

## Here's how the state takes control of your neighborhood

We're in for a transformation in how local government works.

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If you live in North Texas and haven't been paying close attention to the Texas Legislature, now would be a good time to start. Lawmakers in Austin are advancing sweeping legislation that could permanently reshape our region, changing how we build our cities, how we educate our children and how much control local communities retain over their future.

Proposals once viewed as fringe, like school vouchers and state preemption of local zoning laws, are no longer political outliers. Backed by influential coalitions and powerful special interests, they're gaining serious traction. And the impact could be dramatic:

denser development in suburban neighborhoods, [new educational divides](#) and a weakening of long-held local authority.

Why now?

The answer lies at the intersection of crisis and opportunity. Texas is facing a housing shortfall of more than 300,000 homes, [according to a 2024 report from the Texas Comptroller](#). That shortage has only grown in recent years, even as the state experiences record levels of new construction. Meanwhile, Texas home prices have surged: [The median price rose 40% between 2019 and 2023](#). In Dallas-Fort Worth, for example, the median price is more than \$400,000.

Those rising prices have made homeownership feel out of reach for many Texans, particularly younger buyers and middle-income families. Deep-pocketed developers and newly arrived billionaires with real estate ambitions see Texas as a blank slate. But they also see local zoning rules as an obstacle. Rather than go city by city, they're now pushing for change at the state level, where a single law can upend local regulations statewide.

Among those leading the charge are groups like Texans for Reasonable Solutions, the Texas Affiliation of Affordable Housing Providers (TAAHP) and assorted groups collectively known as YIMBYs (Yes In My Backyard), which support denser, more flexible housing laws. Their message is simple: local zoning laws are to blame for the affordability crisis; the only solution is bold state action.

One such proposal is Senate Bill 854, filed by Sen. Royce West, D-Dallas, and Sen. Mayes Middleton, R-Galveston. It would allow churches and religious institutions to build multifamily and mixed-use housing on their land without going through the local zoning process. More concerning, the bill would limit cities' ability to regulate building height, setbacks and parking, effectively sidelining local input on development projects.

This kind of top-down approach has infuriated local officials across the state. The Senate Committee on Local Government recently heard spirited testimony from both sides. It's a preview of the battles still to come.

"Our message is clear," said David Schwarte, a retired Arlington attorney representing the Texas Neighborhood Coalition. "Do not pass any bills that preempt the power of cities to protect residents and residential neighborhoods."

Other bills, including HB 878, HB 1779, and SB 673 would legalize accessory dwelling units (ADUs) statewide, once again overriding local control. But perhaps the most far-reaching is Senate Bill 15, which would eliminate minimum lot size requirements larger than 1,400 square feet for new neighborhoods. That change would allow up to 31 dwelling units per acre in cities over 150,000 residents in counties of 300,000 or more.

You read that right: under SB 15, cities would be forced to allow densities more typical of apartment complexes in new neighborhoods that might otherwise be zoned for single-family homes.

The pushback has been fierce. Flower Mound Deputy Mayor Pro-Tem Adam Schiestel warned the infrastructure burden alone could cost his city hundreds of millions. Former Arlington City Council member Charlie Parker assailed SB 15 as “a vision for housing that is smaller than my two-car garage.”

For many Texans, the ideal of homeownership still includes a single-family house on a quiet, tree-lined street, with good schools, low traffic and strong community involvement. But for a growing number of residents, especially younger families and newcomers to the state, affordability is the new priority. That means smaller homes, denser neighborhoods and fewer barriers to building.

Politicians, never ones to let a crisis go to waste, have seized on this shift. Under the banner of “affordability,” they’re advancing laws that align closely with the interests of builders, developers and politically connected landowners, many of whom now see Austin as the most efficient place to make deals – and, most importantly, to develop land as they see fit. They are in it for the long haul.

“We might not get the legislation now, or maybe even in five years,” said a representative for one of the special interest groups who agreed to speak on the condition of anonymity. “But it won’t take a decade. We weren’t successful in trying to work with individual cities. We’ll get what we need at the state level.”

What’s at stake isn’t simply where people live; it’s who gets to decide.

**CLARIFICATION -- Monday, April 7, 3:30pm:** An earlier version of this column said that SB15 would allow greater density in neighborhoods already zoned for single family homes. In fact, SB15 would only apply to new neighborhoods.