



Atlanta’s proposal offers false hopes for housing affordability, breaks from ‘Atlanta City Design’

Mike Dobbins
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Stop, look and listen. Atlanta’s misguided densification planning and zoning strategy is barreling down the tracks. It has many negatives – it will exacerbate the housing affordability crisis, destabilize neighborhoods and gut the NPUs ability to shape their neighborhood’s future.

Shunt it to a siding and build a better engine.

Let’s begin on common ground. Atlanta is a city of neighborhoods. It is a city in the woodlands. Most Atlantans, Black and white, affluent and low wealth, take pride in their neighborhoods. That pride reflects physical and social cohesion around shared values and commitment to betterment. Neighborhoods embody a sense of place, of belonging, an identity. Atlanta’s natural environment reinforces those social values. Most neighborhoods are heavily wooded and distinctively hilly.

Atlanta’s neighborhoods have a stronger voice than in most cities in shaping and projecting their futures through the Neighborhood Planning Unit system. Then-Mayor Maynard Jackson and his planning commissioner, Leon Eplan, set up the system in 1974 for the express purpose deepening democratization and strengthening local guidance for how the city should grow.

In the face of the present housing crisis, doing anything possible to conserve affordability and to plan and build for markets most in need is a city policy priority. To do this, the city needs zoning reform, but only as it interacts with the other factors that are causing the growing affordability gap, such as markets, land control, access to capital, technologies, among others.

Now to the ground that’s not so common – the proposed Comprehensive Development Plan. The city has put forward a top down, silver bullet strategy in its proposed CDP and attendant zoning proposals. The premise of the proposal is that if the city increases the supply of housing, there will eventually be enough units built for prices to drop, thus becoming more affordable.

The city is marketing its program vigorously, deceptively, and divisively. Claiming that the proposal will improve affordability, instead it does the opposite.

First, the city bases its proposal on false population projections. It assumes a 2040 population of 1.2 million people. The Atlanta Regional Commission, with its team of professional demographers aided by sophisticated digital technology, predicts that the city will have 800,000 people by 2050, so 400,000 fewer people than forecast by the CDP 10 years later. ARC's projections have been pretty much on the mark for many years, with occasional fluctuations within reasonable margins of error along the way. Which numbers will the market accept? Probably not the city's.

The city's incessant repetition of the 1.2 million number follows an increasingly familiar path: if you hear something often enough it becomes "fact." But it's not. Planning Commissioner Tim Keane imagines that the city can gain 25 percent of the region's growth going forward. Over the last 20 years, though, the city is realizing about a 12 percent growth rate per decade. At the same time, from Duluth to Smyrna, from Sandy Springs to Jonesboro, more and more of the region's smaller cities are using walkable, townscape-centered strategies to gain population at similar rates. They will continue to do so.

The city's baseless number, then, wrongly inflates the city's potential market share, which would be actually about a third of whatever numbers of housing units the city is projecting. Thus, that pillar of the densification strategy shrinks dramatically. Beyond that, population growth is probably not the best metric for assessing progress toward the goal of narrowing the affordability gap.

Related to the distortion of the market, the city's affordability fantasy relies on "trickle down" affordability. New housing on its face is not affordable to people in the lower couple of income quintiles where the need is greatest. Just as "trickle down" economics has proven to not meet the needs of lower wealth families, so "trickle down" housing affordability won't work either. Other ventures into the supply side approach to affordability through relaxation of zoning entitlements are failing. Most dramatic and longest in the densification for affordability game is Vancouver, now the least affordable city in North America.

Second, as it takes form in zoning proposals, the densification strategies focus on single family and duplex residential neighborhoods on the one hand, and MARTA rail stations on the other. Both strategies are in direct conflict with the "Atlanta City Design" policies adopted by the Atlanta City Council in 2017. Relevant to the current subject, these policies map out "growth areas" and "conservation areas." The growth areas, quite sensibly, call for densifying along major travel corridors and in areas where densification is already occurring. The conservation areas, likewise sensible, call for conservation of existing low-density forested neighborhoods, the ones that can and do foster pride and cohesion.

“Atlanta City Design” calls for densifying along major corridors. This makes perfect sense as the corridors are already mixed use, already transit served, with MARTA, arterial rapid transit and bus rapid transit enhancements soon in the offing. Beyond that, utilizing the typical 150-foot-deep corridor frontages to accommodate missing middle and other densification forms could, and should, transform the functionality and appearance of these really ugly and dysfunctional frontages. Much better would be tree-lined, well-lit, walkable, bus transit-served boulevards that would buffer the neighborhoods beyond. Where people travel the most would look and function the best, not the worst, as people experience today. Such a future would validate and even celebrate the wisdom of the “Atlanta City Design” plan. Inexplicably though, the current planning and zoning proposals ignore that strategy.

Likewise, the CDP’s proposals to put density where it’s already happening make sense. But a one-size-fits-all, mile-wide ring around nine MARTA rail stations does not make sense. The extreme variability of the stations and their likely time frames for attracting investment should be specific to each and tailored to their conditions and needs. Many of the stations are located in low-density areas where the ring would precipitate speculation, dislocation, and deforestation into presently settled and stable “conservation area” neighborhoods. While the proposals do call for a token affordability component, it doesn’t amount to much and appears easy to manipulate or slide around for canny developers. Here again, why not follow the “Atlanta City Design” policy of focusing growth on MARTA bus lines, not just rail stations?

