Proposal for Residential Zoning by Race: How Pittsburgh’s Zoning Districts Promote Different Housing Options for Black and White Residents

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Issue and Significance

This proposal for Residential Zoning by Race: How Pittsburgh’s Zoning Districts Promote Different Housing Options for Black and White Residents is in response to the RFP for the 2022 PHFA Housing Policy Fellowship. The working hypothesis for this project is that the current single-family and multi-family zoning districts in Pittsburgh follow a racial and exclusionary pattern that effects the housing choices available to white and Black residents. The fellowship will enable me to dedicate the time to validate this hypothesis by using GIS to compare the 1927, 1967, and current zoning maps against the 1937 Home Owner’s Loan Corporation (HOLC) redlining map of Pittsburgh and the racial compositions of the city’s neighborhoods in the 1960s and 2010s.

While this study is focused on the city of Pittsburgh, the hypothesis and methodology are applicable to municipalities across the Commonwealth. The hypothesis stems from a larger research project into the origin and implication of the stated purpose of zoning to promote the morals of the local community, where the morality promoted centers on the white, middleclass, suburban morality of a male head-of-household homeowner and breadwinner supported by the housewife and mother. The Pennsylvania State Enabling Act for Zoning specifies that zoning ordinances “shall be designed to promote, protect and facilitate any or all of the following: the public health, safety, morals and general welfare . . .” (emphasis added). This Act recommends, but does not require, that municipalities base their zoning code regulations on promoting morals. Nine of the ten largest cities in Pennsylvania currently follow this recommendation. Philadelphia is the only one of these cities that does not include...

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City of Scranton, PA. Chapter 445: Zoning.
Zoning Ordinance for the City of Erie. May 1, 2019.
morals in the purpose of its current zoning code. This shared language suggests that there is a shared philosophy behind the zoning codes across the state.

The methodology in this study can be replicated in other Pennsylvania municipalities. There are 1930s HOLC maps available in a GIS compatible format for Altoona, Bethlehem, Chester, Erie, Harrisburg, Johnstown, Lancaster, New Castle, Philadelphia, Wilkes-Barre, and York. I assume that most of these cities will also have records of previous zoning maps in addition to their current maps. Even if the past maps are not available, the comparison of the HOLC redlining designations with the current zoning map and demographics can be done with each of these cities. Some cities will have a bigger lift as in my review of current zoning maps in cities across Pennsylvania about half use a format compatible with GIS while the other half use a format that would need to be converted first.

The results of this project will help inform local planners and policymakers as they participate in the national conversation that is re-evaluating the exclusive single-family zoning district central to US zoning codes. Minneapolis and San Francisco are taking local approaches to eliminate the single-family zoning district and add more housing options in the single-family zone respectively. DesegregateCT is pursuing a statewide approach to zoning reform. In these proposed changes, there is consensus that the exclusive single-family zoning district is a problem for limiting housing options and therefore housing affordability, but there is variation in how to solve that problem. This variation makes sense if it is based on the local conditions and experiences.

My research proposes to focus on the local conditions by probing how and why the existing residential zoning districts were established. The single-family zoning district did not grow in isolation, which is why it is important to consider the multi-unit residential districts as well in formulating a solution to the limitations and exclusions of the single-family zone. When I worked in Pittsburgh’s zoning office, I was trained that the current zoning map was based on the existing housing stock. This is a logical approach as much of the city’s residential buildings were built prior to the introduction of zoning. However, while the existing housing stock may have been considered in the decisions to establish the locations of the current zoning districts, there are too many anomalies for this to be the sole factor. For example, multiple neighborhoods with predominately white populations and a pre-WWII housing stock of mixed single-family and multi-unit dwellings are currently in single-family zoning districts. This study proposes to focus on the factors of redlining and race in Pittsburgh’s zoning as these anomalies suggest a pattern of single-family zoning districts in white neighborhoods and multi-unit zoning districts in Black neighborhoods.

