



Agenda 21 Zoning Is Political Lightning Rod In Des Moines

Densification, mixed-use, transit corridors, street redesign, regional planning, restricted building codes, all combine to rile both citizens and builders. City Planner says, “Criticism of the Des Moines 2040 zoning proposal ‘does a disservice’ to what the code change intends to fix.” □
TN Editor

It’s a zoning change that’ll restrict density. It’s a city plan that’ll make it harder for Habitat for Humanity to build homes, and for homebuilders to make a profit. Des Moines, Iowa’s new proposed zoning code has been pilloried by critics as “[backward](#)” and unfair to poor renters, an example of the city “saying no thanks to 21st-century living.”

“It’ll be a tidal wave that’ll swamp many boats, especially Des Moines residents who are making less than \$90,000 per year,” Lance Henning, executive director of the Greater Des Moines Habitat for Humanity, [told the city’s Planning and Zoning commission](#), arguing that the new rules will make new homes too expensive for certain income levels.

But speak to Michael Ludwig, the planning administrator for the city of Des Moines who helped draft the proposal, and you'll hear a different side of the story. The changes proposed and recently updated—including a more strict set of materials and building requirements, streamlining code requirements, and minimum size requirements such as 1,150 square feet for a one-story home with a basement, among others—has been unfairly criticized, in his opinion. The [Des Moines 2040 zoning proposal](#) that's gotten so much national attention—in the wake of the [nation's affordable housing crisis](#) and efforts like [Minneapolis's citywide upzoning](#)—has a much different intention.

At the end of a three-year process that he says included numerous stakeholders, including some of those discussing size requirements, he feels the current controversy is misinformed.

“Contrary to articles about the plan, the idea is to streamline construction, create a more sustainable city, and allow for more missing middle and affordable housing,” says Ludwig. “The amount of attention the square footage requirement is getting is doing a disservice to what this code does and encourages.”

Last week, the city's planning and zoning commission approved the ordinance unanimously, 14-0, recommending the code as proposed, as well as an addendum asking for changes to the minimum square footage requirements for homes. Much of the backlash over the plan, and articles criticizing its potential impact, came about over the initial requirements for minimum home sizes.

But, after an addendum in the same planning and zoning commission meeting that approved that plan recommended lower required square footage for homes, based on feedback from developers and housing advocates, even some of the most ardent critics changed their take on the new rules.

Ted Grob, who's owned and operated local homebuilder Savannah Homes for decades, told the *Des Moines Register* late last month that he simply [“wouldn't build in Des Moines”](#) if the new rules went into effect. But in a conversation with Curbed on Monday, after changes to

minimum house sizes had been included in the commission's recommendations, he said that if the new changes carry through, "they're on a good path."

"If they follow the recommendations, which are unanimous, I think we're in good shape," he says.

How Des Moines's zoning proposal came to be

The new zoning recommendations grew out of larger regional plans, [Plan DSM](#), a set of regional goals and guidelines that has won planning awards ([Silver Level Sustainability award from the American Planning Association](#) and a [Daniel Burnham Award](#) from the state of Iowa). Ludwig says the city, which is [one of the fastest-growing in the midwest](#), wanted to connect land use with transportation and overall budget.

The city's zoning code hasn't been updated since 1965. Instead, it's been amended over 300 times in the preceding decades. Ludwig's vision is to replace a disjointed, conflicting set of regulations with something that encourages the kind of development Des Moines needs: denser, closer to transit, and ideally more affordable. By eliminating code contradictions, the city could raise the quality and predictability of the development process.

"We are trying to steer the market to be more creative, and provide a product that's different than what's been provided historically," he says. "We've heard there's no market for mixed-use, but we've seen those really work when we targeted to transit corridors."

The new code proposal is set up with what Ludwig calls a fast lane, what's known as by-right development. This allows property owners to build as long as plans meet a strict set of requirements, opting out of a 90-day approval process.

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