

HOUSING & SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES

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WHY IT MATTERS

Housing 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. Virginians feel the pressure: nearly 2 in 3 renters and 1 in 4 homeowners in Virginia are “housing cost-burdened,” meaning they spend over 30% of their income on rent or mortgage.¹ To cope with rising housing costs, residents often move out of cities and into car-dependent suburban sprawl, increasing carbon emissions, other pollutants, and household transportation costs.² Local zoning laws that prohibit smaller lots or limit apartments exacerbate this sprawl.³ As a result, Virginians face some of the nation’s longest commutes, straining household budgets and increasing greenhouse gas emissions.^{4,5} Moreover, local zoning policies limit the vast majority of our residential land to single-family housing, which typically consumes twice the energy of multi-family homes.⁶

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 factor in record housing prices.^{7,8} This is fueling financial insecurity, making it more difficult to live close to jobs and amenities, and pricing people out of communities they have called home for decades. Because of high demand and a systemic failure to provide a diversity of home types and sizes, the same housing stock that was affordable a generation ago is often now out of reach for young families.⁹ Past planning and zoning decisions have also concentrated affordable housing in many communities in areas facing disproportionate climate risks. Zoning laws that allow vast commercial parking areas and limit most residential land to large lot, single-family homes restrict the number and types of homes built, providing insufficient affordable housing and pushing development out into agricultural and natural areas.^{10,11}

Recently, some localities have adopted zoning laws 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. The General Assembly can support local government efforts to address Virginia’s housing shortage by adopting less restrictive zoning and streamlining permitting processes. Of particular importance, state

and local policies could encourage and allow more homes in areas that are already developed. This provides housing choice while also conserving green space and mature tree canopy, thereby reducing sprawl, cutting pollution, and limiting the climate vulnerabilities that sprawl creates.¹²

OPPORTUNITIES

Housing and land use policies can be leveraged to help reach sustainability goals while helping Virginians, and those who want to call Virginia home, afford safe and stable homes. The following policy opportunities could allow for flexibility within zoning codes and create incentives to provide more home options while preserving natural areas, reducing car-dependency, and allowing for smaller, more energy-efficient homes.¹³

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. Incentives could include a Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development grant program or awarding extra weight when evaluating funding for projects in localities that upzone such areas.

HOUSING IN JOB CENTERS

Allow for the conversion of commercial parking lots and office buildings into mixed-use, walkable, and tree-lined communities. Allowing housing and mixed-use development in already-developed commercial areas without expensive and lengthy rezonings would encourage infill development, adding new, more energy efficient homes where people can drive less, reduce stormwater runoff, and remove tree-less surface parking lots that contribute to urban heat islands.

URBAN DEVELOPMENT AREAS (UDAs)

The General Assembly could require localities to identify at least one Urban Development Area (UDA).¹⁴ By establishing a locally-designated growth area, localities can determine appropriate areas for increased housing and walkable, transit-oriented neighborhoods, while minimizing sprawl and avoiding areas vulnerable to flooding and sea level rise.

FIX-IT-FIRST INFRASTRUCTURE FUNDING

The Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission (JLARC) should determine the full scope of need and cost to address Virginia’s aging infrastructure and make it more resilient, including bridges, transit, schools, drinking water, and wastewater facilities. A state fix-it-first infrastructure fund that addresses the

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most pressing repair and replacement needs by prioritizing funding to jurisdictions that have adopted specific pro-housing policies tied to existing infrastructure would incentivize location-efficient, infill housing development that preserves natural areas.

TOP TAKEAWAYS

Suburban sprawl and associated transportation emissions and costs, exacerbated by shortfalls in housing in existing areas near jobs, services, and transit, contribute to housing affordability challenges and the climate crisis.

Leveraging zoning flexibility and incentives can help promote walkable, compact communities that incorporate greenspace into infill development.

Allowing more and diverse types of homes within already developed neighborhoods and corridors would provide a myriad of benefits, including economic growth, increased tax bases, fewer carbon emissions, lower combined housing and transportation costs, more conserved land, and decreased homelessness and housing insecurity.

ENDNOTES

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