

To be included in public record of the January 11th General Policy Committee Meeting

Re: Well-meaning but misguided proposal to impose blanket high-density zoning city-wide

Teri Hamill, PhD, 2214 NW 11th Rd, Gainesville

I am asking you to consider the downsides to the city-wide high-density rezoning proposed by Mr. Eastman.

He asserts that rezoning has only advantages. Infill with small, energy-efficient cottage homes would create affordable housing, not alter neighborhood characteristics, and would provide much-needed tax base enhancement without significantly increasing infrastructure demands. The agenda item is noted as not having financial impact. We are told that rezoning will create charming, walkable communities: the entire city will be like the Duckpond or Pleasant Street. By not pushing new development to the fringes, fragile ecosystems are preserved, and shorter commutes equate to less automobile exhaust pollution.

The problem is, **those are untested theories.** Mr Eastman did not provide supporting evidence with concrete examples of how rezoning created those changes in cities of similar size and character, nor did he discuss potential pitfalls.

The proposed changes are epic. Rezoning the entire city cannot be undone. Please, take this slowly and make deliberate, data-based decisions. Please be open to considering other solutions to the real and significant affordability problems: sweeping changes in zoning might be within your powers but may not create the changes desired, and the changes may harm the those you seek to help.

Below are alternative theories of the results of increasing zoning density. Are they just as plausible? More likely? Do we have data for either set of theories?

Smaller lot sizes will only marginally and insignificantly reduce the cost of new home construction. The primary cost of new home construction is not the lot, it is in the construction and mortgage interest. A small new home offered at \$300,000 instead of \$315,000 is not going to make home purchase affordable.

First-time home buyers usually don't buy new homes. They purchase affordable, already-built homes. Redevelopment will reduce that supply – low cost properties would be redevelopment targets.

Cash-buyer builders will snap up the lower-cost homes that are on the market, demolish them, and build multiple new homes on the lot. The cost of each new home will be greater than the cost of the fixer-upper that was demolished. As a result, the median price of housing will increase, not decrease. The opportunity to build wealth through sweat equity will be lost.

The new construction will largely NOT be small, affordable homes.

There will be no requirement that the homes be small. Three-story construction in any architectural style can be built. Whatever is most profitable to the builder is what we can expect! The probability is most will be large, multi-story homes.

Urban infill in well-wooded areas will displace wildlife and harm the ecosystem.

Some of the city's neighborhoods, especially those near creeks and parks, have wildlife corridors and are functional ecosystems. The plantings surrounding the lots, many of which are over a half-century old, provide habitat for deer and rabbits, and foxes and coyotes. The loss of predator mammals will increase the rodent populations. (If water sources and some shelter still exist, then snakes, including venomous ones, will appreciate the more abundant food source.)

In this Bee City, many homeowners incorporate native plants in their large yards. Isolated gardens are less effective pollinator hosts than a necklace of host plants within the insect's range.

Although environmental harm occurs when sensitive land is clearcut for new development, we have not been shown data to indicate that the harm is any more or any less than the harm from infill.

Infill will create greater storm-water runoff and worsen flooding problems.

Greater density equates to more impermeable surface area and more water running off the developed property. Less stormwater will reach / recharge the aquifer. Runoff will wash pollutants such as car tire "dust" and pesticides and herbicides into the sewers, then into our creeks and streams.

If this proposal is implemented, we will need procedures to ensure no net increase in the runoff from the property relative to before re-developed, otherwise the development may flood other properties. That won't be popular with builders! If you implement eco-friendly requirements, such as permeable paving of driveways and retention ponds or rain barrel storage of roof-collected water, you will increase the cost of the developed land and undermine affordability.

Traffic will increase in an unplanned manner and create gridlock. Wrecks will be more common. Insurance costs will rise.

Allowing developers to build in this manner is, in essence, piecemeal / spot rezoning, devoid of consideration of effects on infrastructure and traffic patterns.

The average household makes ten auto trips per day. Unplanned infill development will increase traffic – particularly if building is concentrated in specific areas. It is probable that a builder will redevelop in the areas of town that have lower cost land, feature specific geographical features, or are in proximity to the university. Rather than a single-digit percent increase in car traffic across town, we may find roads clogged in specific areas.

Increased traffic will make it harder and more stressful to back out onto one's residential street, particularly for seniors whose necks no longer swivel painlessly nor as quickly. There will be accidents. Cars parked on the street, as is likely to occur with greater density, reduce visibility of oncoming traffic. That is a hazard both when backing out and at all intersections. (Game-day parking illustrates the difficulties.)

Auto insurance rates are actuarially driven. More wrecks will drive higher insurance premiums for everyone. Insurance costs are a component of affordability.

Traffic management will be expensive.

What had been four-way stops may need to become signalized intersections. Roads may need to be widened and homeowners will be upset when the city builds on the right-of-way that homeowners maintained and considered their property.

Street widening involves not only paving, but also gutter and sewer systems reengineered. Original sewer drains include brick-lined deep wells that exceed 10 feet in depth in hilly areas. Utility poles may need relocation so as not to be a hazard to traffic on the newly widened lanes.

