

Equitable Zoning Reform: How to Do It Right

Eliminating exclusionary zoning has the potential to significantly advance racial and economic justice. Unless it is done carefully, though, tackling exclusionary zoning could fail to make any real-world impacts or could have unintended consequences, including increased displacement of low-income communities of color. The following principles should inform all policies concerning exclusionary zoning.

Focus on Exclusionary Areas

Exclusionary zoning is about the exclusion of people, not the exclusion of types of buildings or housing types. In many predominantly Black and Latinx neighborhoods reducing barriers to higher density development is unlikely to increase access for low-income families and, instead, has the potential to fuel real estate speculation and displacement.

Prioritize Deeply Affordable Housing

In high-cost areas, new market-rate multi-family housing is generally still very expensive. Zoning reform will only be an effective tool for advancing racial and economic justice if reform focuses on deeply affordable housing

Look at the Whole Community Picture

Municipalities should be evaluated holistically to ensure that they are not able to comply with new policies or access new funding sources while simultaneously undermining the goals of an inclusive zoning plan. A city that upzones in an area that is unsuitable for healthy housing or upzones one area while downzoning an equal or greater amount in another area are on balance counter to the goals of equitable zoning reform.

Protect Tenants From Displacement

It is important to protect individual households from displacement pressures that may result from zoning or land-use decisions. Prohibition on demolition, limitations on land-use conversions of manufactured home communities, anti-harassment protections, just cause eviction requirements, rent stabilization, right to counsel, source of income protections, and tenant opportunity to purchase would all help alleviate displacement.

Ensure Equitable Access to Funds

To avoid potential inequity, create parallel grant programs that support neighborhood investments in low-income communities of color to build or replace infrastructure and to counter displacement pressures.

Select Types of Funding That Will Incentivize Meaningful Change

Carefully consider the types of funding that are used. Attempts to use affordable housing dollars to incentivize breaking down of exclusionary zoning often fail to reach the most exclusionary communities that have no interest in affordable housing. Infrastructure or discretionary funding have proven to be more effective.