

Golis: Why fewer people will be living in single-family homes

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In the name of slowing the escalation of housing prices, Oregon is poised to become the first state to abandon single-family zoning in the state's largest cities. "In Portland, we're just trying not to become San Francisco," the speaker of the Oregon House of Representatives told the Los Angeles Times.

In Minneapolis, the City Council last year approved a new long-term zoning map that allows duplexes and triplexes anywhere in the city and declares the city's intention to banish single-family zoning. One supporter of the new plan told Politico: "Lots of people want to live here. It's a great city to live in. And we have used our city policies to keep people out."

In California, there seems to be agreement that something needs to be done to expedite new housing construction. It's a crisis, after all.

But there is no agreement about how to do it. In May, a controversial measure to remove barriers to multi-family construction in transit corridors was shelved for another year, a decision that confirmed the state's abiding ambivalence toward housing. We, Californians, seem to believe that more housing is important, but we're not sure it belongs in our neighborhood.

Eventually, even in California, the housing landscape will change. Reducing a community's dependence on single-family homes becomes a way to slow the escalation of housing prices, make better use of existing urban land, accept that sprawl development can't go on forever and acknowledge that wages aren't keeping pace with the run-up in housing costs.

If you live in Sonoma County, all these issues should matter to you.

So what's going on here? Like baseball, apple pie and hot dogs, isn't every American guaranteed the right to own his or her own home on his or her own patch of dirt?

Well, no. The San Jose Mercury News reported Thursday that homeownership just hit a seven-year low. Only about half of all Californians, 53.2%, now own their homes. In 12 years, the newspaper also reported, the number of renters earning more than \$150,000 a year has tripled.

For better and worse, most cities in the West have been designed — the polite word — to accommodate the automobile and the single-family home. A recent New York Times survey found that only single-family homes are permitted on 75% of the residential land in Los Angeles. It's 77% in Portland.

There are many reasons for the high price of housing, but one of them is the demand for bigger houses on bigger lots. According to the National Association of Home Builders, the average size of an American home grew from 983 square feet in 1950 to 2,340 square feet in 2004.

New homes are getting smaller now, responding to the belated recognition that something has to be done about the cost of housing and the collateral costs associated with sprawl development.

But when the median price of a home is more than \$1.5 million in San Francisco and almost \$1.3 million in Santa Clara County, there is more work to do, and so there is talk of zoning changes that promote smaller homes, more multi-family housing and increased density in all kinds of neighborhoods.

Modest efforts to promote granny units in existing single-family neighborhoods may represent the first statewide effort to override hometown politics, but they likely won't be the last.

As we learn every day in California, saying and doing are not the same thing.

Staff Writer Will Schmitt reported this month that the city of Santa Rosa hopes to build 7,000 homes in the city center over the next two decades. It's an ambitious goal, especially when one considers that the city planned to build 3,400 homes in the downtown between 2007 and 2027, and so far has managed only 375.

When it comes to ambitious downtown plans that came up short, Santa Rosa has a long history.

Will homebuyers and renters want to live downtown? Can homes and apartments be constructed at a price that will attract customers? Builders and the banks that loan money to builders want answers to these same questions.

For Santa Rosa, much is riding on the outcome. In a community determined to protect open space and make the best possible use of land inside the urban boundary, there is no Plan B. Downtown living needs to become a popular option.

Santa Rosa, smaller and more suburban than Portland and Minneapolis, isn't likely to outlaw single-family zoning, but it can't pretend that some of the same issues don't exist here.

Older folks who have lived most of their lives in single-family homes on large lots may decide that living in a downtown high-rise doesn't appeal to them. As people who got their foot in the door before housing prices went crazy, they can afford to live where they live.

But young people with regular jobs may have a different idea. They may prefer a lifestyle with easy access to shops, restaurants and transit. They also know from hard experience that wages are not keeping up with home prices and rents.

It's a simple proposition: The housing and job markets are changing, and successful communities will figure out what it will take to make the best of those changes.