

They Want Our Land!

A 2012 study by the City showed that Austin's zoning capacity would accommodate a doubling of the population. That is apparently not enough for organizations like the Real Estate Council of Austin (RECA), Austin Board of Realtors (ABOR), and Austinites For Urban Rail Action (AURA). These groups blame single-family zoning for the City's housing affordability crisis and claim that entrenched neighborhood groups resist any changes to neighborhoods.

At public meetings on CodeNEXT, some members of these organizations advocate for the elimination of or a reduction in single-family zoning in Austin's neighborhoods. Some claim that single-family homes take up too much land and should be replaced with high-density multifamily units and row houses. One likened single-family homes with yards to homes with "private parks."

Over the past 10 years, thousands of moderately priced single-family homes throughout Austin have been demolished, and many have been replaced with more expensive, higher-density housing, apartments, duplexes,

and condos. A recent report by KVUE indicated that “Nearly 1,000 homes in Austin” were demolished in 2014 and “that number is expected to be even higher in 2015.”

Thousands of high-density apartments and condos have also been built along transit corridors in many neighborhoods in the City. Over 1,000 new apartments and condos have been built or are under construction in the Zilker neighborhood along South Lamar Boulevard.

Neighborhoods, south, central, north, west and east, have experienced significant in-fill and redevelopment. Some neighborhoods in South Austin encountered such rapid in-fill and increased density over the past few years that it overwhelmed the capacity of the storm water infrastructure and caused increased flooding. As a result, the City Council enacted the South Lamar Mitigation program to limit redevelopment and give the City time to upgrade the storm water infrastructure.

In the meantime, the Planning Commission and City Council have routinely granted variances and waivers for redevelopment in neighborhoods throughout the City. These so-called entrenched neighborhood groups have apparently not been very successful in resisting change in their neighborhoods as RECA would have you believe.

Neighborhood groups do not resist all change in their neighborhoods. These groups simply insist that residents have a say in redevelopment, in-fill, and increased density in their areas. They also insist that the development community follow the rules, the **land development code**.

Single-family zoning did not cause Austin's affordability crisis. The affordability crisis is rooted in the City's policies to "incentivize" density in all parts of Austin. This "incentivized" growth hasn't paid for itself. The City's economic development incentives have hastened Austin's status as the most economically segregated city in the US; its preferred development zones and density bonus programs have fueled the rapid escalation in land prices in Austin. As a result, low to middle-income families have been forced to move out of the City, while more affluent and high-income families take their place in "the urban core."

Austin has exported its poverty to the suburbs. City Demographer, Ryan Robinson, indicated that Austin's poverty rate decreased, because so many low to moderate-income families have moved to suburbs like Bastrop. As a consequence, poverty has increased in Bastrop and other Austin suburbs.

If this trend continues, only high-income and wealthy **residents** will live in the few remaining single-family homes in Austin. Moderate income families will be forced to live in cramped, high-density apartments or move to the suburbs and drive back to their jobs in the inner city.

Robinson also reported that with only a few exceptions, neighborhoods in the urban core are “becoming almost devoid of married-with-children households”.

Supporting this trend, the Austin Independent School District has reported declining enrollment at Central Austin neighborhood schools. What will become of our city?

RECA and developers willfully conflate the affordability crisis with single-family zoning to facilitate their own vested interests in profit. They profit from ridding Austin’s neighborhoods of single-family homes to make way for new row houses and high-density multifamily units. They also profit when they build and sell homes to the families in the suburbs, who were pushed out of the urban core. (They want our land, and they want it cheap!)

Austin's single-family homeowners and renters didn't cause the affordability crisis. They are simply trying to live the "American Dream." Single-family zoning isn't to blame for the affordability crisis in Austin. It's shameful that RECA and other groups with moneyed interests are blaming neighborhood groups when they themselves have enabled and expedited the very policies that have worsened the affordability crisis.

Make no mistake, this is a battle for our single-family land in Austin. RECA and other vested interests want our single-family land for profit.

David King
Austin Neighborhoods Activist
Austin, TX