

# The Register-Guard

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Opinion

## Leave single-family housing alone

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Many communities in Oregon face an affordable housing crisis, but doing away with single-family zoning statewide won't fix the problem. It will make it worse.

Oregon House Speaker Tina Kotek introduced [House Bill 2001](#) with the best intentions: increasing the supply and diversity of affordable housing in neighborhoods statewide. Cities with more than 10,000 residents and counties with more than 15,000 would have to allow greater density in neighborhoods zoned for single-family homes. Cities with more than 25,000 residents — which includes Eugene and Springfield — would have to allow duplexes, triplexes, townhouses and “cottage clusters.”

Proponents of the measure refer to that denser development as “missing middle” housing because they fill a perceived gap between single-family homes and apartment buildings. The hypothesis is that smaller units packed tightly onto single lots will be cheaper to rent or buy. People who might not be able to afford a single-family home could still find a place to live in a neighborhood.

The problem with a lot of hypotheses is that they wind up incorrect, and Oregon can't afford to experiment with something so critical.

To start, neighborhoods might not be able to handle denser development, and nothing in the bill requires that infrastructure be in place to support additional housing units. Sewer and water lines large enough to handle a street of single-family homes might not have enough capacity for denser development. Drop some triplexes and garden apartments into the mix, and they could overwhelm those pipes, not to mention parks, streets and schools. Cities and their taxpayers would bear the cost.

Likewise, there's no requirement for parking at these projects. Supporters of missing middle housing see that as a feature. They don't want driveways and garages taking up space that could be one more unit. In their dense utopia,

everyone takes the bus. In the real world, residents park their cars on neighborhood streets, causing all sorts of conflicts.

The real winners if HB2001 passes will be developers, not people who can't afford a home. The bill doesn't require that the new missing middle homes actually be affordable. The type of new construction that would happen under these zoning changes would be compact, modern multi-family buildings that take up entire lots. So long lawns and trees. Meanwhile, neighbors risk declining property values when noise increases, privacy decreases and an absentee landlord doesn't care.

The end of single-family zoning could even wind up being counterproductive, reducing the supply of affordable housing in many places. Developers looking to make a profit will target older homes for demolition. They will then replace them with nice new apartments and duplexes that maximize their profit. But those older homes are the places most likely to be affordable now.

This is a one-size-fits-all solution to a complex problem. Missing middle housing is in vogue in Oregon because Portland is considering a similar local rule. They call it the Residential Infill Project.

And if it's good enough for Portland, it's good enough for Oregon, right?  
Wrong.

Eugene and other cities need to find creative ways to encourage more affordable housing. Those can't be some grand scheme hatched in Portland and championed by a House speaker whose district is in that city. As Eugene City Councilor Jennifer Yeh noted in written testimony to lawmakers, "Different communities experience different challenges and have different needs and each community should have the freedom to plan accordingly."

Eugene's greatest need isn't just-right middle housing. It's greatest deficit is the most affordable housing that costs less than \$625 per month. There's actually a surplus of other housing.

Developers aren't building the most-affordable housing units in Eugene because there's not enough incentive. Only two developers have taken advantage of the city's Multi-Unit Property Tax Exemption (MUPTE), and neither project is close

to completion.

If HB 2001 becomes law, the most likely outcome in Eugene will be a spike in demolition permits and a rash of cheap, student housing going up around the University of Oregon.

More must be done, but it must be done thoughtfully. There's a place for missing middle housing, but probably not in every neighborhood. There's also a place for single-family housing. If the goal is diverse housing options, which is a good goal, then that should include single-family neighborhoods, mixed-use neighborhoods and high-density neighborhoods with transitions between them. Localities, not the Legislature, are best able to create and manage such zoning plans.