UNLEASHING SUSTAINABLE HOUSING GROWTH

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Where we live and how we get around drives a significant share of carbon emissions. Changing housing policies to allow for density, affordable housing, and mixed-use in developed areas lowers transportation and building emissions, reduces sprawl, preserves rural areas' farmlands and forests, and helps ensure low- and moderate-income families don't bear the burden of increased housing and transportation costs. Smart policy can encourage smart growth with affordable housing across the Commonwealth to improve Virginians' quality of life and drive economic growth, while simultaneously helping to reach sustainability, environmental justice, and equity goals.

CHALLENGE

The current landscape of local housing creation revolves around car-centered development, which limits the housing we build, and its character, and increases costs for Virginians. By zoning primarily for single-family homes, local governments in essence require residents to rely on automotive transportation to conduct their daily business. A drive is required to go to school, to work, to the grocery store, and to visit family and friends. The American Automobile Association found the annual average cost of car ownership is now over $10,000 a year in 2022.[1] Land use policies that prioritize car-oriented development and transportation create long commutes for residents, generating traffic congestion, and worse health outcomes, particularly for urban communities of color.[2] Lowering vehicle miles traveled is necessary to meet our net-zero carbon emission goals.[3]

Furthermore, these policies constrict the number and form of homes that can legally be built. Sprawl not only drives up the cost of housing because it generates fewer and more expensive homes (due to higher land and materials costs), but single-family homes produce more carbon emissions because they require more energy to heat, cool, and deliver services. Analysis of carbon emissions clearly shows the areas that permit denser housing have lower emissions.[4] Sprawl-driven development also reduces tree canopy and green space opportunities for residents, as more land is parceled for development.

Current land use policies cut into Virginians' budgets by raising the cost of living and making it difficult to meet sustainability goals. This car-centered development increases our transportation emissions and places a heavy burden on middle-income families. Other zoning provisions like large lot sizes and setbacks, parking mandates, and floor area ratio regulations artificially restrict the housing availability and thus access to areas with already existing transit infrastructure. Building denser housing closer to jobs, schools, and services is a critically underleveraged climate policy tool to address transportation and building sector emissions, which make up over 40% of national emissions.[5] Doing so in an equitable way, including ensuring the provision of sufficient affordable housing for low- and middle-income Virginians, is also a key part of environmental justice.

SOLUTION

Legalizing and encouraging denser housing, also known as "missing middle housing," in existing urban and suburban areas helps remediate the environmental and financial costs associated with sprawling development. Missing middle refers to housing types that have density levels in between single-family homes and large apartment complexes, such as townhomes, four-plexes, six- and eight-plexes. This kind of "gentle density" is an excellent opportunity to build vibrant and socioeconomically diverse communities, tackle sustainability goals, and address the housing shortage.

Missing middle housing allows for the diversification of housing types, enabling communities to address the housing shortage by adding supply at various price points. Added supply places downward pressure on home prices, allowing for economic growth as residents will have more money to spend in their local, state, and global economies. Gentle density allows for development to utilize and benefit from non-automotive transportation types – such as rail, bus, and micro-transit – moving communities away from car-oriented sprawl and ultimately, lowering the carbon footprint required to live, work, and play. In addition, centering growth around urban cores including Virginia's cities, small towns, and village centers, serves to protect communities' rural character.

By definition, subdivisions with large lots require more land, destroying ecosystems and green space. Concentrating home construction in smaller geographical footprints preserves Virginia's natural resources while improving air and water quality. That said, creating greenspace and providing tree canopy helps prevent urban heat islands, reduces cooling costs, and aids with stormwater runoff. Density necessitates intentional design that allows for tree coverage and contiguous tree canopy, particularly along streets, sidewalks, and other public spaces.

Finally, providing resources for affordable housing construction and preservation will help ensure that the climate transition is conducted equitably and for the benefit of all, particularly low-income Virginians.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Incentivize local governments to zone for multi-family housing and eliminate parking minimums within a half mile of all bus rapid transit, light-rail, and Metro routes in Virginia; include a grant-based incentive program to automatically upzone such areas administered by DHCD.

Legalize the by-right development of accessory dwelling units in urban and suburban localities.

Reform building codes under the DHCD to allow for single staircases for buildings up to 6 stories to reduce the cost of building more housing while maintaining safety standards.

$90.1M for a statewide housing voucher pilot program for low-income Virginia tenants. Furthermore, grant all localities permission to adopt mandatory affordable dwelling unit ordinances.