

Houston's Lack of Zoning Laws Will Help It Rebuild

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In the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey, commentators have been quick to blame Houston's lack of traditional zoning for the storm's damage. Last week, I provided some evidence that lack of zoning is not the cause of Houston's problems. But commentators have been equally quick to minimize the various benefits that accompany Houston's limited zoning.

That's short-sighted. To begin with, Houston's lack of traditional zoning impedes its ability to act in political or exclusionary ways. Take New Orleans, post-Hurricane Katrina as a comparative study.

Zoning and Hurricane Katrina

Following Katrina, parishes in the New Orleans metropolitan statistical area (MSA) imposed moratoriums on construction of multi-family housing, threatened changes to zoning that deterred low-cost housing development, and created a blood-relative ordinance that restricted home rentals to blood relatives of owners "within the first, second or third direct ascending or descending generations." These zoning regulations kept low-income evacuees out of certain neighborhoods and were highly controversial.

The details might sound remarkable, but the impacts of New Orleans' post-Katrina zoning follow a standard pattern.

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Academic research suggests zoning acts as a barrier to the provision of low-cost, rental, and multifamily housing, segregates by socio-economic class and by race, and drives the cost of housing up. In fact, one study found that over half of the difference in levels of segregation between strictly zoned Boston and lenient Houston could be attributed to zoning regulations.

Given the average impacts of zoning, it shouldn't be a surprise that low-income African Americans, low-income whites, and Hispanics have opposed zoning electorally in Houston and other locations.

It's probably also not a coincidence that about 250,000 Hurricane Katrina evacuees, many of them African American, temporarily settled in inclusive Houston. Between 25,000 and 40,000 Katrina evacuees stayed permanently. According to reports, this was because of greater economic opportunities and affordable housing. Thanks to limited zoning, Houston could accommodate housing needs more quickly and cheaply than other cities.

Post-Harvey

Limited zoning will be good for Harvey evacuees, too. For example, limited zoning partly explains why Houston has a high apartment vacancy rate. Last year, Houston's apartment vacancy rate was 6.8%, compared to 2.7% in Manhattan and 3.9% in the United States overall. This means there are thousands of apartments for Harvey evacuees to fall back on while they repair their homes.

These benefits will become increasingly apparent as Houstonians rebuild. The truth is that limited zoning means more opportunity, more low-cost housing, and less politically-motivated and exclusionary policies. That's good every day, but especially good in case of an emergency.

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