



Opinion: Commentary: For More Housing to Help in Alexandria, It Must Be In the Right Place

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The dismal science of housing economics is in vogue as never before. At a politically polarized moment in our history, there is an unlikely coalescing of conventional wisdom across the spectrum. How else could it be explained that Secretary Ben Carson, President Trump's Secretary of Housing and Urban Development and Jason Furman, President Obama's Chair of the Council of Economic Advisers are in violent agreement? How shocking is it that the Brookings Institute and the Cato Institute agree on a policy approach? How unlikely is it that the Sierra Club and the National Association of Home Builders have substantial agreement? All of these disparate voices have come together in agreement that our housing crisis has a common culprit: local governments.

A raft of new legislation has been proposed in Richmond seeking to increase our housing supply from afar. This well-meaning legislation demonstrates a recognition of the problem, but sadly lacks the nuance and precision only possible in the local land-use process. The legislation usurps local authority, removes the voice of residents from the process, but perhaps worse yet, such legislation could exacerbate existing problems.

With wide swaths of our population being priced out of our nation's urban and suburban areas, local policymakers are grappling with a housing crisis that threatens our economic growth, chokes our roads, challenges even modest climate efforts and turns the economics of funding government nearly upside down. With the Federal government retreating from the playing field and state governments largely absent, action on housing has fallen solely to local governments.

These are heady times for those that believe it's time to address the supply side of our housing equation as a method to improve affordability. Last year, the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments (COG) brought together the region's local governments to make commitments around new housing creation. The new housing targets contemplate 320,000 additional housing units, with most proposed to be near activity centers or transit, and most to be affordable to low and middle-income earners. Each jurisdiction must now work within their local processes to bring these new units to reality. For each jurisdiction they will work to find the right mix of new committed affordable housing and market-rate housing to address the gap between expected future job growth and the existing housing stock.

In Alexandria, our ownership stock has been largely stagnant for the past decade. Ten years ago, we had 21,883 single-family homes. Today, we have 200 less. Ten years ago, we had 18,247 condos. Today, we have just about 400 more. Now our rental stock has grown, during that period, from 33,467 apartments a decade ago, to 40,188 today. Included in these numbers are

nearly 1,500 committed affordable units in the past 6 years. While we have more work to do to meet our share of the new COG commitments, we are well-positioned to do so.

The focus of the COG housing commitments and most forward-thinking local planning is to place residential density in close proximity to job centers and transit infrastructure. Doing so reduces commutes, reduces climate impact, reduces costs for residents and increases economic vitality. The consequence of the “broad-brush” legislation being proposed in Richmond would be to not only add density in areas proximate to these job centers and transit infrastructure, but also far-flung areas with little infrastructure. This would compound many of the challenges we face.

A far more enlightened approach for the Commonwealth to take would be to further increase state investment in the development of affordable housing and tie the receipt of such funding to the adoption of land-use policies that help address our region’s housing supply needs. Such an approach would enhance the partnership between the Commonwealth and local jurisdictions and ensure more committed affordable housing in the areas that can benefit from that investment.