

# The “Multi-Family Housing Blues”

by Bob Mulder

“Most people who rent apartments are not living the American Dream.” That was probably the most striking and disturbing statement made at a recent public hearing in opposition to a rezoning request. The rezoning involved 18 acres currently zoned R-4 (4 units/acre), and the request was for R-10 (10 units/acre), which typically means multi-family (apartments, townhomes, condos).

There is a definite feeling by a significant number of people in the community that multi-family development brings in the “wrong element.” The reasons they give in opposition to multi-family are usually specious, and would make you think that people who rent apartments are knuckle-dragging Neanderthals or irreclaimable criminals.

The City of Raleigh, North Carolina’s policy on providing affordable housing opportunities for families or individuals in

lower income brackets is to distribute this type of housing — usually rental apartments — all across the city. By affordable I mean housing that is available to people

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who have an annual income corresponding to 50 percent of the median income for this area (I feel compelled to define affordable, because it’s a slippery term; a \$350,000 house can be said to be “affordable” if you can afford it).

One of the positive effects of this policy

is that residents are able to live in an environment which might encourage them to go back to school so they can increase their income and, perhaps, someday become homeowners. In spite of the prevalent community view that the “American Dream” is centered on home ownership, renter-occupied units make up 56 percent of Raleigh’s housing stock (according to 1990 statistics).

In a well-publicized case here in Raleigh, residents of a well-to-do single family development across the street from a site proposed for apartment units to be financed through a tax credit program, tried to rezone the site to kill the project, even though the project met all code requirements and had received the necessary building permits.

A local newspaper article published some of the reasons nearby residents gave for their opposition: they didn’t want “hamburger flippers” living near them; they felt the new residents would be discouraged from pulling themselves up “by their bootstraps” if they saw the affluence around them. It would be ironic if individuals who spoke out against this project suddenly found themselves having to live in these apartments and “flip hamburgers” to make ends meet. It’s an unfortunate reality that some people who have held high paying jobs with some of our best known high-tech corporations have had to sell their homes and work in fast-food restaurants.

One Raleigh resident recently told me that some new single-family homes being built in the area would help “tilt the balance” against an apartment complex up the street. I was amazed to hear this person explain that the presence of the apartment complex made this a “borderline” area. I have worked around this area for years, and there is nothing borderline about it. Many times people will write off all apartments as being unattractive simply



## On-Line Comments:

In the article, multi-family housing is discussed in the context of housing affordability. We could get more affordable housing with less public opposition by simply amending our zoning by-laws to allow second dwelling units as-of-right. Our Provincial government did this in 1994 by outlawing any zoning provision which did not allow a second unit in any single, semi-detached, or townhouse dwelling unit.

More recently, a new provincial government rescinded the as-of-right legislation and has left it up to the individual municipalities to decide through their zoning by-laws if they wish to allow second units as-of-right. In my experience, there need to be adequate safety measures in place for the protection of the occupants of second dwelling units through strict building by-law standards and fire department safety requirements. There should also be a register of all second dwelling units so that building and fire personnel are aware of the

additional occupant load. Other than those concerns, I am not aware of any significant complaint about any additional housing that has been added to our community.

— Ron Marini, Stoney Creek, Ontario

Even the term “duplex” seems to have the power to incite a riot these days. I have watched as citizens opposed development of condos and townhomes that were well out of my reach, crying that they already have enough multi-family housing in their area. I have seen people in public meetings stand up and say openly that they like the way their neighborhood is, and don’t want to see people who are different from them moving in. They moved there to get away from those people. Some are even more blatant, and say openly that they don’t want their kids going to a “mixed” school. And, mention subsidized housing to people, and they go through the roof. Nevermind that five years ago, my husband and I would have qualified for subsidized housing.

— Lisa Haderlein, Peoria County, Illinois

Robert,

Having been a dweller in rental property since 1984, I don't feel that renting and living the "American Dream" are mutually exclusive. The employment opportunities that are increasingly offered to Americans require geographic mobility; factory, mill, and paternalistic corporate jobs that offer employment from graduation to retirement at the same location are few. The amount of rental property in Raleigh is testament to this, even considering the university population. ... Rental properties provide quicker, less expensive, and much less complex moves.

The "American Dream" does not pivot on the question of who holds title to a property, but on dignity. The size of one's income or the conspicuous consumption of that income in an owned property are poor gauges of self respect and do not prove that an individual is living the "American Dream." The quality of one's environment is a much more important factor in meeting that ideal. A rental property developed with proper planning, architectural design, quality construction and continuing maintenance is as valid a conveyance to the "American Dream," and perhaps more so, than a shoddily-built, large square footage house with a high-maintenance white picket fence. Renting with dignity can be facilitated through quality construction that provides a basis and foundation for people working toward the "American Dream." The planning of a rented residence should be performed with as much care and thought as a library. What does the environment of a well-designed library tell the users? It speaks with a dignity that promotes thought, achievement, order, possibility; the foundations of opportunity, and opportunity is the foundation of the "American Dream."

Mark Mulder

[Editor's Note: Bob Mulder passed along to us this note he received from his brother:]

because of problems being created by some residents at a particular apartment complex. It's worthwhile remembering that unsavory people can and do live in single-family residences — just as they do in apartments. Fortunately, most people, regardless of what type of housing they live in, are basically decent and just trying their best to make a living and get ahead.

Another well-worn argument against multi-family housing is that it will cause property values to fall. I tell people that if they sincerely believe that, it will become a self-fulfilling prophecy, especially if realtors hear about these "falling" property values. I firmly believe that multi-family developments should not cause property values of adjacent single-family homes to decrease.

It is extremely important for those of us serving on planning commissions or boards to investigate thoroughly any opposition to multi-family development. Are there legitimate planning issues related

to traffic, stormwater management, and so on, or is it simply a case of not wanting "those kinds of people" near our neighborhood? When you hear someone say "we don't want anyone in our neighborhood who doesn't belong there," be on guard. ♦

*Bob Mulder has been a member of the Raleigh, North Carolina, Planning Commission for four years, and currently serves as its Chairman. He has owned and operated a landscaping business since 1979, and specializes in environmentally sound landscaping.*



[Editor's Note: Bob Mulder addresses an important, and disturbing, subject in his Insights column. We would like your reaction. Does your community face similar problems? How do you deal with NIMBY-like opposition? Are there strategies you've used to help accommodate multi-family housing? We'd like to run additional perspectives on this important topic.]