

ZONING PRACTICE

AUGUST 2021



AMERICAN PLANNING ASSOCIATION

➔ ISSUE NUMBER 8

PRACTICE ULTRALOCAL UPZONING



Smarter Zoning by Street and by Block

By John Myers

Many planners and other policymakers want more housing and other development, but political obstacles frustrate planning staff trying to achieve those goals. Residents often fight against change if they fear it may put their community at risk.

Building on various precedents from parking reform, business improvement districts, and minimum lot size reform, a coalition of advocates for better housing and planning has developed ideas to enable more infill development and improve equity at smaller scales. The concept is to allow a supplementary process that may enable infill in some places where traditional upzoning has so far proven too challenging.

We suggest that a local government could designate appropriate areas where a menu of different zoning options, each allowing more development than the current applicable zoning, is made available to residents on a street-by-street or block-by-block basis. If a sufficient qualified majority of residents on a street or block supports one of those options, they could apply for their street or block to be converted to that new zoning designation, with rules to reduce spillover effects on other residents. The goal is to make it easier to find win-win ways to enable more infill growth with less controversy.

POLITICAL OBSTACLES TO DEVELOPMENT ARE HURTING GROWTH AND EQUITY

Over time, housing has become much less affordable in many successful cities. Housing supply has become less responsive to prices, as zoning rules have increasingly constrained what can be built. One study estimated that 40 percent of the buildings in Manhattan could not legally be rebuilt today because of tighter zoning rules (Bui et al. 2016). In many parts of the U.S., house prices have risen far above the minimum level at which building more housing would be profitable in the absence of tight legal constraints. In such cases, restrictive

applicable zoning is often a major reason for the low supply of new homes (Glaeser and Gyourko 2018).

Efforts by planners and politicians to increase housing supply often meet fierce political resistance. Homeowners worry about changes to their neighborhoods and about their most expensive asset: their home (Fischel 2005). They worry about congestion, disruption, and crime, and they fear that they will lose daylight, parking, beauty, and peace and quiet. The traditional process whereby a city changes its zoning plan attempts to mitigate some of those concerns but is not designed to address all of them.

Often, proposed upzonings—changes to the zoning code that allow for a greater density of residences in a given area—would not benefit most affected residents. That may be because the upzoning is proposed over a wide area that might reduce property values overall. Sometimes the upzoning is not ambitious enough to make it economical to demolish and redevelop most existing buildings, meaning that only some of the property owners in the area would benefit. Some owners may be subject to historic preservation requirements or private covenants that stop them from building more, leaving them with nothing but inconvenience. Apartment owners or rent-controlled tenants may also see disadvantages rather than benefits in an upzoning. In other cases, residents are concerned that rapid change will damage local amenities. Each voter who perceives a potential harm, rather than a benefit, from upzoning increases the political resistance.

ULTRALOCAL ZONING MAY HELP TO ENABLE MORE INFILL

If broad upzoning often fails because the area across which the decision is made encompasses enough people who will likely not benefit from it, one solution could be to allow upzoning to be done by smaller areas. Under “street votes,” cities would allow the

registered voters resident on each single length of street between two intersections (a “face block”) to choose more intensive zoning by supermajority vote—perhaps 60 percent. “Block votes” would do the same for residents on each single city block (surrounded by streets). Different jurisdictions might choose different rules regarding who is eligible to participate in the street or block vote. That will give those residents a way to negotiate to share the benefits of new development and ensure that it will suit them. To reduce spillover effects on residents of other blocks or streets, the city can restrict the range of available options by setting maximum allowable heights and other limits.

Street and block votes would be a minor supplement to existing zoning procedures, requiring minimal amendments to local law. The goal is to make change as easy and as popular as possible. This proposal may be put forward by planners, beyond the realm of politics, but it should ideally receive political support and, indeed, is structured to maximize political upside.

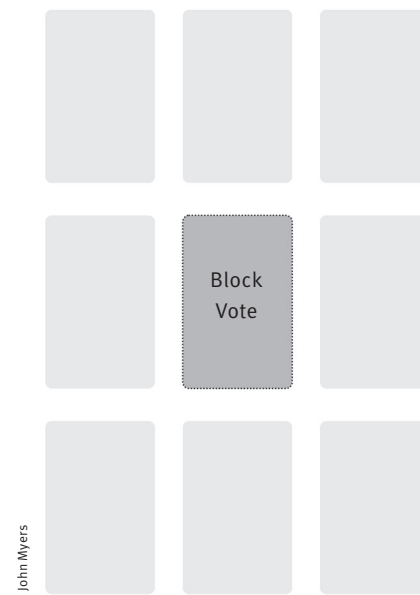
For certain defined areas, each government would simply set out a narrow range of zoning changes from which resident eligible voters who wish to upzone their street block or city block could collectively choose. That choice could be made by verified petition or by referendum using normal ballot processes. That process might be a way of meeting housing obligations under state law, in places where they exist.

