Opinion: We must plan racial justice in our cities

By Dorothy Walker, Streetsblog USA, August 3, 2020

Dorothy Walker was the founding president of the APA in 1978 and former assistant vice chancellor for property development at University of California, Berkeley. She served on a variety of commissions and committees in Berkeley, where she is a long-time resident.

In her letter published in StreetsBlog, Walker identifies cities’ land-use decisions — “a process that is the foundation of the planning profession” — as an area “ripe for transformation.”

She calls attention to the contradictory actions of cities like Berkeley that celebrate liberal political values while exercising local control over land use, preventing the "development of denser communities that enable more affordable housing, ignoring the need to serve the housing needs of both new and existing residents.”

For the residents of cities like Berkeley, Walker argues that local control has become a barrier to “structural changes in their own communities that would advance the cause of racial justice.”

Therefore, local land use decisions, “must be taken out of the hands of those who benefit from stopping change, and who bear none of the consequences of centering their self-interest above the interests of the disadvantaged, the disenfranchised, and the community at large. The planning profession must play a leading role in the reformation of how land use decisions are made.”

Walker concludes: “Now is the time for planners to ask our legislators to join us in the long-overdue, deep exploration of the foundations of planning in this country — and the difficult process of redefining how, and by whom, our land use decisions are controlled.

Read the full text of Dorothy Walker’s letter here.

Related: In the Wall Street Journal, President Trump and Secretary of Housing and Urban Development Ben Carson reject any federal initiative for upzoning suburban single-family residential neighborhoods. They reference the opportunity zone program, which offers preferential tax treatment to certain investments in designated low-income communities, as their preferred alternative for development.

Read Trump and Carson’s August 16th op-ed “We’ll Protect America’s Suburbs” here (paywall).

Related: John J. Parman, Visiting Scholar/Architecture at UC Berkeley, argues in the planning and design journal Common Edge that local control reforms proposed by the UK’s Conservative government echo California’s current legislative package for housing
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production. He contends that meaningful by-right assurances at the local level, stronger processes for regional or county housing allocation, and state and federal funding mechanisms for below-market housing, offer a better path to housing production than the state’s top-down approach to upzoning.


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