

# High-density development is not what Americans want

March 1, 2018

by [Randy Bright](#)

A few years ago on Christmas Eve, a major fire erupted at a luxury hotel in Dubai. Though the building did not collapse, there were reports of huge parts of the structure falling off of the building nine hours after the fire began.

This wasn't the first time Dubai experienced a major high-rise fire. In February of 2015, a fire broke out in one of the world's tallest apartment buildings, the 86-story, 1100 foot tall skyscraper ironically named the Torch Tower. The fire began on the 51<sup>st</sup> floor.

There were no reports of deaths directly related to the fires, but there were a few minor injuries.

With dense, high-rise development come risks, not just to personal safety, but to the places where hundreds, or in some cases, thousands of people live. A large number of people were made homeless by what started as a small fire because the chimney effect spread the fire from one apartment to the next so quickly.

Despite this risk, urban planners still see high density as their most desired living arrangements for most of the population, and with that the notion that most people should live in the urban cores where density is more prevalent.

But even though the reality is that most people still prefer a single detached home, especially families with children, supplies of these kinds of homes have become scarce, and therefore very expensive as urban growth polices drive land costs up.

A few years ago, two articles appeared on the *Newgeography* website that deals with this issue, *Land Regulation Making Us Poor: Emerging Left-Right Consensus* by Wendell Cox, and *Where American Families are Moving*, by Joel Kotkin.

Cox uses data from New Zealand to prove the point that the housing crisis there is being recognized by both liberal and conservatives as being the result of overregulation of land.

Cox writes, "Both the center-Left and center-Right have come together in agreement on the depth of New Zealand's housing affordability and its principal cause, overly restrictive urban planning regulations," quoting authors of the *New Zealand Herald* commentary who wrote. "our own research leaves no doubt that planning rules are a root cause of the housing crisis...".

According to Cox's article, home construction in New Zealand has fallen 40 percent since 1973, but its population has increased by 50 percent. He says that this is because "far more restrictive land use regulations have been adopted, including urban containment boundaries (urban growth boundaries), which have been associated with higher prices relative to income. Before the imposition of strict land use regulations, houses typically cost three times or less that of

household incomes. Since then, house prices have doubled or tripled relative to household incomes.”

Even though the impacts of more regulations are well known to urban planners and city governments, many cities still push for high density development. Another of those impacts is that it is simply driving people away from these areas simply because they are not within family budgets.

Kotkin writes in his article, “However hip and cool San Francisco, Manhattan, Boston or coastal California may seem, they are not where families are moving.”

Citing a study by the Chapman Center for Demographics and Policy, he wrote, “We found that the best cities for middle-class families tend to be located outside the largest metropolitan areas.”

He gives the example of San Francisco to make the point about childless cities: “in 1970, children made up 22 percent of the population of San Francisco. Four decades later, they comprised just 13.4 percent of the town’s 800,000 residents. Nearly half of the parents of young children there, according to (a) 2011 survey conducted by the city, planned to leave in the next three years, largely due to high housing costs. This pattern is accelerating: since 2011, less-dense zip codes have been growing far faster than the more dense ones.”

Kotkin points out that industries are recognizing the importance of being located near communities where homes are within the budget of their workers: “A recent SMU study found that high housing prices to be the biggest reason why Toyota left Los Angeles for the Dallas-Ft. Worth area.”

There is overwhelming evidence that high-density development for the places we live is very poor policy, for security, for safety, and for economic reasons. But that hasn’t stopped our governments, from the local to the federal level, from pushing it on us. It is something our presidential candidates should be talking about because these policies will eventually affect us all.



Randy W. Bright, AIA, NCARB, is an architect who specializes in church and church-related projects. You may contact him at 918-582-3972, [rwbrightchurcharch@sbcglobal.net](mailto:rwbrightchurcharch@sbcglobal.net) or [www.churcharchitect.net](http://www.churcharchitect.net).  
©2018 Randy W. Bright