Oregon moves to nix single-family zoning, continues a national trend

In what is shaping up to be a potential nation-sweeping wave, Oregon lawmakers voted to eliminate single-family zoning in much of the state.

The bill that the Oregon Senate approved Sunday has the potential to significantly reshape dozens of cities. It would allow small multifamily buildings such as duplexes and four-plexes, as well as groups of tightly packed houses called “cottage clusters,” in neighborhoods where zoning had previously only allowed single-family homes.

The full range of new housing types would be allowed in any Oregon city with more than 25,000 people, as well as some smaller municipalities in the Portland area. The bill also requires cities with 10,000 or more people to allow duplexes in neighborhoods that were previously set aside exclusively for single-family homes.

An example of a “cottage cluster.” This particular example is located in Santa Monica, California,

where such developments are often called bungalow courts. Credit: Jim Dalrymple II

After being held up for several days while Republican lawmakers fled the state to avoid voting on a proposed climate change law, the zoning bill ultimately garnered bipartisan support over the weekend and passed with 16 state senators voting in favor and nine voting against.

The bill now just needs the approval of Oregon Gov. Kate Brown to become law.

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If the bill does get that approval, it will become perhaps the most radical — and so far successful — effort to reintroduce what experts call "missing middle" housing into cities. Missing middle housing typically refers to units that fall somewhere in between suburban-style single-family homes and high-density urban apartments. Proponents of missing middle housing argue that it represents a more diverse range of home sizes and price points, which leads to greater affordability and neighborhoods that can accommodate greater diversity.

Such housing was once a common part of most cities, but has gradually become illegal in most of the U.S. thanks to zoning that only allows single-family homes.

Recent analysis from the *New York Times* found that numerous U.S. cities have also zoned the vast majority of their residential land exclusively for single-family homes. However, critics across the political spectrum — as well as within the Trump administration — have argued that such zoning artificially constrains the supply of housing and pushes prices out of reach for many people.

It was in this context that Oregon lawmakers managed to push through their bill, though they did face opposition. Among those who objected to liberalization of Oregon's zoning codes were residents who warned of, among other things, "drastic negative effects" on the state's "famous reputation for livability."

Moderate density, townhome-style development in Portland, Oregon. This type of housing would be easier to build in more places under the new zoning bill. Credit: Jim Dalrymple II

However, many other Oregonians also expressed support for rezoning and in some cases wrote to

lawmakers about on-the-ground struggles with housing affordability. Proponents also touted the zoning bill's potential environmental impacts.

"Adding gentle density to our already connected towns and cities will go a long way toward bringing down per home greenhouse gas emissions, and curbing future sprawl," one Oregon man wrote.

The bill also drew support from a diverse group of advocacy organizations including the AARP, the NAACP, Portland Public Schools and others. These groups argued that adding missing middle housing to existing neighborhoods would allow elderly people to age in place, counteract segregation and have other benefits.

In the end, those arguments won the day — and have been gaining wider traction in other parts of the country as well. The most notable other example thus far is Minneapolis, which voted to end single-family zoning last year, foreshadowing what would later happen on a larger scale in Oregon.

But other places facing housing crunches are mulling similar laws. Seattle, for example, is currently considering allowing two "accessory dwelling units" — or secondary housing sometimes dubbed "mother-in-law" apartments — in single-family neighborhoods. Lawmakers in California have also repeatedly proposed legislation that would allow denser housing, though these efforts have been put on ice two years in a row now.

Whatever the outcome in each individual region, the recent successes of this kind of legislation in Minneapolis and Oregon — as well as interest in housing density reform at the national level — suggest that, at least in some neighborhoods, single-family zoning may not be long for this world.

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