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Opinion

Conte: Legislature threatens single-family homeowners

By Paul Conte

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Homeowners in many of Eugene's single-family neighborhoods are in the crosshairs of a radical bill in the Oregon Legislature that would entirely eliminate single-family zoning. This ill-conceived bill would dictate that older, less-expensive areas be exposed to wholesale redevelopment, while wealthier areas and all new subdivisions would remain protected by homeowner "covenants, conditions and restrictions" (CC&Rs).

House Bill 2001 specifically would require Eugene to allow a duplex, triplex or fourplex on every lot in Eugene's only single-family zone, "R-1." That means every single-family household that isn't protected by CC&Rs could suddenly see duplexes or larger structures added to, or replacing, the homes around it. Areas of Amazon, Friendly and Bethel-Danebo neighborhoods are just a few of the many locations that are susceptible.

Eugene's R-1 code already allows multiplexes in new subdivisions, where the developer can design the housing mix to avoid negative impacts or simply record CC&Rs that prohibit multiplexes. Consequently, HB 2001 won't affect newer subdivisions or many existing, more expensive single-family developments (such as Tonawanda Heights in the southwest hills). If this sounds grossly inequitable, it is.

Eugene's past experience with similar upzoning of the "Westside" area (west of Jefferson Street, between 8th and 13th Ave.) is proof of what HB 2001 would cause — bottom-feeding developers jamming shoddy multiplexes into backyards of distressed rental houses, destabilizing the surrounding block and causing an exodus of economically-mobile households.

Similar effects have occurred across the nation when lower-density, more affordable areas are suddenly upzoned. Investors pick off lower-cost properties and redevelop with multi-units regardless of the impacts on adjacent and nearby homeowners. The appeal and value of

affordable homes with modest yards declines, and impacted households, especially families, give up and sell at whatever price an investor will pay. As a result older, lower-cost and family friendly housing is replaced with more expensive multi-unit condos and rentals.

Advocates for such upzoning use a charming term for multiplexes: “missing-middle housing.” Do an internet search, and you’ll find artful web pages with promotional images depicting tree-lined boulevards with lovely brick, two-up-two-down apartment buildings surrounded by pretty landscaping — what more honestly should be called “mything middle housing.”

Advocates justify HB 2001 by claiming “middle housing” would improve “housing affordability” (it would worsen it); reduce emissions that contribute to climate change (it would increase them) and make housing more equitable (it would exacerbate the gap between poorer and wealthier households).

When Eugene and state planners are pressed, not one can point to a successful example of upzoning to allow multiplexes in older, more affordable, single-family neighborhoods. Newer multiplexes make a minuscule contribution to the overall dwelling inventory, and market dynamics force such development to have a high market price or monthly rent. There’s a reason multiplexes have been “missing” — builders and lenders see these forms as high risk and low return. Small developers stick with tried-and-true, single-family homes; and large developers build larger apartments for a higher return commensurate with the risk.

“Middle housing” can create other problems when forced into older, single-family neighborhoods without careful evaluation of potential impacts. Many older neighborhoods don’t have the utility, storm sewer and street infrastructure to safely and adequately handle a substantial increase in households.

In addition, dispersing increased density throughout older neighborhoods means many of the added households won’t be near frequent public transit service (such as EmX). The increased traffic congestion produces greater greenhouse gas emissions. Building over arable areas in small yards of close-in, single-family neighborhoods diminishes large trees and other vegetation, exacerbating the “heat island” effect.

Oregon’s Legislature should not be mesmerized by the “shiny object” of “middle housing” and unwittingly pass a bill that would benefit just a few developers, leave well-off homeowners unscathed and do much harm to lower-income homeowners and renters.

Instead, as serious advocates for housing affordability and “green development” know, Eugene and the Legislature should be advancing medium- and high-density development, both subsidized and market rate, on efficient public transit routes, such as where EmX runs along W. 6th and 7th Ave in Eugene. That would deliver on affordability, lower vehicle emissions and equitability. HB 2001 offers nothing but a swing and a “myth.”

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