

Editorial: The benefit of balance: In Chicago neighborhoods, growth and affordability can coexist



Development continues along Milwaukee Avenue in Logan Square on April 23, 2019. Logan Square is one of the neighborhoods showing a big drop in affordable housing, according to a new report from DePaul University. (E. Jason Wambsgans/Chicago Tribune)

By **Editorial Board**

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A Chicago neighborhood that's on the rise is obvious to the eye at street level — new shops and restaurants attracting customers, homes and condos under construction, maybe new office space, too. What can't be seen amid the excitement of robust economic activity is the impact of rising rents on longtime residents. With growth and renewal, or *gentrification* if you prefer, the supply of affordable housing declines and some renters are forced out.

This phenomenon is underway most aggressively on the North and Northwest sides. A new report from DePaul University's Institute for Housing Studies explores [the scope of Chicago's affordable housing woes](#), and what it means to the city's future.

Some highlights:

- Since 2012, the city's supply of affordable housing units has dropped 15 percent. The study defines an affordable unit as one with a rent of \$940 a month. That's about 30 percent of the monthly earnings of a low-income household bringing in yearly wages of \$37,641 or less. Neighborhoods with the biggest drops in affordable housing include Portage Park/Jefferson Park, Logan Square/Avondale, Irving Park/Albany Park and Lincoln Square/North Center.
- There's a wide array of reasons why Chicagoans pack up their U-Hauls and motor out of Chicago. Violent crime and not enough jobs are two big ones. But the report suggests another factor — a lack of affordable housing. The report points to a big drop in low-income renters that isn't offset by increases in home ownership or shifts to higher income brackets. Instead, the report says, "The loss of affordable rental housing may be contributing to low income renters leaving" the Chicago area.
- One of the city's biggest sources for affordable housing is its supply of apartment buildings with two or four units. Between 2016 and 2017, the number of those units dropped by 14,000. In neighborhoods on the North and Northwest sides. Many of those buildings are being torn down and replaced by million-dollar single-family homes or luxury apartment buildings.

The city's lack of affordable housing was one of the most hotly debated issues in the mayoral and aldermanic races. Mayor-elect [Lori Lightfoot](#) pledged to "lead on this front and be a partner with those seeking to provide more housing that is affordable in Chicago so people can stay in their neighborhoods, schools and jobs."

Lightfoot has said she would clamp down on the use of aldermanic privilege to thwart the construction of affordable housing. Her approach: Streamline the approval process for projects that include affordable housing in wards where less than 10 percent of the housing stock is affordable. An alderman's veto power over such projects would disappear. She also would ramp up the amount of affordable housing that developers must build in order to obtain rezoning, city financing or city land.

Currently, aldermen have the power to negotiate with developers, possibly pushing them to include more affordable housing units as a part of new construction projects. That can be effective, but the reality is that as more Chicago neighborhoods gentrify, the affordable housing shortage will increase.

Our message as Lightfoot takes office: Adding more affordable housing is vitally important as more neighborhoods gentrify. But there's a careful balance required to ensure that growth isn't squelched. New developments bring jobs and investments in new businesses. This is how a city grows. The goal in managing change is to improve the quality of life for all Chicagoans.

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