

# SUSTAINABLE HOUSING GROWTH

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## WHY IT MATTERS

Housing has a profound effect on our lives.<sup>1</sup> Not only does it shape where we work, how we get around, and the community around us, but housing is also the most valuable asset for many people. Yet while people are moving to the Commonwealth for jobs and opportunities, we are not building enough housing near jobs, services, and transit to keep up with demand, fueling a state-wide housing crisis. And increasing climate threats are bringing new risks and rising costs, threatening Virginians' ability to mitigate housing-related financial risks.

Zoning policies in Virginia's cities and counties limit a huge amount of our residential land to single-family only housing,<sup>2</sup> which typically consumes twice the energy of multi-family homes.<sup>3</sup> If zoning doesn't allow new homes at different levels of affordability to be built in our cities, towns, and existing suburbs, people will be forced into living farther out in car-dependent sprawl, leading to more carbon pollution from longer commutes.<sup>4</sup> Virginians already face one of the nation's longest commutes,<sup>5</sup> which strain household budgets.

If we sprawl farther outward, Virginia will lose valuable farmland, forests, and wetlands, destroying carbon sinks and impacting the resilience of our communities. This is a real threat, with our neighbors in North Carolina seeing 10 new houses built in the floodplain for every 1 home in the floodplain that is demolished.<sup>6</sup>

Dense housing in cities and towns could even help reduce urban heat islands and stormwater runoff if cities shrink roadway width to add space for tree wells and bioswales to the public right-of-way. Green space and housing growth need not conflict. When built to high standards and in climate-safe and transit-oriented places, new housing can be a powerful tool to make more liveable and resilient communities.

## CURRENT LANDSCAPE

Virginia's restrictive zoning and land use policies are a primary cause of a shortage of over 105,000 housing units in the Commonwealth and are a leading factor causing housing prices to shoot up to an all-time high.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, families are facing financial insecurity, struggling to live close to jobs and services, and being priced out of communities they have called home for decades. The same housing stock that was affordable a generation ago is out of reach for young families, and almost 30% of middle-income families aged 50+ are paying over 30% of their income

on housing.<sup>8</sup>

Local zoning codes can artificially limit residential land to single-family detached homes, limiting housing supply and driving up housing costs. Other zoning provisions like large minimum lot sizes and parking mandates further restrict the types and amount of housing we can build—and drive up the cost of housing that is built. Many localities do not currently allow for more affordable accessory dwelling units (ADUs), and those that do often have regulations so complicated as to make them unfeasible to build.

Currently, some localities have taken steps to upzone beyond single-family housing and legalize and streamline more diverse and accessible housing types. Unfortunately, these local efforts alone without state policy will never meet the needs of all Virginians, or fully protect Virginia's environment.<sup>9</sup>

Indeed, when cities loosen zoning restrictions, we can see a decrease in housing costs in the immediate jurisdiction,<sup>10</sup> but the region surrounding it may remain just as costly, and regional commutes and sprawl just as bad. We need state solutions to complement local efforts to address Virginia's housing shortage while reducing sprawl and ensuring solutions to create housing also mitigate climate risks, such as urban heat islands and localized flooding, for residents and their homes.

## OPPORTUNITIES

The best opportunities to add more housing are in our urban and suburban areas, particularly cities, towns, and counties that have over 100,000 residents. With climate change making Virginia hotter and wetter, it's important to ensure that new housing does not exacerbate heat islands or flood risks or put more Virginians in harm's way. We recommend that state policymakers take bold action to pass and implement the following:

### TRANSIT-ORIENTED DEVELOPMENT

Incentivizing 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 can come in a variety of forms, including having the Department of Housing and Community Development administer a grant-based incentive program to localities who upzone such areas.

### ACCESSORY DWELLING UNITS

Accessory dwelling units include mother-in-law suites and backyard cottages. By-right development

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of accessory dwelling units in urban and suburban localities for long-term rentals would provide more housing in existing communities. They can house family members, facilitate intergenerational living and community support, and increase property values and wealth-building for homeowners.

## HOUSING IN JOB CENTERS

Converting acres of parking lots in commercial areas into mixed-use, walkable, and tree-lined communities will enable more Virginians to live near where they work, retail businesses to thrive, and employers to access nearby talent. Allowing housing and mixed-use development in commercial areas within approved Urban Development Areas to be built without a lengthy rezoning process would encourage more in-fill development.

## AFFORDABLE HOUSING ON FAITH-BASED PROPERTIES

Faith-based organizations can offer free or lower-cost land for affordable housing and are among our most supportive communities for low-income Virginians and vulnerable populations like seniors. Implementing a “Faith in Housing” policy would legalize long-term, by-right low-income housing on land owned by faith-based organizations, in locations within approved Urban Development Areas with nearby access to jobs, services, green space, and transit.

## ENDNOTES

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## TOP TAKEAWAYS

Virginia’s restrictive zoning and land use policies are a primary cause of a shortage of over 105,000 housing units in the Commonwealth and a primary factor in causing housing prices to shoot up to all-time highs.

We must prioritize building new climate-safe homes at a variety of affordability levels in our existing cities, towns, and suburbs so that people will not be forced to live farther away in car-dependent sprawl, leading to much higher carbon pollution from long commutes and lower climate resilience.<sup>11</sup>

Allowing more types of dense in-fill housing will provide a myriad of benefits, including economic growth, increased tax base, fewer carbon emissions, lower combined housing and transportation costs, more conserved land, and decreased homelessness and housing insecurity.