

We need a fact-based, community-wide discussion of housing choices in Seattle.

Recent public discussion has suggested that there is a war between urbanists and neighborhoods, a conflict between renters and homeowners, a generational divide between millennials and boomers, and an economic clash among Seattleite income levels.

This oversimplified and divisive messaging sadly reflects the national political discourse of segregating constituencies into steadfast oppositional camps. What we need in Seattle is a rich community conversation about strategy and alliance, community values, and city-wide common good to address the housing emergency we face. Instead, most citizens are left adrift, to navigate through top-down partisan policy proposals from City Hall.

There was a time not long ago when City Hall reached out and partnered with all our neighborhoods. The outreach respected loose geographical boundaries, community councils and many other representative groups, and engaged residents in their own communities. Citizens participated in neighborhood planning, studied the special components of their unique communities, discovered and uncovered values that are most important to their neighbors, evaluated issues and opportunities that define our place in the city, and partnered with City Hall to create neighborhood plans which have provided guidance and support for over thirty years.

But now, there has been a paradigm shift in Seattle. What once was a citywide dialogue and community discussion about strategy, planning, performance, values, and the inclusive advancement of alternative ideas, has now been turned upside-down. Now we are simply informed of what is best for us, with no need for citizen outreach, community-council and other group input, and only a few very limited public meetings which most closely resemble a slick marketing program. Some at City Hall even want to redefine or eliminate District and Community Councils.

The lack of public discussion, disclosure, and inclusive study is unprecedented, and it has degraded the political process in Seattle. Neighborhoods are tagged as resisting change, cloistered and protectionist, against increasing density, and sometimes much worse. In reality, most Seattle neighborhoods have accepted more growth than directed or anticipated by regional planners over the last decade.

Residents of the city have been assured by City Hall that encouraging more growth would cause minimal if any environmental impacts. However, there is a lack of real data gleaned from serious, inclusive, unbiased, and professional citywide studies to confirm this assertion.

For example, the current proposal by Councilmember Mike O'Brien to loosen regulation of backyard cottages suggests that rezoning the majority of Seattle's residential land area would produce not one environmental impact, and therefore needs no professional studies, nor an Environmental Impact Statement, nor a truly inclusive public process. Given the chance to identify environmental impacts of Mr. O'Brien's legislation in the required SEPA (Seattle Environmental Policy Act) checklist, City Hall answered "No Impact" to all 109 questions. That is: no impact from allowing backyard houses, greater lot coverage, higher building heights,

reduced building setbacks, reduced minimum lot size, removing all parking requirements, removing ownership requirements, and allowing a triplex on every lot in Seattle greater than 3,200 sq ft. The assertion that these wide-ranging changes would have “No Impact” is simply absurd.

Councilmember O'Brien's public outreach on this proposal has been minimal. Mr. O'Brien reports that he held two public meetings and met with a small number of citizens who have backyard cottages or want to build them, and an architect. This is preposterously inadequate, which is why I and the Queen Anne Community Council have filed an appeal of the City's finding of "No Impact."

Neighborhoods have a right and a duty to stand up and ask for a fact- and data-driven environmental impact study to inform and confirm every one of the City's assertions about the backyard-cottages proposal, and for the Mayor's HALA program.

Neighborhoods have been at the table through time helping to build Seattle, to create a diversity of housing choices, to craft codes and create plans that acknowledge their unique character and quality of life, and to enhance their small business villages. Now we are being told to 'embrace change' without any involvement in the process, with no seat at the table, and no real studies to predict the impacts and consequences of City policies.

There is not a war between urbanists and neighborhoods, only a rising storm from thousands of Seattleites who love their city, but very much dislike the mayor's new ideological foundation behind one-size-fits-all zoning, top-down proclamations that ignore public input, and a forced march toward controversial policies with little if any background study, with no reliable metrics and data, and without a serious and city-wide commitment to listen to neighborhoods and invite their unbiased input.