Denver’s Group Living Proposal

American cities and suburbs, during the 20th century, grew at an unprecedented rate and in a uniquely American fashion. With the help of the federal government, residential neighborhoods, filled with single-family homes, sprung up in nearly every city, while older urban areas that were packed with houses, apartments, industry and other commercial uses were often left to deteriorate. Throughout the U.S., the results were the creation of “nice” residential neighborhoods for white Americans and deteriorating urban neighborhoods for black Americans. You might be surprised to learn that the federal government was complicit in this segregation, the creation of ghettos and the policies that made it nearly impossible for African American residents to move out of these urban neighborhoods and to benefit from homeownership. These practices have been illegal since the Federal Fair Housing Act of 1968, but the legacy of this government sanctioned segregation is still with us today.

Like most cities, Denver grew in these same ways with single-family residential neighborhoods protected from commercial uses. In southeast Denver, for example, nearly all of our neighborhoods are made up of single-family homes and are separated or protected from commercial uses. In other parts of Denver, on the other hand, in some neighborhoods in west or north Denver for example, houses are in commercial and industrial zone districts and families are living next to factories and other hazardous and unpleasant uses. These are the same neighborhoods that were “redlined” by the federal government in the early to mid-20th century preventing banks from offering mortgages to residents. The Globeville, Elyria and Swansea neighborhoods were redlined and are still home to many minority families. And today, these neighborhoods, located in the 80216 zip code, are part of the most polluted zip code in the U.S. It is unacceptable that some neighborhoods are “protected” while others are not.

It is shocking to learn the exclusionary and racist history of our cities. Today, we would not tolerate it. And, while as a nation and a city we are now seriously confronting our history and bias, we must also try to fix some of the wrongs imposed on our minority neighborhoods. We need to invest in these neighborhoods and residents and provide equitable access to opportunities, schools, housing, green spaces, jobs and more.

Additionally, we need to address issues with our zoning code that have unfairly impacted these same neighborhoods. Currently certain uses like shelters and community corrections (half-way houses) are concentrated in these neighborhoods. Shelters and community corrections are essential in our city, but should not be concentrated in the same neighborhoods that have been unfairly treated for decades. The Group Living Advisory Committee (GLAC) was tasked with examining this issue and recommending solutions. After meeting for two years, the GLAC recommends two types of residential care be allowed in residential neighborhoods:

- **Very Small Residential Care** is defined as a home where 10 or fewer residents live and receive full-time care. These types of homes already exist throughout Denver and the country. Your own neighborhood might have a home, for example, where seniors or disabled people live. Currently, the Federal Fair Housing Act mandates that this type of group home be allowed in any neighborhood in the U.S. for certain populations including older adults, people with disabilities and people in recovery. Denver’s proposed definition would allow additional uses not covered by the Fair Housing Act including community corrections and shelters.

- **Small Residential Care** is defined as a home where 11-40 residents live and receive full-time care. The proposal recommends that these larger facilities be allowed on lots that are 12,000 square feet or larger in zone districts that allow residential uses including the SU (single unit) zone district.
As you see from the chart above, the proposal greatly expands where residential care facilities can be throughout the city. By adding additional zone districts including multi-unit, mixed-use, commercial and industrial, thousands of new parcels will be available for these uses in the future ensuring that they are no longer concentrated in the neighborhoods that have been disproportionately impacted.

The other tough issue that the GLAC addressed is the number of unrelated people who can live in a single-family house. Currently, Denver allows unlimited family members in a home, but only two unrelated adults (plus their family members) can live in a house. This is very low and restricts many desired living arrangements. For example, under Denver’s current rule, it is illegal for three recent college graduates to live together or for a group of retirees to share expenses and a home in order to stay in their neighborhood. Other cities allow more people. See chart below.
The GLAC’s current proposal is to allow 5 unrelated adults (plus their family members) in a 1,600 square foot house with an additional unrelated person for every 200 additional square feet with a maximum of 10. I feel very strongly that the current limit of two unrelated adults per household should be increased. There are many situations where unrelated people want and/or need to live together. Increasing the number will provide for an affordable option for many in a time when Denver has few affordable housing options.

It is important to note that Governor Polis has asked cities to temporarily cease enforcing restrictions on household size due to the pandemic and economic crisis. Many people are unemployed and at risk for eviction and becoming homeless. Allowing people to live with family and friends is important now to ensure that families have a roof over their heads.

I encourage you to learn more by going to www.denvergov.org/groupliving for more details about the process and proposal.