

[savvy special report]

By Beverly Smirnis

It's Time for Housing Policies to CHANGE, But Balancing the Decision- Making Power Is a *Delicate Subject*

Minneapolis recently voted to become the first city in the country to eliminate single-family zoning and increase density near transit. Denver and Austin have implemented new housing trust funds paid by local taxes. Durham, North Carolina, is pursuing plans to create an affordable housing loan fund and housing bond to support financing for affordable construction. Pittsburgh, Baltimore, Seattle, New York City, and Jackson, Mississippi, are all experimenting with various forms of “social housing,” like limited-equity cooperatives and community land trusts.

Oregon, California, and New York recently passed sweeping “rent regulation” protections for tenants, which limit the rent increases landlords can charge. New York became the first city to offer a “right to counsel” law, to ensure tenants are represented by a lawyer when facing eviction proceedings. Philadelphia, Newark, San Francisco, Berkeley, and Washington, D.C., are working on similar laws.

CityLab is an organization committed to telling the story of the world's cities: how they work, the challenges they face, and the solutions they need. It recently reported on a meeting held by Local Progress, a national network of progressive elected officials from

cities and local governments across the country, which recently convened to address the housing affordability issues that are infiltrating more and more cities. “It’s a simple idea: Everyone should have a place to live. But we are failing badly at this most basic of goals in every part of the country,” a Local Progress spokesperson explained to CityLab. Talking points made by Local Progress support the expansion of city-led alternative models for housing ownership to create housing that is affordable to all for the long term. They’re also in favor of more state-led and, ultimately, federal policies to address these concerns. As in higher education and health care, public options can complement what the market provides, they say.

Local Progress points to examples of families being pushed out of the neighborhoods where they’ve rented for years. In cities like Detroit, as many as one in five renters face eviction, as landlords confidently raise the rent on families however high they wish because they know they can profit from renters now willing to pay more to live there. The group is demanding strong protections against rent hikes and unwarranted evictions so tenants can stay in their homes.

Many would agree that the imbalance of housing supply and demand can only be addressed by creating different housing options than those of the past. While Local Progress pats cities on the back for their progress, the Brookings Institution holds an opposing opinion, asserting that local governments are usually the root of the problems. Like Local Progress, Brookings also urges state and national policymakers to take action to reduce barriers to housing supply, essentially usurping local governments that have adopted overly restrictive land-use regulations that constrain housing growth and drive up home prices.

But, in a country where private enterprise and property rights are vehemently upheld, some social policy proposals and government oversight actions already taken may sound radical. At the same time, discussions about affordability and housing policy reform have been the subject of debate in even the most conservative of cities and states. Indeed, Texas, in its last legislative session, voted to limit local regulation of building materials in new construction, preventing rules that go beyond national standards published within the last three code cycles. For example, the state stepped in to nix cities’ ability to implement policies requiring all homes to be faced with a certain amount of masonry. Existing owners in neighborhoods that held specific architectural restrictions were strongly opposed, saying the change would adversely affect their investment in their chosen neighborhood. Furthermore, they said that the state should stay out of their city’s business.

Here’s one statement made by a Local Progress spokesperson that we can all agree on: “Growth will be required. We’ll need courage to push past the fear of change, of loss of the familiar, that so often tethers us too strongly to the status quo.” ▼