

May 25, 2022

Dear County Board members,

Please do not make radical changes to our county's zoning. Once this is done, Arlington will be changed forever, probably for the worse.

First, upzoning and creating more Missing Middle housing is not necessarily going to improve housing availability for lower-income and racially diverse groups. Arlington's Joint Facilities Advisory Commission (JFAC) specifically looked at the experiences of other communities and concluded:

Because interest in missing middle housing policies has not gained momentum until recently, and the enacted missing middle housing policies we identified have gone into effect only in the last few years, it may be too early to assess whether enacting those policies are accomplishing the goals of affordability, diversity, or inclusion.

https://www.arlingtonva.us/files/sharedassets/public/commissions/documents/jfac/jfac_mmhs_finaldraft_report_2022-04-27.pdf

JFAC was even more blunt in its earlier draft:

It was not clear from Commissioner research that the Missing Middle Housing in the jurisdictions researched were able to accomplish the goals of affordability, diversity, or inclusion.

https://www.arlingtonva.us/files/sharedassets/public/commissions/documents/jfac/jfac_mmhs_draft_report_2022-03-20.pdf

In other words, we don't have evidence that any communities achieved affordability, diversity, or inclusion by initiating Missing Middle policies. And that's the main point. Without evidence that Missing Middle actually achieves the professed goals, what is the justification for it? At this point, any benefits are purely speculative. Urban planning is a very tricky

business, with a history of unfortunate unintended consequences for planners and communities who didn't think things through carefully enough - and even for those who did.

Before initiating such a radical change, we should wait to see how Missing Middle projects actually work out in other parts of the country. If it turns out Missing Middle leads primarily to gentrification, we may want to rethink.

Second, Arlington is now a tech-fueled super community, like Silicon Valley, with Amazon HQ2, Virginia Tech's Innovation Campus, George Mason University, the Pentagon, Microsoft, Oracle, Consumer Technology Association, Gartner, etc., etc. The workforce is one of the most educated in the country, with a large population of computer science graduates. <https://www.arlingtoneconomicdevelopment.com/Home>. The economic and housing realities in this kind of community differ significantly from those in less dynamic communities. As Richard Florida writes, extensively quoting from a paper by two leading economic geographers, Andrés Rodríguez-Pose of the London School of Economics and Michael Storper of UCLA, London School of Economics, and Sciences Po in Paris:

The economies and talent bases of cities have diverged over time. Expensive cities have much larger clusters of leading-edge tech and knowledge industries and of highly educated, skilled talent. It's this, rather than differences in housing prices, that is behind growing spatial inequality.

"The affordability crisis within major urban areas is real," they write, "but it is due less to over-regulation of housing markets than to the underlying wage and income inequalities, and a sharp increase in the value of central locations within metro areas, as employment and amenities concentrate in these places."

A key factor here is the growing divide between highly-paid techies and knowledge workers and much lower-paid people who work in routine service jobs. These service workers end up getting the short end of the stick, spending much more of their income on housing in expensive cities. "Under these circumstances moving to big cities provides no immediate benefits for workers without college education," Rodríguez-Pose and Storper write.

Upzoning does little to change this fundamental imbalance. Because land in superstar cities and tech hubs is so expensive to begin with, upzoning tends to create even more expensive condominium towers. "While building more affordable housing in core agglomerations would accommodate more people," the authors note, "the collapse of the urban wage premium for less-educated workers means that the extra housing would mostly attract additional skilled workers." . . .

And as Rodríguez-Pose told me via email: "Upzoning is far from the progressive policy tool it has been sold to be. It mainly leads to building high-end housing in desirable locations."

'Build More Housing' Is No Match for Inequality A new analysis finds that liberalizing zoning rules and building more won't solve the urban affordability crisis, and could exacerbate it.

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-05-09/-build-more-housing-is-no-match-for-inequality>

While wanting to help the disadvantaged may be a worthy goal, applying untested means to achieve that goal is not a smart way to proceed, particularly if it's likely to make things worse for the intended beneficiaries — current lower- and middle-class Arlington residents who may well face displacement as waves of wealthy techies and related professionals move into Arlington.

Arlington Resident from Williamsburg neighborhood