

# HOUSING FOR THE CLIMATE

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## WHY IT MATTERS

Housing has a profound effect on our lives. It shapes where we work, how we get around, and the community around us. Yet, we are not building enough housing near jobs, services, and transit to keep up with demand, fueling a statewide housing shortage and suburban sprawl. This shortage has resulted in large increases in home and rent prices. The pain is real: nearly 2 in 3 renters and 1 in 4 homeowners in Virginia are “cost-burdened,” meaning they spend over 30% of their income on rent or mortgage.<sup>1</sup> To cope with rising rents and home prices, residents move away from walkable cities, into car-dependent suburbs, increasing carbon emissions with longer commutes.<sup>2</sup>

Zoning policies in Virginia’s cities and counties limit the vast majority of our residential land to single-family only housing, which typically consumes twice the energy of multi-family homes.<sup>3</sup> When zoning prohibits small, affordable homes on small lots in our cities, towns, and existing suburbs, people will continue to be forced into living farther out in car-dependent sprawl. Today, Virginians already face one of the nation’s longest commutes, straining household budgets and increasing greenhouse gas emissions.<sup>4,5</sup>

## CURRENT LANDSCAPE

Restrictive zoning and land use policies enacted by local governments have contributed to a shortage of over 105,000 housing units in the Commonwealth and are a key factor in an all-time high housing prices.<sup>6,7</sup> Consequently, families are facing financial insecurity, struggling to live close to jobs and amenities, and being priced out of communities they have called home for decades. Because of high demand and systemic failure to provide a diversity of home types and sizes, the same housing stock that was affordable a generation ago is now out of reach for young families.<sup>8</sup>

Zoning provisions that limit the majority of residential land in urban, town, and village centers to large-lot, single-family homes with parking mandates restrict the types and amount of housing built, pushing development out into agricultural and natural areas.<sup>9,10</sup> Additionally, the upfront cost of land, infrastructure, and materials necessitates a higher sale price for these types of homes. This kind of sprawl results in car-dependent development patterns that are defined by long commute times and high vehicle emissions.<sup>11</sup>

Recently, some localities have adopted zoning codes that allow for a wider diversity of home designs (duplexes, small multi-family, etc.) that use land more

efficiently and sustainably while providing homes that are affordable to a wider range of incomes. In response, many of these localities are being sued by residents who disagree with these changes.<sup>12,13,14,15</sup> As a result, other localities are reluctant to implement zoning changes that legalize a variety of homes to avoid the risk of costly litigation.

The General Assembly can support local government efforts to address Virginia’s housing shortage by providing zoning, permitting, and process improvements. When aligned with zoning flexibility, these changes conserve green space and mature tree canopy, reduce sprawl, and limit climate vulnerabilities that sprawl creates.<sup>16</sup>

## OPPORTUNITIES

Virginia can leverage housing and land use policy to reach sustainability goals and ensure that Virginians and those who want to call Virginia home can afford a safe and stable home. In Virginia’s urban cores, any of the following policy opportunities could contain provisions to allow for flexibility within zoning codes and create incentives to promote the preservation of existing trees. Adding more homes of varied styles in town centers preserves natural areas, reduces car-dependency, and allows for smaller, energy-efficient homes.<sup>17</sup>

### TRANSIT-ORIENTED DEVELOPMENT

Incentivize local governments to zone for multi-family housing and eliminate parking minimums within a half mile of all high-frequency transit, light-rail, and Metro routes in Virginia. Incentives could include a Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development grant program or awarding extra weight when evaluating funding for infrastructure projects in localities that upzone such areas.

### ACCESSORY DWELLING UNITS

Allow homeowners to build accessory dwelling units (ADUs), including mother-in-law suites and backyard cottages, without an expensive and confusing special use process. ADUs support multi-generational living, can supplement household income if rented, and provide new homes in communities of opportunity. Localities would still require these units to meet building code standards, water and sewer capacity, and floodplain and stormwater standards.

### HOUSING IN JOB CENTERS

Allow for the conversion of acres of commercial parking lots, vacant storefronts, and office buildings into mixed-use, walkable, and tree-lined communities. Allowing housing and mixed-use development in commercial areas without expensive and lengthy

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rezonings within urban cores would encourage infill development, adding new homes where people can drive less, reduce stormwater runoff, and remove tree-less surface parking lots that contribute to urban heat islands.

## AFFORDABLE HOUSING ON FAITH-BASED PROPERTIES

Many faith institutions are looking to support their congregations and communities using their most valuable asset – their land – to provide income-re-

stricted homes. However, the process of building new multi-family homes, especially affordable homes, is extremely challenging. Removing zoning barriers and shortening development timeframes while preserving green space will enable faith-based organizations to build income-restricted homes in urban centers with access to jobs, services, and transit.

## TOP TAKEAWAYS

Restrictive zoning and land use policies are a cause of Virginia's 105,000 home shortage, and a key factor in causing housing prices to reach all-time highs. Zoning reform efforts at both the local and state level are important tools to simultaneously address both housing and climate challenges.

Leveraging zoning flexibility and incentives can help intentionally incorporate greenspace into infill development, supporting environmental goals without significantly increasing the cost of building new homes.

Allowing more and diverse types of housing within already developed neighborhoods 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.

## ENDNOTES

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