The menu given to the residents might include simply reducing the minimum lot size for single-family homes or allowing one or more “granny flats” or accessory dwelling units (ADUs) per parcel. More ambitious options might allow town houses or multifamily housing. Residents who fear deterioration of the neighborhood’s character can choose a more reassuring option, such as town houses rather than apartment blocks. And residents who wish to avoid



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➡ Diagram of the lots affected by a street vote.



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➡ Diagram of the lots affected by a block vote.

changes altogether can choose to adopt none of the proposals.

Even with street and block votes, governments would still retain full power over zoning because they would control the options (if any) from which local residents could choose. The benefit of such ultralocal zoning is that the city need not choose a single zoning rule for each area, as at present. That will let residents choose win-win outcomes, in order to solve the political obstacles to more intensive zoning. Street and block votes will simply supplement current mechanisms to upzone, which will remain otherwise unchanged. Trials of these bottom-up procedures would not interfere with existing processes to upzone. Any resulting upzoning will be purely additive.

UPZONING SPRINGFIELD

To see how this would work in practice, consider the fictional town of Springfield, which is frustrated by slow growth and budget challenges. Average wages are healthy, but renters complain about the cost of living and employers grumble that high costs prevent expansion. The mayor would like to

allow more development to address those problems and increase property-tax receipts, but she faces too much political resistance. When zoning changes do allow construction, renters and community groups complain about disruption and gentrification.

Owners of single-family homes, concerned about effects on schools, traffic, and parking, have successfully blocked growth in their areas.

The city's planning staff identifies four areas of single-family homes adjacent to downtown that would be suitable for gentle densification if the political obstacles could be overcome. They estimate that the typical property value could be increased by 75 percent by allowing three additional ADUs, replacement town houses, duplexes, or triplexes on each lot. City attorneys advise that Springfield has power under state law to allow street votes.

The mayor publishes a proposal to allow street votes in each of those low-density residential areas. The residents can select one or more options via such street votes: halving the minimum lot size; allowing up to three additional ADUs per lot; or allowing

replacement town houses, duplexes, or triplexes. They can also opt to halve the existing setback rule from the street. The city publishes a supplemental report illustrating how much value homeowners can add to their properties through each option.

The proposal has safeguards to protect other residents. Each of the pilot residential areas would become a controlled parking district, with free parking stickers for residents and short-term stickers for their guests. When each street votes to upzone, it becomes its own separate parking district, with stickers valid only on that street, so more housing on that street will not affect parking on other streets.

Development on each upzoned street will be subject to height restrictions to ensure that homeowners on other streets have access to sunlight. Each lot would remain subject to a setback rule, which could be waived by the adjacent homeowner to allow traditional town houses that would add more value for each owner. Parcels on street corners would remain subject to the old zoning limits until both streets opt to upzone.

The zoning amendment provides that the residents of each block can opt to upzone by filing a verified petition with signatures of 60 percent of the resident registered voters on that face block. Because design is a concern for some residents, they can add an optional design code to their petition, which new construction would be required to meet. To address concerns from homeowners about jumps in property taxes immediately after upzoning, the city agrees to assess each property's value based on the original zoning, until more housing is built, or for a maximum of 10 years.

The first pilot area sees three street votes within the first year. The residents of the first street opt to allow duplexes plus an ADU in the backyards. They choose a design code for the fronts facing the street to ensure good urbanism. After five years, many of the original homes remain—considerably increased in value by the potential for adding more housing—but the new duplexes blend well into the neighborhood. Property-tax receipts from the street have risen, without the need for major road or sewer upgrades. More professionals have moved

to Springfield's growing economy, and local schools are not harmed by the organic increase in numbers. Some residents sold after upzoning and used part of their profits to move to another low-density residential part of Springfield. Many of the new residents are opting to commute downtown with taxi pooling or scooters and bicycles, so no one has noticed an increase in congestion.

The newly reelected mayor decides to push to allow street votes in more low-density residential areas of Springfield and to give a few areas adjacent to downtown the additional option of five-story apartment buildings, if they wish.

