

The journey from housing to home: The Legacy of Zoning

Any discussion of housing will lead inevitably to the subject of zoning. Zoning embodies the rules that determine the type of housing that is built, as well as where and how it is built. In order to truly understand the housing crises and to work on solutions, it is important to understand the basics of zoning and how it can be used as a tool to both suppress the supply of housing and at the same time to enhance it. Zoning is part of the set of bylaws (in a town) or part of the ordinances (in a city) that state the rules of land use. A property can be “zoned” for industrial, commercial or residential use, thus separating land uses from each other.

In order to understand zoning, it helps to understand its history. Public health was a driving force in the early days of zoning, after the industrial revolution forced dense housing to be created adjacent to factories, resulting in unhealthy living conditions for residents. The noxious odors and noise emanating from factories were not conducive to healthy living environments, resulting in the adoption of zoning to separate these uses.

Zoning was also used by many communities to separate people by either class or race. This discrimination was not explicitly stated in zoning codes, however, the intent to discriminate can be seen in documents that include deed restrictions and in banking maps. The latter are commonly known as “red-lining” maps due to the red lines that encircled neighborhoods where loans to non-white residents were restricted. Instead of explicitly restricting zoning by race, the discrimination was achieved through restrictions by housing types.

Today, wealthy communities often create zoning exclusively for single family homes that require one or two acre lots. The less expensive multi-family homes are either restricted to smaller areas or outlawed completely in certain communities. According to Boston Fair Housing, almost 50% of the communities in the Greater Boston Area currently have over 90% of their community zoned for single family use only. Some communities further restrict access by outlawing multi-family zoning and by requiring these policies contribute to higher home prices and restrict access to upper-income households.

How can zoning be used to address some of the problems inherent in the housing crises? In future articles, we will present some possible solutions using zoning as a tool to relax the grip of the SF zoning; to allow for more multi-family; and to address issues of “community character” through design standards. Hopefully we can make the case for using zoning as a tool to bring the community together, to create diversity and to build a community that we are all proud to call home.

If you are interested in housing and want to take part in the Greater Newburyport Housing Choice Coalition activities or if you simply want to learn more about the issue, please check us

out at <https://bit.ly/3HHVotS> and get in touch at jmeers@ywcanewburyport.org. Our next meeting is February 15. We are excited for you to join us on this journey from housing to home.

My name is Judy Tymon and I am the coordinator for the Greater Newburyport Housing Choice Coalition.