This pattern is important because zoning affects housing choice by designating what types of housing can and cannot be built or renovated in a given area. Single-family zoning districts restrict the

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6 Desegregate Connecticut. https://www.desegregatect.org/ Note: DesegregateCT started with a statewide zoning atlas to combine all the local zoning maps into one interactive map that then informs the regulatory changes they are pursuing and supporting. https://www.desegregatect.org/atlas
options. Multi-family zoning districts allow a wider range of options. However, multi-family districts in Pittsburgh also enable mass consolidations which remove single-family dwellings from the homeownership market. For example, the rowhouses at 7502-7539 Hamilton Ave, Pittsburgh, located in an multi-unit zoning district with a high Black population were consolidated into a single parcel\(^7\) reducing the possibility of these houses becoming available for homeownership at a future date. If this proposal’s hypothesis is correct, then zoning is currently funneling Pittsburgh’s white residents toward the option of a single-family dwelling as either homeowners or renters and Black residents toward rental and multi-unit housing options.

Related research conducted by others provides a foundation for this project. Similar comparisons of the 1930s HOLC redlining maps and recent zoning maps have been conducted for St. Louis, Portland, and Minneapolis. The results from St. Louis and Portland show that areas marked as “best” on the HOLC map currently have the highest percentage of single-family zoning districts while the areas marked as “hazardous” currently have the lowest percentage.\(^8\) The Minneapolis analysis found that the areas identified in the 1930s HOLC maps as “best” and “still desirable” were mostly designated as exclusive single-family zoning districts up through 2019 when Minneapolis eliminated that district type.\(^9\) In Pittsburgh, the 1937 HOLC redlining map has been compared to the racial demographics of the city from 1970 to 2000 with the result that persistently Black neighborhoods align with those designated as “definitely declining” and “hazardous.”\(^10\) My project proposes to combine these approaches to test the hypothesis that “definitely declining” and “hazardous” neighborhoods with high Black populations will mostly fall into multi-unit zoning districts in the current zoning map.

This project also ties into my on-going research into zoning and morality. As mentioned above, this research is inspired by the Pittsburgh’s zoning code’s purpose to “promote the health, safety, morals and general welfare of the community”\(^11\) and by how the zoning code appropriates the morals of the single-family dwelling and picket white fence. I am currently conducting a literature review on zoning, the single-family dwelling, and morals that I developed in consultation with Dr. Diane Shaw, an architectural historian at Carnegie Mellon University with a specialty in US housing. The readings done to date have impressed on me the strong ties between zoning regulations and racial exclusion which resonate with my experiences working in zoning where I saw certain regulations having a disproportionate impact on people of color. The research I am proposing to conduct for the PHFA Housing Policy Fellowship will be the first original research in my project examining zoning and morality.

\(^7\) Allegheny County Real Estate Portal. https://www2.alleghenycounty.us/RealEstate/GeneralInfo.aspx?ParcelID=0174P00156000000&SearchType=3&Cur rRow=0&SearchName=&SearchStreet=&SearchNum=&SearchMuni=&SearchParcel=0174p00156&pin=0174P0015 600000


\(^11\) Pittsburgh Zoning Code. Section 901.03 “Purpose and Intent.” https://library.municode.com/pa/pittsburgh/codes/code_of_ordinances?nodeId=PIZOCO_TITNINEZOCO_ARTIINES _CH901GEPR_901.03 PUIN
Methods and Work Plan

To look at the role that exclusion and race have played in the development and location of Pittsburgh’s current zoning districts, I propose to compare the 1927, 1967, and current zoning maps; the 1937 HOLC redlining map; and the racial compositions of the different areas of the city in 1960 and 2010. These dates and sources were chosen due to their availability, but they also represent important points in the timeline of zoning and race in Pittsburgh. The 1927 zoning map is the first one in Pittsburgh to include an exclusive single-family zoning district. The 1967 zoning map is the earliest available map I have found following the 1958 zoning code update that changed Pittsburgh’s code from a 25-50 page pamphlet to a book hundreds of pages long. Also, Pittsburgh experienced only a moderate rise in the percentage of its Black population in the 1920s, but by the 1960s this had changed to a sharp increase.\(^{12}\)

This project will be conducted primarily from home or the library. The required tools are ArcGIS, which I have access to from home, and the data. Some of the 1960 census data will need to be accessed through the library, but the rest of the maps and data are easily accessible online.