ADDRESSING RESIDENTS' CONCERNS

Residents can have reasonable concerns about adverse change to their area. Development has spillover effects, and not all of them are good. Care should be taken to minimize effects on residents outside the street or block. Street votes will require careful rules, as suggested above for Springfield, to address parking, traffic, and other effects. Block votes could be coupled with a requirement that existing building fronts onto the surrounding streets should be retained so that residents on the surrounding blocks will be unaffected. Light planes could be set to rise at an angle from the surrounding streets, limiting the height of new buildings within the block.

More ambitiously, a developer who negatively affects an adjoining landowner could be required to pay compensation in a limited range of cases, both for loss of property value and for inconvenience. But such votes will pass only where there is a broad consensus among residents that such upzoning will benefit them. Homeowners will each gain from the increased value of their property because of the upzoning, so compensation may not be needed.

Other spillover effects might be addressed with impact fees, tax increment local transfers, community benefit agreements, and other methods, such as auctions—all of which are meant to share any financial benefits from upzonings with relevant neighbors, with an eye toward engendering their support (Elmendorf and Shanske 2019). Some localities might allow

the upzoning to create transferable development rights, so that homeowners who do not wish to develop could sell some of their additional permitted floor area to another owner on the block; inter-street transfers might also be permitted.

Many residents will not want to leave the area immediately after upzoning, if ever, so it will be hard to assemble a sufficient majority for a proposal that would damage the neighborhood. If a proposal seems risky, 60 percent of residents are unlikely to agree to it, given how much homeowners worry about change. To win a street vote, the advocates will have to pick options and possibly a design code that will clearly make the street better in the eyes of existing residents. Winning proposals will tend to improve their areas.

EASIER DECISIONS AT STREET WAND BLOCK LEVEL

The economic benefits from upzoning can be enormous, but current mechanisms to upzone make it all but impossible for residents to negotiate changes that would benefit most of them.

Although residents often fear upzoning, upzoning just a small area of houses will often substantially increase the values of those properties. Opposition arises because current zoning proposals often leave many homeowners with a risky and unattractive choice. Faced with a different set of options, many might choose to allow controlled change. The adoption of rules allowing ADUs in California; Minneapolis; Portland, Oregon; Seattle; and elsewhere shows how aligning interests of residents with those who want more housing density can make change much easier. Political resistance to ADUs is lower because homeowners can see the benefits of adding them on their own lots. Homeowners and existing renters may have different views: the former can capture the value of upzoning, but renters may be concerned about short-term displacement.

Given the choice, many individual landowners would choose to upzone their own lot without changing the zoning of nearby properties, even if more housing might only be added by a subsequent buyer, many years later. Otherwise, there would be no need

for zoning rules. The same is true for many groups of a few landowners. But at the scale of hundreds or thousands of landowners—the scale at which zoning decisions are often made—negotiation and agreement become much more difficult. Agreeing to upzone, like anything else, gets harder as more people are involved: the costs of reaching agreement substantially increase. As we have seen, that leads to highly restrictive zoning and political near-gridlock in many places where politicians face thousands or millions of voters. The known phenomenon of “blame avoidance” means that it is difficult for officials and politicians to make decisions that might be controversial. A modicum of direct democracy may provide a way to bypass those problems.

It is not always necessary to impose upzoning on homeowners. Given the powers to do so easily in small groups, it is likely that a proportion will negotiate among themselves to find upzonings that will suit them so they may enjoy the resulting economic benefits.

Various commentators have suggested devolution of zoning powers to smaller scales, in order to ease the negotiation of win-win outcomes. Robert Nelson, for example, suggested devolving zoning and other powers to individual neighborhoods (Nelson 2005). Instead of devolving to neighborhoods, another option is to allow opt-ins at even smaller scales: street segments or single blocks, following proposals from zoning scholars Robert Ellickson (1998) and George Liebmann (1993).

Street votes and block votes are gaining ground in the U.K.: in August 2020, a government white paper supported the concept (MHCLG 2020), after trials of “microdemocracy” were endorsed by the U.K.'s Royal Town Planning Institute (Kenny and Harris 2020) and Centre for Cities (Breach and Magrini 2020), among others.

Streets and blocks have two main advantages over neighborhoods: they have clear, natural boundaries; and they are smaller.

There is often little consensus over the boundaries of a “neighborhood,” particularly for residents who live near a proposed boundary. The process of precisely

demarcating the boundaries of a given neighborhood, in order to allow that neighborhood to vote on zoning proposals, will itself be politically contentious and would only add more friction to the process.

