

## Zoning for Housing Choices

### Zoning code revision lowers barriers & costs for better housing options

Contact: Cheryl Cort, Coalition for Smarter Growth, [cheryl@smartergrowth.net](mailto:cheryl@smartergrowth.net), T. 202-675-0016 x 112

After decades of decline, DC is growing rapidly. Last year, the city added 13,022 residents. Housing permits in the last few years have jumped -- 3,200-4,600 units/year for 2011 to 2013, up from the peak of 2,800 in 2005.<sup>i</sup> Despite increased production, housing prices are rising and affordable housing is scarcer. The gap between units available to households at low incomes is growing. In part, existing unit prices are bid up from strong demand. To keep up with projected demand over the next two decades, DC would need to increase its annual housing production by 2–4 times or 3,100–5,200 units/year.<sup>ii</sup> While increased housing supply alone will not address our need for more affordable housing, keeping pace with growing demand is part of the condition needed to strengthen direct efforts to preserve and increase housing options for low income families. Land use policies that overly-restrict housing construction, especially in areas close to transit, dampen housing supply and increase housing and transportation costs.

The city is currently revising its 1958 zoning code; a process that has lasted over 5 years. Zoning revisions could remove some key barriers to more housing options, and lower construction costs. The revised zoning code would ease restrictions on accessory apartments so that a homeowner can rent out a basement apartment or carriage house. This could help a retired couple generate additional income and put vacant space to use, allowing them to age in place. Renters can also help with the upkeep of a larger home. Income from an accessory apartment might also help a young couple finance the purchase of a home. Accessory apartments add diversity of housing choices in neighborhoods and offer an often less expensive rental option for small households.

The zoning revision also proposes to reduce parking requirements. Minimum parking requirements sometimes force the construction of more costly parking spaces in a building than occupants want to pay for. In higher density neighborhoods, even though monthly rates for leasing a parking space exceed \$200/month, this fee may pay for less than half the cost to build and maintain space. This raises housing costs for everyone who must help subsidize the cost of parking. Parking requirements can be particularly costly to affordable housing projects since lower income households own fewer cars on average. While 38% of DC households do not own a car, the number is much higher among lower income households. The zoning update would significantly reduce parking requirements in areas well served by transit – the very areas where lower income people can take advantage of better transportation access and shed car ownership expenses.

### Recommendations

- Support completing revisions to the 1958 zoning code to ease restrictions on accessory apartments and reduce unneeded parking requirements.
- Assist homeowners going through the permitting process for an accessory unit so that the process is less intimidating, and encourages all accessory apartments to be safe, legal, and increasingly available and affordable.
- Identify vacant sites and underutilized land for reuse as mixed income housing, especially near Metrorail stations and major bus corridors. Assess barriers to redevelopment.

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<sup>i</sup> US Census Building Permits Survey, 2004 – 2013.

<sup>ii</sup> Housing the Region's Future Workforce, 2012-2032, December 2013, George Mason University Center for Regional Analysis, [http://cra.gmu.edu/pdfs/studies\\_reports\\_presentations/Housing\\_the\\_Regions\\_Future\\_Workforce\\_2012.pdf](http://cra.gmu.edu/pdfs/studies_reports_presentations/Housing_the_Regions_Future_Workforce_2012.pdf)