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# Legislature should reject plan to upend single-family zoning

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By

[The Seattle Times editorial board](#)

To hear Gov. Jay Inslee tell it, his plan to eliminate single-family zoning across the state is essential to creating more affordable housing and ending homelessness.

What's missing is any guarantee that this monumental shift in local land-use policy will actually reduce housing costs, let alone produce more places available for those living on the streets. Instead, developers are likely to cater to the top end of the market, making Seattle's housing pressures even worse, at least in the short term.

"We must pass legislation that removes antiquated barriers to middle housing options in our cities — such as duplexes and town homes — and provides more housing supply to make it available to all income levels," Inslee said in his Jan. 11 [State of the State speech](#). "We cannot tell our constituents we are fighting homelessness and yet not provide ways to build more housing."

His proposal, [HB 1782](#), would direct cities with populations over 20,000 to allow duplexes, triplexes, fourplexes, fiveplexes, sixplexes, stacked flats, town houses and courtyard apartments in all lots that are, both, currently zoned for detached single-family residential use and within one-half mile of a major transit stop. Cities must also allow development of duplexes, triplexes and fourplexes on all other lots zoned for single-family residential use.

Many Republican lawmakers sing the proposal's praises: "I love single-family housing, but I don't want to see people homeless," said Sen.

Shelly Short, R-Addy, during an interview with The Times editorial board. “We can’t just continue to not do anything, when we know that we have a limited land base.”

Supporters — ranging across the political spectrum and including business groups and housing advocates — rely on the premise that increasing housing supply will inevitably lower prices. They believe trickle-down economics will provide everyone housing if there are more housing options for those at or above median income.

That doesn’t ring true to some in Olympia, and Seattle’s experience with mandating affordable housing tells a different narrative.

“As we have seen, if you simply say we are going to build 3, 4, 5, 6 units per lot, the next 1,000 and 2,000 units that are built will not be affordable-housing units,” said Rep. Gerry Pollet, D-North Seattle, during a legislative hearing on Jan. 18.

Less than three years ago, Mayor Jenny Durkan signed legislation authorizing citywide implementation of Mandatory Housing Affordability into law. Among other changes, it required that new development include rent-restricted affordable homes or contribute to a city fund for affordable housing.

The results have been mixed, but illustrative. Given the choice of building affordable housing or paying a fee, the vast majority of developers pay the fee.

Among the 224 market-rate projects that were subject to MHA’s requirements in 2020, [219 chose to pay fees](#), while only five agreed to include some affordable housing, yielding 21 on-site units. The program raised \$68 million in fees.

If this is a sign of things to come, it’s easy to wonder how Inslee’s plan would have the desired effect of creating so much new affordable housing that seniors can age in place, workers have a chance to live the communities they serve, and local land-use and zoning laws rooted in inequity and racism are dismantled.

In fact, according to a Seattle Department of Construction and Inspection spokesman, the department is evaluating this proposal “for its potential to exacerbate residential displacement, especially of lower-income renters and communities of color.”

When talking about density, don't forget that in Seattle, a single-family home can include two units under the same roof, and another separate unit in the backyard.

Even if new construction has some impact on prices, creating sufficient income-restricted, rent-restricted homes for lower-income folks will continue to require significant taxpayer money.

Inslee's budget package includes targeted investments of \$815 million in proven programs that promote housing stability, as well as funds for shelter and permanent housing, and expansion of behavioral-health services.

That's where the Legislature should focus its attention. Land-use decisions are complicated, and fraught with pitfalls and unforeseen consequences. Unless lawmakers ensure that new middle housing would be affordable, HB 1782 looks less like an equalizer than a developer giveaway.

***The Seattle Times editorial board*** members are editorial page editor Kate Riley, Frank A. Blethen, Luis Carrasco, Alex Fryer, Jennifer Hemmingsen, Mark Higgins, Derrick Nunnally and William K. Blethen (emeritus).