Furthermore, residents are most affected by activities on their own face block. Changes on other streets tend to affect them less. That makes face blocks a natural candidate for modest reforms where the spillover effects are mainly contained within that length of street. They are a natural unit for housing upkeep and for control of crime (Oakerson and Clifton 2017). The intersections create two natural endpoints to each segment of street. Similarly, if the street frontages of the buildings around all four edges of a city block are preserved unchanged, new development within a city block mainly affects residents within that city block, and not residents of other blocks—particularly if congestion effects are controlled. The streets bordering the block form another natural boundary.

PLACES WHERE ULTRALOCAL ZONING MAY HELP

Edward Glaeser and others have suggested that residents resist upzoning because of concerns about their house price, but owners of houses in metropolitan areas ranging from Seattle and Los Angeles to Miami and Boston would see large financial benefits if a small area, including their own lot, were upzoned (Glaeser and Gottlieb 2008). If apartment blocks four or five floors high are permitted instead of single-family homes, that may increase the value of the current property by a factor of three times or more.

Street or block votes for upzoning are more likely to succeed in any place where large benefits will accrue to homeowners—that is, wherever restrictive zoning has substantially raised the price of land. Where existing upzoning procedures are already working well, there may be no need for such votes.

Recently, Joe Gyourko and Jacob Krimmel listed various metropolitan areas where land costs are high due to restrictive land-use rules (Gyourko and Krimmel 2020). In addition to metro areas well known for restrictive zoning such as Los Angeles, San

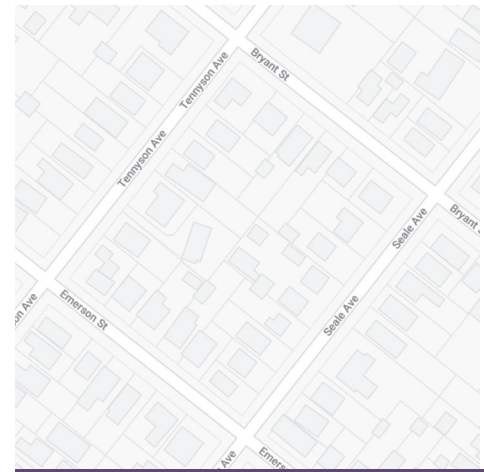
Francisco, Seattle, and New York City, they include a wide range of cities where restrictive rules have increased land costs within 15 miles of the urban core: Atlanta; Boston; Chicago; Dallas; Miami; Minneapolis; Philadelphia; Phoenix, Arizona; Portland, Oregon; Riverside–San Bernardino, California; San Jose, California; and Washington, D.C. In Boston, Chicago, Miami, New York City, Philadelphia, and San Jose, they estimate that land costs are still elevated at up to 30 miles from the urban core.

In large portions of those metropolitan areas, attractive infill growth would be highly profitable. There are also likely to be many smaller cities and towns outside those metropolitan areas, not analyzed by Gyourko and Krimmel, where a university, hospital, corporate headquarters, or other factors have increased housing demand but political obstacles have stopped zoning rules from being updated—Princeton, New Jersey, for example. Street votes and block votes should also help growth in those places.

Cities that are in decline or facing economic distress may have expensive areas that could drive growth through street and block votes. In areas where house prices are not significantly elevated above build costs, other street-by-street methods for regeneration may be helpful. Street and block votes as proposed here may be less likely to work in areas of existing apartment blocks—where there are already many more residents with widely differing interests, density is already higher, and coordination is more difficult.

THERE ARE VARIOUS PRECEDENTS

Although the precise idea of street and block votes has not yet been implemented, a wide range of precedents indicate that street votes and block votes should be feasible and desirable.



Map Data © 2021 Google



Plot use in Palo Alto, California, showing considerable scope for densification and infill.



Map Data © 2021 Google



Plot use in Philadelphia, illustrating a denser urban form.

Parking Reform

There are many examples of street-level demand for reform in the field of parking, dating back to the first parking meters. In 1976, San Francisco neighborhoods were given an option to petition to restrict parking time for nonresidents but allow residents to buy a sticker for unlimited right to park. It

was so popular that before the department had implemented it in the first neighborhood that petitioned for it, another nine neighborhoods had also filed petitions (Fulton and Weimer 1980). David Weimer explains: “The Planning Department set criteria and adapted the existing process for establishing two-hour zones, applying them so that neighborhoods could self-select for participation. This facilitated smooth implementation by allowing the most enthusiastic and best organized neighborhoods to elect for early participation” (1992).

