amendments to you. One big piece is just being transparent about what was actually passed.

What are the next steps toward implementing the plan?

The plan itself goes to the metropolitan council for final approval. The comprehensive plan is not the law in and of itself. It's a forward-thinking vision of where our city can be. The code or the law itself rests in our zoning.

Critics of the 2040 plan rallied around two major points, and these are what always come up in debates about density and zoning. One that density will change the character of Minneapolis neighborhoods. The other is that Minneapolis infrastructure can't support the added density. Can you answer these criticisms?

First, we do need to build out our public transportation system. The desire to incorporate a public transportation system that gibes with our housing and demand—that's fair. I totally agree with that. This comprehensive plan is not just a housing vision. It includes everything from basic infrastructure to water management to transportation.

People in Minneapolis love their neighborhoods, and I love them for it. You should have a deep pride in the neighborhood you live in and the block you live on. That beautiful character exists today and will continue to exist in 2040. That said, cities evolve. That evolution can be embraced in a holistic fashion that accommodates people who need homes while also retaining the character that people love.

What did you have to leave out of the plan that you wish you might have kept?

It has been a long process. I wanted the ability to see a diversity of housing options in every neighborhood, and people of different socioeconomic backgrounds living in the same zip code and even on the same block. There's still quite a lot of work to do to get there. The comprehensive plan helps.