

Housing 'crisis' Trojan horse aims to undermine local control

THE state legislature, propelled by special interest groups and ideologues, is considering changes that will result in centrally planned, top-down zoning, which will greatly affect how all municipalities plan for growth and build their communities. The convenient diversionary excuse (crutch) being cited is the alleged "housing crisis."



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NEW HAMPSHIRE VOICES

Before I tackle the real underlying issue of zoning by state dictate, let's first eliminate a false premise. Housing crisis, housing crisis, housing crisis — regurgitated enough times for public consumption by lobbyists for the N.H. Builders Association and the N.H. Business and Industry Association, as well as other special interest groups and the ideologues — becomes the conventional wisdom, but that doesn't make it a reality.

Flogged as New Hampshire's top concern in the polls, this crisis du jour comes down to a mere 29% of a few hundred people asked out of a population of more than 1.3 million. Try to dig deeper into polling that's often years old and it's hard to say who was polled, where respondents were from, or their demographics, like age and political affiliation. That information apparently is either deemed unimportant or detrimental to the cause.

Recall what these same housing fear-mongers first said: "We need 24,000 units by 2025." When that didn't seem scary enough to frighten and garner our attention, housing advocates pushed the date out to 2040 and proclaimed 90,000 units are needed. At this rate, how many new homes will be needed by 2100?

Another scare tactic used is citing the "median price" of a home. How many times have we heard or read that "the median home" in New Hampshire now costs \$500,000? That false narrative is often coupled with how young people today can't afford to buy a home in the communities where they were raised.

First, consider the term "median" because it necessarily means that half of all homes sold in New Hampshire are being sold for under \$500,000. Pull up a Zillow search of single-family homes in the Granite State and you quickly get a visual showing many listings in the \$200,000 to \$300,000 range throughout the state.

These lower priced properties might not be what some believe they are entitled to, but they are available. Have we somehow set unreasonable expectations that individuals in their 20s, are somehow entitled to a half million-dollar home and should be able to live in the exact town (or even state) they were raised in?

Does it appear to you, as it does to me,

that our society has fallen into an immediate gratification and entitlement mentality, where the "work hard and save your money" ethic has vanished?

For 100 years, towns have adopted their own growth strategies enshrined in local zoning ordinances adopted via town votes on warrant articles; each change involved community input and voting at annual town meetings. The success or failure of municipalities has been, and should continue to be, a result of their individual zoning decisions.

The numerous bills in front of us in the House, if passed and signed by Governor Kelly Ayotte, will have the state dictating what every municipality must do using a one-size-fits-all mentality. Each will complicate current local control of zoning by increasing the burden on town administration, pressuring public services, negatively impacting neighbors and bringing on numerous lawsuits over the interpretation of hastily drafted legislation riddled with technical issues and conflicts with existing law.

There exists significant bipartisan concern that this legislation is not getting the thorough examination necessary for changes of this magnitude and that many of our fellow lawmakers have not taken the time to scrutinize the legislation. Rather, they incorrectly assume that members of the House Housing Committee and Senate Subcommittee on Housing have done their due diligence. The bills have sailed through these committees with unquestioning support from anti-zoning legislators, egged on by pro-development advocates.

As a stark example, during this past year's sessions, the House Housing Committee recommended 16 new statewide mandate zoning bills that passed with a combined committee vote of 281-2. That simply doesn't add up. No committee I have ever been a member of has this sort of record. I'll leave the reader to draw your own conclusions.

I write this op-ed as a state representative for the benefit of our citizens; think of me (and many others) as your unpaid lobbyist. Now, contrast that with the constant drumbeat by paid lobbyists promoting agendas for the sole benefit of the special interest groups they represent.

Most Granite Staters are unaware that their ability to shape local zoning policies is on the brink of extinction and without even proper review or debate in our state legislature.

In my last op-ed in this paper, I began with "wakey, wakey New Hampshire citizens" — I'll remind you again to pay attention and speak out. We must defend local control of zoning before it's too late.

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