If structured to provide significant benefits to those who make the decisions, opt-ins can be a powerful way to encourage voters to do the work of convincing one another that a reform is good and to achieve widespread adoption. This can be seen, for example, in the opt-in process for the adoption of parking benefit districts in Austin, Texas (Shoup 2018). In parking benefit districts, a city installs parking meters and ensures that some or all of the revenue from those meters is spent on public services in the metered area. By allowing residents of an area the option to become a parking benefit district, cities ensure that residents themselves do the hard work of persuading their neighbors.

Business Improvement Districts

Business Improvement Districts are often set up in already established areas to provide services such as street cleaning, security, parking facilities, street furniture, signage, and public relations. They may have the power to place small additional levies on each business within the BID (Heller and Hills 2008). By contrast, street and block votes would have no power of compulsion. People who do not want to change their property will not be forced to do so.

Minimum Lot Sizes in Houston

Houston already gives some power over land use to individual blocks or face blocks. Although Houston does not have zoning, it has land-use ordinances governing minimum lot sizes. When the city attempted to lower the minimum lot size in some places, in order to allow more housing, it also allowed owners within individual blocks, face blocks,

or other areas to opt via qualified or simple majority for larger minimum lot sizes (§42-197 et seq.). Unlike the street and block votes proposed in this article, which would allow residents to opt in to more intensive zoning, Houston required residents to opt out. M. Nolan Gray and Adam Millsap argue that this opt-out power made reform easier because dissenting voters knew that they could avoid its effects if they wished (Gray and Millsap 2020).

HOAs and Condominiums

The Uniform Common Interests Act regulating condominium and HOAs requires an 80 percent supermajority to terminate an association, which would allow for redevelopment.

Israel, Japan, Australia, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Canada, for example, have laws allowing the redevelopment of an apartment block on approval of a supermajority of the owners. That involves the power to force dissenting residents to sell and move out, a much more drastic provision than street and block votes. Such laws have led to many new homes in places such as Tel Aviv under the applicable “Pinui Binui” and Tama 38 provisions.

Neighborhood Conservation Districts

In some ways, these proposals are simply an inversion of an already widespread technique: neighborhood conservation districts. Rather than allowing a sublocal decision to increase restrictions, as happens with neighborhood conservation districts, street or block votes allow a sublocal decision to allow more housing.

SMARTER ZONING MAY HELP YOUR CITY

The first step for a city planner interested in ultralocal upzoning is to ask an attorney to determine how to do it under state law. We would suggest that the framework rules should be designed so that a successful street vote automatically results in an upzoning, without the need for anything more than a ministerial decision, to avoid political controversy, delay, and expense. Alternatively, upzonings could be implemented through subsequent discretionary city decisions after each street vote, but that will be much less ideal. Decisions might

be made based on a ballot of residents or, subject to legal constraints, by a petition of homeowners.

The next step is for planners to identify low-density residential areas adjacent to downtown or with good transport links that would be suitable for gentle densification if political obstacles can be overcome. Planning staff can prepare a proposal with upzoning options and safeguarding rules. The example of Springfield above illustrates the mechanism and various options that the city can offer residents. Planners should select among those and other options appropriate for each place.

The city can then invite each of those areas to compete to be the first to pilot the street votes approach, by opting in through a petition of, say, 10 percent of residents in each area, or by less formal means. Homeowners in the first area will see the largest gains in the value of their property, as they start to meet the demand for more homes.

After the pilot areas, additional areas can be included, with additional options and perhaps additional safeguards to ensure that any resident concerns and spillover effects discovered in the pilot areas are kept to an absolute minimum. The tremendous economic potential means that it should be possible to design upzoning packages to achieve broad consensus.

Street votes and block votes could be a new way to reduce some of the political obstacles to infill growth, in a wide range of towns and metropolitan areas across the U.S., through smarter zoning that will improve equity and opportunity.

Note: This paper is based on Myers (2021), by kind permission of the Manhattan Institute.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John Myers is an attorney and housing campaigner based in London, England. He co-founded the London YIMBY and YIMBY Alliance campaigns, which seek to increase the supply and quality of housing with the support of local people. He previously worked in finance and in private legal practice.

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VOL. 38, NO. 8

The American Planning Association will lead the way to equitable, thriving communities by creating unique insights, as well as innovative and practical approaches that enable the planning community to anticipate and successfully adapt to the needs of a rapidly changing world.

Zoning Practice (ISSN 1548–0135) is a monthly publication of the American Planning Association. Joel Albizo, FASAE, CAE, Chief Executive Officer; Petra Hurtado, PhD, Research Director; Joseph DeAngelis, AICP, and David Morley, AICP, Editors.

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