The relaxation of zoning standards in “conservation area” neighborhoods has several flaws. Beyond being based on bloated market expectations, the top-down, permissible, densification strategy directly conflicts with the “Atlanta City Design” policy for conservation. This designation applies most extensively across the city, comprising about half of the city’s land area. The new CDP designates these lands as “traditional neighborhoods.” Of these, it targets about half for “redevelopment.” The descriptions of these, dismissive of who lives there, hark back to the old “slums and blight” characterizations that laid the basis for “urban renewal” (or as James Baldwin called it, “Negro Removal”). Instead, in these times, some of these neighborhoods are where the needs are greatest, where conserving affordability and fixing the infrastructure could provide a more constructive path toward affordability. Again, going that way is consistent with the goals stated in the “Atlanta City Design” policy.

Far from conserving neighborhoods, the effect of the proposed CDP and attendant zoning ordinances on both types of neighborhoods would be to destabilize and deforest them, randomly and unpredictably, according to meeting investors’ and developers’ acquisition strategies. The city touts and represents this as a kind of “one accessory dwelling unit at a time” intervention, so-called “subtle densification,” therefore not so intrusive. As is already happening in many neighborhoods, however, including Carey Park, such a move is likely to accelerate investor buyouts of multiple lots to build new missing middle or town house developments. These

displace whoever's there, double or quadruple the density, resulting in soaring profits, with no affordability requirements whatsoever.

It seems clear that the impetus and the urgency for moving the ordinances forward is to remove the barriers that current zoning and NPU processes might raise. Meanwhile, after a three-year effort, the Center for Civic Innovation has recently unveiled proposals for strengthening NPUs' presence for guiding city policy-making. Their proposals seek to restore Jackson's and Eplan's commitment to spreading democratic principles and practices through the neighborhood level. The planning and zoning proposals would strip away the ability for NPUs to even weigh in on development activities in their single family and duplex neighborhoods, removing one of the few avenues that everyday people have to influence their futures.

I take the "Atlanta City Design" policies to not just be the guide for physical development, but also to include social and economic values, like neighborhood and cultural cohesion, conserving existing affordability, and stabilization or moderation of housing cost and tax increases. Even at that, should this not-so-subtle densification occur, the numbers gained would only come to a 200 to 300 units per year, next to none "affordable." Is this modest increase worth degrading the NPU system and fomenting the neighbor-to-neighbor strife that is already occurring? For reference, based on two years of data, California's statewide ADU directive has produced 9,500 units – in a state with 40 million people. (I couldn't find how many ADU units have been actually produced under the City's current ADU ordinance, in place now for about four years).

In sum, the ordinances as proposed are in direct violation of the framework that the city's adopted "Atlanta City Design" policies recommend. As written, they echo the positions that the libertarian Cato Institute has been advocating and marketing for some years, with some effect (see here and here). These have managed to help default "the solution" to affordability to the "free" market and its failed "trickle down" philosophy to create the latest silver bullet. In fact, any affordable housing strategy that does not link zoning reform, which is needed, with other regulatory measures, housing finance, non-profits, land acquisition, technologies, access to capital, policy priorities, and so on is unlikely to work.

So, as one who doesn't like to raise problems without ideas about what do about them, I offer the following for redirecting the strategy for the Conservation Areas' "Traditional Neighborhoods Redevelopment:"

- Hold on to the affordable units we have through locally productive forces like the rejuvenated Atlanta Land Trust, the Community Development Corporations, or Purpose Built type initiatives, most of which are committed, productive and would be more so with prioritized funding support;

- Prioritize investment in infrastructure, both physical and socioeconomic, in neighborhoods that most need it, and property acquisition while housing costs are low and vacancies are high;
- Plan now to prioritize whatever comes out of federal infrastructure bills to meet needs where they are greatest.

And for the Growth Areas:

- Focus on corridors, where densification strengthens MARTA ridership and transforms the cityscape;
- Fine tune what to do about rail transit stations by observing their “conservation area” designations.

And for zoning strategies, instead of the divisive rancor caused by the city’s top-down and misleading tactics, consider:

- An idea from John Myers piece, “Hyperlocal Zoning: Enabling Growth by Block and Street” for turning NIMBYS into YIMBYS, try “hyperlocal” zoning processes. These suggest how densification could happen incrementally and equitably. The processes can respond to people who share a street, or a mixed use crossroads or a whole neighborhood that wants equitable densification. Atlanta has such YIMBY communities, and they represent a starting place. Through success of such an approach, others can actually see the results and likely expand the demand. With our ever-growing data management capabilities, we have the capacity to manage such an approach, unthinkable 20 years ago. To some extent, Atlanta is already doing this in practice.

Finally, how helpful is it to foment such urgency in the middle of an election? Good grief, pounding on candidates from both sides only further divides people, with a wide disparity of knowledge among the pounders and the candidates themselves on what zoning even is?

- Let's shelve the proposal until the next mayor and council take office, in less than four months. State planners may support such a delay, if only because the five-year CDP would have the imprint of the folks to be in office for the next four years.

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