

Connected Communities response: Donald Dudrow, Jr., (Lenox Place)

Description

Katherine (Keough-Jurs),

As a member of your committee of professional stakeholders that participated in your concept meetings, I must say that I oppose the current Connected Communities proposal. I've reviewed the recommendations/ plan and as an affordable housing professional and Cincinnati homeowner I cannot support the plan. I'm opposed to the Connected Communities zoning changes for the following reasons.

1. Unintended Consequences – The 4/24/2023 Urban Land Institute study found that less restrictive zoning regulations increased housing supply, but not for renters and low income peoples. Also, detrimental increases in housing density led to less affordability and increased incidents of crime. Though I agree that increased investment in subsidy programs and affordable housing development is necessary, these zoning changes will only exacerbate the problem by promoting higher cost rentals/ increased homeownership costs in the Connected Communities areas by driving out the affordable housing opportunities.
2. Fairness – Existing homeowners have purchased and invested in their homes under the current zoning regulations. Arbitrarily changing these zoning regulations after the fact to allow multi-family housing in historically single family neighborhoods will decrease their property values and neighborhood dynamics that may have appealed to them when they chose to live in a particular neighborhood.
3. Absentee Landlords – Unfortunately Cincinnati has a horrible history with out of town investors and landlords. These zoning changes will only exacerbate this issue and increase the potential for out of town investors dividing-up single family homes as investment opportunities. Unless the zoning requires owner-occupancy for an extended period of time, this will occur (unlikely legal to do so).

Better Options: The following alternatives to increasing the housing stock include the following. These alternatives can be implemented without changing any laws/ regulations.

1. Enforcement – there are many blighted and neglected properties throughout Cincinnati. Enforcement of municipal housing and maintenance codes will either cause the owner to improve their properties or sell. This is not being done in a comprehensive manner due to building inspector staff shortages/ funding. Also, mandatory annual housing code inspections of rental housing is needed. Increasing fines and consequences of non-compliance may be necessary.
2. Assessment/ Foreclosure – failure of a property owner to maintain their properties would be a “big-stick” in turning blighted properties into needed housing.
3. City/ Port/ 3CDC Purchase/ Stabilization/Resale – Foreclosure or purchase of abandoned lots or properties that fail enforcement actions and then offering them to new buyers with financing/ tax abatement/ and other incentives. I personally was involved in the very successful City led VBS (Vacant Building Stabilization) program. As one of the City's Consulting Architects we stabilized

over 30 buildings in OTR that were foreclosed on by the City or abandoned. Stabilization included: roofing, closing doors/ windows, and structural repairs in order to prevent further deterioration or collapse of the buildings. These stabilized building were eventually sold by 3CDC for \$1 to investors who promised to renovate/ occupy the buildings. The success you see in OTR is in great part due to this VBS program. Otherwise, the failure to stabilize these buildings would have led to their demolition and loss of much of the OTR fabric. This approach can be implemented city-wide to great effect.

4. Variances – though I’m not a huge fan of zoning variances, there are times and places where it is needed. The current zoning code allows for some “flexibility” while engaging neighborhood stakeholders in an organized and transparent process. Why change something that to a great extent has been successful in accommodating exceptions to current zoning?
5. Market Forces – A better solution is to keep the historically zoned single family neighborhoods intact and let the market determine the best location and type of affordable housing as permitted by current zoning. This allows stabilized communities and active neighborhood involvement (ex. NANA and others) to serve as an anchor for peripheral growth of multi-family housing. “Multi-family rentals everywhere” is the antithesis of good urban planning. Uniform housing types, in defined neighborhoods, is the goal of many successful urban plans and zoning ordinances – i.e. utopian planned communities.

Closing Thoughts – Building types, height and area requirements preserve the rich character of Cincinnati’s neighborhoods. Hyde Park is a perfect example of what loose zoning codes/ lack of enforcement and undesirable variances will do to destroy a once beautiful and recognized neighborhood. When I moved to Hyde Park in 1986 it was a wonderful, quiet, safe and vibrant community. Now I avoid the area as much as possible due to the traffic, divided single family lots, high density and poorly designed new-builds surrounding the square by speculators. Oh, and none of it is “affordable” to most. I urge the City of Cincinnati to leave the zoning as-is and instead of legislating destructive change; enforce current codes/ regulations, and find financial resources and incentives to motivate the free market to determine the best location and type of affordable housing within the constraints of the current zoning code.

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Date Created

April 19, 2024

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