There are four phases to this proposal all of which will be conducted in ArcGIS. Phase 1 will compare the current zoning map to the 1937 HOLC redlining map. Phase 2 will trace the growth of the exclusive single-family zoning district across the city and compare that growth to the remaining locations that permit multiple units using the 1927, 1967, and current zoning maps. Phase 3 will layer racial data from the 1960 and 2010 census on top of the corresponding zoning maps. The final phase will pull the first three phases together into a presentable analysis. The total time from the beginning of Phase 1 through completion is expected to take 12 months.

Phase 1 will be the quickest phase. The current zoning map and the 1937 HOLC redlining map already exist as GIS shapefiles that can be used for analysis. This phase will explore any patterns of overlap between the residential zoning districts and the grades that the HOLC agents assigned from “best” to “hazardous” in 1937. Based on comparing the maps side-by-side, my hypothesis is that most current multi-family zoning districts will be in areas that were marked “hazardous” or “definitely declining” in 1937 while areas that were marked “best” or “still desirable” will now be mostly single-family zoning districts. This phase will require working with the existing shapefiles to compare the overlap between the four categories and the current single-family and multi-family zoning districts followed by a written analysis of the results. This phase is expected to take two months.

Phase 2 will be the most time intensive phase. While the current zoning map is available in the shapefile format required for using in GIS, the 1927 and 1967 zoning maps will need to be converted to that file format. Once they are converted, they can be overlayed with the current map to look for the pattern of growth of single-family zoning in Pittsburgh compared to the areas that continued to allow multiple units. The visual analysis will be complemented by a written description of the findings. This phase is expected to take five months.

Phase 3 will also be a time-intensive phase. As with the zoning maps, the recent data, in this case the 2010 census, is already in a format compatible with GIS while the older data is not. The 1960 racial demographic census data will be converted to a format compatible with GIS. Then, the racial census data from both eras will be overlayed on the corresponding zoning maps. My hypothesis is that in both eras the single-family zoning districts added since the previous zoning map will be predominantly in the whiter neighborhoods while neighborhoods with the highest Black populations will see more multi-unit residential zoning districts. This phase is expected to take three and a half months.

The final phase will bring the previous three phases together. In this phase, I will develop the GIS storymap to present the maps created during the research in a user-friendly format with explanatory text. The written analysis that will accompany the visual analysis in the storymap and the dissemination plan will also be finalized at this time. This phase is expected to take one and a half months.
Final Product and Dissemination

The proposed final product of this research on Residential Zoning by Race is an ArcGIS storymap based on the analysis created throughout the fellowship. The storymap will include a visual and written analysis. The visual analysis will be the maps showing the patterns and overlaps between redlining, race, single-family zoning, and multi-family zoning. The written analysis will explain the patterns found and their implications, including how the results could inform the discussion about local solutions to the problems of exclusive single-family zoning. The storymap’s URL will be publicly accessible and can be linked on PHFA’s website.

The dissemination plan will continue to evolve as the project moves forward. I am in discussions with Ray Gastil, director of the Remaking Cities Institute (RCI), about collaborating with RCI on the dissemination of the final maps and analysis. The goal of the dissemination plan is to share the results of this project with as wide an audience of planners and policymakers as possible. In addition to PHFA, others in the target audience will be planners, housing specialists, and municipal governments and planning commissions throughout the state. Avenues for reaching this audience may include the above-mentioned collaboration with RCI, engagement with the state chapter of the American Planning Association, and direct contact with planning and housing organizations across the state. The local examples of these organizations would include Pittsburgh’s Department of City Planning, City Council, and Planning Commission; the Urban Redevelopment Authority; the Pittsburgh Community Reinvestment Group; and the local community development corporations. Conversations with these groups about my research will be ongoing in the coming months and continue throughout the fellowship.