The rezoning is NOT cost-free.

The agenda says that no cost is associated with the proposal. That assertion evidences that the impacts of the proposal have not been researched. You cannot increase the infrastructure demands without costs. Whether it will be offset with new property tax revenue is uncertain.

Parking will become a problem.

Where on-street parking is utilized, its availability will decrease as the competition increases.

Neighborhoods will NOT be walkable. They will become even less pedestrian friendly. Inequity will be exacerbated.

Walkable neighborhoods require a mix of residential and commercial zoning. You can't stroll to a neighborhood coffee shop or walk to dinner if the establishment is miles away.

Gainesville is a city of inequity. The food deserts will become more congested food deserts.

If everyone worked near where they live, then increased infill density would reduce work commutes and allow walking or biking to work. That is not our reality. People's places of employment are diverse and change over time. It's unlikely that all household members will have nearby jobs: multiple wage earners likely work in different parts of town.

Increased traffic, especially in areas devoid of sidewalks, will *decrease* walkability. What currently is a pleasant walk will become one that features cars whizzing by. People will drive to parks to walk, further increasing traffic. Neighborhood cohesion will be lost. If you do not stroll around your neighborhood, you do not meet your neighbors. The presumption that people only walk in high density areas is silly!

Infill is unplanned development.

Planned new construction developments can incorporate commercial zoning. That will not happen with infill alone. The lack of commercial space will eventually be problematic. We will have too many people for too few grocery stores and commercial establishments. Developers will propose piecemeal rezoning of areas from residential to commercial. That will adversely affect the immediate neighbors. Contrast this to having new, planned development: people either elected to live near the commercial zones or elected not to do so. With infill and rezoning, a house that used to back to another's yard may back to a store's truck loading zone. That is a form of government taking not presently recognized in law, but it is a taking.

The net increase in car traffic will be greater than if the new development was on the outskirts.

The work commute is typically twice per day. People also drive to the grocery store, to restaurants, doctors' offices, to friends' homes, to houses of worship, etcetera. As traffic increases due to infill, all the trips within town take longer because each intersection has traffic. The time spent in cars increases.

Parking lots will become crammed; people will circle to find a space. In contrast, when new development on the outskirts occurs, proportional new commercial development comes in tandem.

Demolishing existing homes, rather than restoring them, is environmentally harmful.

It may be envisioned that additional homes will be squeezed onto an existing lot. It is more likely that, to maximize the number of units, the existing home will be demolished.

When this occurs, serviceable fixtures, toilets, tubs, brick fireplaces, original doors and molding all become rubble. Energy is required to create the concrete used for foundations and block walls: it is not recaptured with demolition. Release of lead-based paint and asbestos particles may occur.

The loss of mature trees will make Gainesville hotter – and potentially ugly.

Gainesville boasts an impressive 59% tree canopy due to our history of planting trees in the right-of-way and giving away trees that residents have planted them on their setbacks. The urban tree canopy will be sacrificed to the bulldozers as the large lot becomes multiple small lots. Mature shade trees will be replaced with small species appropriate to the smaller lots.

A lot cannot have both cheek-to-jowl houses and plentiful trees.

Less shade means more heat. A street that once was tree lined will absorb heat all day. Summer-evening walks that used to be pleasant will not be. Heat will radiate from the pavement for hours after sunset.

Greater air-conditioning use will cause more carbon emissions. Home cooling bills will rise, adding to economic stress.

Infill will create difficult-to-anticipate infrastructure demands.

Marginally functional sanitary sewer systems will become dysfunctional under the added demand. Fixing sudden problems is an expensive proposition.

Higher population density increases the need for first-responders. This will be true regardless of where development occurs, but if population burgeons with infill, the city will be challenged to find a place to put new police and fire stations. The alternative may be longer response times as the first responders navigate increasingly choked streets.

There will be more students at schools that were not created for their numbers. Who will be bussed? Who will be relegated to portable classrooms? If history is an indicator, these burdens will fall disproportionately to our historically Black and our impoverished neighborhoods.

One-size-fits-all zoning does not! It deprives people of choice.

Some people enjoy living close to their neighbors amid the bustle. Others prefer to live with nature outside their doors. Some do not mind the noise of traffic; some find that urban noise increases anxiety.

Some people easily navigate busy neighborhoods and city centers. Others enjoy walking a quiet street.

Some don't mind waving out their window at their neighbor who is in their kitchen. Others value their privacy and want to bird watch from their windows, not people watch.

Affordable housing is a laudable goal, but it should not come at the expense of depriving those who want to live on a large lot, surrounded by other large lots, in relative quiet and privacy, from living as they choose.

If the economically well-off do not find that Gainesville offers the quality of life they want – they will move away. Before saying “good riddance, affordable housing is more important,” remember that these residents have the disposable income to frequent the bars and restaurants and help establishments stay in business during the slow summer months.

And remember, the benefit of affordable housing is at best speculative. More likely, it is a chimera.

