

CAMBRIDGE DAY

‘Missing Middle’ zoning is bait and switch, Cambridge style, and won’t aid affordability

Monday, March 29, 2021

The road to hell is paved with good intentions – an old saying that comes to new life in a petition to upzone all of Cambridge called “The Missing Middle.”

LETTER

Because they claim to want to create more affordable housing, its proponents have felt free to put forward fact-free arguments, as in a recent op-ed in the Cambridge Chronicle, [“Zoning Should Reflect our Values of Affordability and Sustainability.”](#) The truth is that this proposal will displace tenants by turbocharging gentrification. It will allow dorm-level density on even the smallest street. And it will further destroy Cambridge’s diminishing tree cover and green spaces. Proponents of “The Missing Middle” claim that Cambridge is “de-densifying.” It’s hard to know what city they are referring to, since Cambridge is [among the most densely populated cities](#) in the country, with a population that is steadily growing, not declining. They want us to take “our cue” from Minneapolis, for example. This is a head-scratcher, since Minneapolis is light-years behind where we are now. It is true that Minneapolis has rezoned to allow more density, but it’s doubtful it will ever catch up to Cambridge’s density level. A comparison of the amount of open space in each city drives home the point: Minneapolis is 67 percent open space, while Cambridge is only 24 percent – making open space in Cambridge [even rarer than it is in New York City!](#)

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Backers of “Missing Middle” zoning apparently believe that single-family homes as well as two- and three-deckers are a big part of the housing problem in Cambridge. They want those lots to be built out, supposedly to create more affordable units. Let’s look at the actual numbers. Single-family homes make up a mere 7 percent of the total housing stock in Cambridge. To get an idea of how low a percentage this is, compare us to Portland, Oregon (another city that they bizarrely want us to take “our cue” from) where single-family homes make up an astounding 60 percent of total housing stock.

Two- and three-deckers are iconic housing in Cambridge. Dating back to the 19th century, they represent just under a quarter of the housing units in the city.

Generations of Cantabrigians have raised their families in these homes, most of them as renters.

Under the “Missing Middle” zoning proposal, these homes could be torn down and their tenants evicted. The economics of the upzoning would make these properties irresistible to developers: Tear down a triple-decker, build out the lot, build up to 40 feet and sell the resulting three units for millions of dollars. If you believe that won’t happen, just consider that land and construction costs in Cambridge are among the very highest in the country; the way to make money in Cambridge on small lots is to build as big as possible and to sell for as much as possible. And no development under 10 units is obligated to build even a single affordable unit. It would be a modern-day land rush that makes units more expensive, not less. As a spur to endless construction, no wonder that “Missing Middle” zoning has been embraced by real estate interests and is a top priority of the [National Association of Home Builders](#).

Let’s not overlook the effect on open space and the tree canopy. Slashing the space required between buildings means less open space and fewer mature trees. Under “Missing Middle” zoning, all setbacks (front, back and sides) are cut basically in half. Owners can also go up to 40 feet – the equivalent of a four-story building. Proponents promise that since “The Missing Middle” gets rid of the requirement of off-street parking, driveways would turn into gardens. That’s a lovely dream, but developers look to their return on investment, and roughly two-thirds of households in Cambridge have at least one car. We can wish that the cars all go away, but “Missing Middle” zoning means only that will be far more of them competing for the same number of on-street parking places.

In one moment of candor, proponents acknowledge that “Missing Middle” zoning won’t actually help the situation in Cambridge without a guaranteed “public subsidy.” In fact, they concede that without significant public expenditure, zoning for “Missing Middle Housing” will produce “neither MMH nor affordable units.” Based on their own statement, it is difficult to understand why they want to open the floodgates before doing the hard work of getting the funds to make sure their proposal won’t lead, in their own words, to “worsening the housing crisis.”

There is one area in which we agree strongly with the backers of the zoning: Cambridge needs more affordable housing. Ironically, “Missing Middle,” by making prices skyrocket, will only make that harder to achieve. As the pandemic passes, we need to look at city and commercial property that could be repurposed; we need to continue to support not-for-profit developers and homeownership programs; and we *must* protect current tenants.

To close with another wise saying: First, do no harm. “Missing Middle” zoning would do great harm to our neighbors and neighborhoods without adding to the affordable mix of housing. We urge the City Council to reject it.

The Cambridge Citizens Coalition



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2 Comments

1. Angstromon Monday, March 29, 2021 at 8:21 am

Not responding to the whole thing, but it seems like you misread part of the op-ed you’re responding to. The sentence was “Without this public subsidy guaranteed, _we worry that requiring affordable units_ will disincentivize sustainable multifamily development and we’ll continue to see single-family homes produced under current zoning, producing neither MMH nor affordable units and worsening the housing crisis. ”

Let me try to rephrase the point they're making.

- Without MMH: the status quo, redevelopments result in large luxury detached homes
- With MMH: redevelopments result in small multi-family units, less expensive, more sustainable
- With MMH and an affordability requirement: redevelopments result in luxury detached homes again, because the affordability requirement is not paid for
- With MMH and a public subsidy for affordable units: redevelopments result in small multi-family units, most market-rate and less expensive, some income-restricted affordable housing

For more information on the MMH proposal, please visit CambridgeMMH.org.

2. pete on Monday, March 29, 2021 at 2:43 pm

I suggest people actually read the report from CDD reviewing this petition. In it it says while the “proposed zoning would enable smaller unit sizes,... it is also possible that the zoning could result in larger dwellings if property owners prefer to enlarge existing units or create new larger units instead of adding a greater number of smaller units”. The petition sets up conflict between the goals of housing and preserving the types of residential development patterns that are desired where they currently exist. Units would be 500 sq ft packing three times the units into one building. And yet, there are still no safeguards for middle income people. More market-rate will be built. Some of the suggested regulations are available with current zoning! development on pre-existing non-conforming lots is already permissible. Who is all this really benefiting?