

Legislators considering HB 2001:

You have a tough job. Affordable housing is disappearing across the state. Gentrification is displacing families who have lived in their neighborhoods sometimes for 3-4 generations. Rents have been escalating out of control (although recently falling a bit).

HB2001 may seem to offer a solution — at least a start. BUT it's a sledge hammer approach to a problem that requires smarter tools that are used with care and thoughtful planning.

The fundamental problem is that local governments have very limited options and blunt instruments to deal with these sorts of social problems. They aren't empowered to restrict development at will, they don't have unlimited taxation authority, they can't tell people where to live, and they have limited control of developers (who are funding directly their departments of permitting and development planning as a matter of common practice across the state and the nation).

What they have is zoning control. And the "fix" that HB2001 offers is to basically get rid of residential zoning norms that have been developed over the past century. OK, if your view is that all of that history is really racist, classist, agist, etc., as speaker Kotek seems to argue, then you should undo all of this history. Go for it. Forget neighborhoods, sense of place, organic communities. I don't want to be simplistic. The legislation would grant local authority. But the basic idea is that current zoning patterns are exclusionary and adding in more units in bigger buildings will solve past inequities. Great goal. No evidence that this can solve the problem without creating new problems.

IF the aim of HB2001 is really to provide more equity, housing access, environmental justice, rights of return to historic low-income and minority neighborhoods — you need to ask yourself whether undoing zoning is going to do ANY of this. If you don't dig very deeply, it may seem like at least some minimal progress in the right direction. But if you look at actual historical development patterns, the histories of free market/deregulation policies like this in the past (what some have called a "build, baby build" solution) you'll find that property valuations and already well advanced displacement and the self-interested behavior of developers means that this will likely produce lots of unintended consequences that no one wants and no one wants to own 5 years from now.

These include more demolitions of affordable housing units, neighborhood assaults and pollution, McMansion building for upscale buyers (the preferences of developers across the country; I'm happy to provide references to support this), more cars, lower quality of life, fewer opportunities for hard working people ... you get the picture.

The very sad part of this is that if the policy is adopted it will take years to take hold. When it does it won't provide the benefits needed. More gentrification and displacement will have taken place in the interim. The homeless population will have increased. And legislators who thought this "might at least do something..." will have something to think about for years going forward.

I'm not arguing inaction. The problems are huge. The need is great. Tinkering with zoning is faux-solution / non-solution. Do something about housing costs and access and rents and minimum wages. Please.

Don't make neighborhood residents the perpetrators or the the victims. Let's work together to try to actually solve problems rather than put up largely symbolic solutions intended to please very narrow

constituencies. The stakes are too high and the time is too short for half solutions based on limited analysis.

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