

To Solve Affordable Housing, Drop the 'NIMBY' Attitude

By Tara W. Duhy and Robert Angus Williams



July 11, 2022 - The shortage of affordable housing is a problem for all Florida residents – present and future. The news is full of stories about employers who want to create jobs here but whose employees cannot find an affordable place to live. That’s a brake on our economy that affects everyone—not just the people searching for a place to rent or buy.

Recently, the Palm Beach County Commission approved placing a \$200 million housing bond on the November ballot. Money is one step in

solving this problem. The next steps will be harder – getting units built that the County needs to address the shortfall that leaders estimate to be in the tens of thousands.

Several challenging, interconnected dynamics stymie the creation of affordable housing. The first of these is the well-known “Not in my Backyard” (NIMBY) response: political pressure placed on local elected officials by existing residents who don’t want affordable housing (or any new development) in their neighborhood.

Developers of new homes or apartment complexes can make them more affordable by building smaller houses on smaller lots, or more units on a given parcel of land. To accomplish this, changes to local zoning laws are required. However, this higher-density strategy can prompt NIMBY protests that make local officials reluctant to even consider projects or zoning changes. The voice of existing residents and a consideration of existing development has a place in local planning. However, it should not be a veto that can defeat needed development. Core areas of a community are exactly where affordable housing logically needs to be: close to existing transportation corridors, bus routes, shopping centers and jobs, and away from environmentally sensitive lands.

Some promising developments have occurred. At the state level, in 2022, the Florida legislature authorized counties and municipalities to approve residential development projects that provide affordable housing on parcels zoned for commercial or industrial uses without requiring a rezoning. More locally, in line with other metropolitan areas across the country who have identified outdated zoning codes as a block to affordability, Miami-Dade Mayor Daniella Levine Cava recently proposed relaxing



county zoning laws to allow more density in new residential construction, including splitting lots and enabling construction of more townhouses and duplexes under the single-family home category.

If we are going to protect precious and fragile land resources, while providing needed housing for future populations, it follows that we need to be more flexible in using land that is already developed but has capacity for more density.

The path forward will require replacing NIMBY thinking with a focus on the greater good and a retooling of local zoning codes to encourage efficient use of land. If we want an economically vibrant community, we cannot insist that zoning never changes and that the neighborhood around our property stays exactly the same in perpetuity.

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