Blanket rezoning presumes we have a unique-to-Gainesville housing-cost emergency that is not present elsewhere and demands decisive, immediate action. We are not unique: this is a problem state-wide.

I have not seen data to support the assertion that Gainesville has a uniquely high cost of starter homes that is so critical that any action, even if a partial solution, is required despite the problems that rezoning creates.

Our median home prices are below state average.

Gainesville has homes for sale at affordable prices, prices lower than the cost of new builds.

As of 1/10/24, Realtor.com shows 332 properties for sale (excluding farms and undeveloped property) offered for \$300,000 or less, which approximates the cost of construction of a small, new home on a tiny lot.

There are 236 homes for \$250,000 or less and 156 at or below \$200,000. This evidences that there are affordable homes for sale currently.

The proposal cited “average” cost of housing in the city, not the median cost. Please don’t confuse the two: the former is dramatically increased by the million-dollar homes.

To reiterate, the wrong actions will inflate other costs-of-living.

Gainesville does not impose developer impact fees; but infill development will have cost. Managed inappropriately, the costs may exceed the increase in the tax revenue and taxes may rise.

Increasing the demand for daycare without rezoning to allow for additional facilities will increase the cost of what is already a major financial stressor.

Daycare is tremendously expensive. Added demand without adding space zoned for childcare facilities will make daycare facility rent increasingly expensive. Childcare costs, one of the primary drivers of the affordability crisis, will rise further. Some families may not find daycare they can afford.

Increasing the number of school children without plans for increasing the number of school rooms is a recipe for disaster.

Insurance rates will continue to increase (auto primarily, potentially homeowners/renters insurance as well.)

As mentioned, congestion increases travel time. The trip to the daycare or grocery store takes longer and costs more. More traffic accidents will occur, and auto insurance rates will increase.

If fire and police protection are not increased commensurate with the population infill, or traffic congestion is problematic, then response times will increase. That factors into homeowner and renter insurance rate setting.

Blanket rezoning would be imposed. It is NOT a response to community demand. Rezoning is equivalent to a contract violation. It will further erode trust in government.

Zoning is an important contract between citizens and their government. The purchaser knows the existing rules and expects that the city will hold neighbors to those standards. Residents who bought into a mature neighborhood expect that the neighborhood will change minimally and incrementally. It is unfair to allow the character of the neighborhood to change suddenly by encouraging the building of multiple homes where just one existed before.

Despite platitudes that the added homes will preserve the neighborhood character, it is more likely that neighborhood character will be altered irrevocably. Power points may show examples of cute, small homes with wide front porches. If built, lower-cost homes will be simple boxes with few architectural amenities. If the housing is upscale, then it will be upscale in size as well: expect the older ranch homes to be surrounded by large three-story contemporary villas. We do not have architectural standards: new construction will be in the style of the moment, not the style of the neighborhood.

How cute the new homes are, or are not, is not the determinant of the neighborhood's quality of life. Someone who wants to see foxes on morning walks will say that the city's encouragement of high density is an example of Big Brother imposing his will.

This is not an emergency. Work deliberately. Take the time to find out what specific neighborhoods want and need, rather than dictating an irrevocable one-size "solution" that becomes next decade's headache.

Once rezoned to higher density, you cannot go back: that will be a "government taking." How ironic: the city is legally allowed to take away the right to live at a low density!

It may seem expensive to go slow; if you do not, there will be unexpected and unbudgeted costs down the line. I urge careful study. A single report from one consultant is not sufficient justification for sweeping change. We have a university; let's ask the academics to support their community by advising on the anticipated positive and negative effects of rezoning. ("Service" is a component of academic productivity review. You can find volunteers.) What areas would be most appropriate for higher density? What ecological harms or benefits would be expected with zoning density changes?

Careful study of the results of other areas that have made similar changes is needed.

Provide evidence from other similar-sized cities. Austin and Portland are not apt examples, and perhaps one should visit before thinking these are success stories. Besides considering population differences, some municipalities put in place rent stabilization and other progressive policies that are untenable in Florida. Compare carefully, with your eyes fully open, please.

Look at all options.

What really drives unaffordability? Are there other options than blanket rezoning? What are they? What are those costs and benefits? Why is blanket rezoning the best solution? What are the data?

Housing is not the only driver of the affordability crisis. Daycare expenses are a major concern. Could the city reduce or eliminate property taxes on daycare facilities?

Are there sociologists and economists at UF who can make suggestions on how to improve the quality of life for those living in economic stress? Do community leaders have a wish list? What do the affected people want? (Again, I am not aware that small lot sizes is being requested by those most affected.)

We can put aside our self-interests when convinced of a greater community imperative and if we are given solid data. We will be skeptical at best if only given theories of affordable housing and rosy pictures that do not acknowledge potential pitfalls.

Who really benefits? Is it the developers and not who need affordable housing?

I believe that it is rational, not cynical, to question whether the winners of rezoning will primarily be the developers. The losers will be those who chose to live in Gainesville (owners and renters alike), under the assumption that zoning protected their quality of life.

Respectfully submitted,

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