

# Why our housing plan must pass: Mayor de Blasio urges the City Council and advocates to get behind his zoning reforms

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**The answer is up.**

What kind of city are we going to be 10 or 20 years from now? Can we be both a city that's thriving, and one that working families can still afford to call home?

Today, we're at a turning point, and we face decisions that will shape our city for a generation.

We can address our housing crisis head on, with tough truths, real resources and every tool at our disposal. Or we can shrink from the challenge, letting fear of change paralyze us as the city we all love slips away.

I see and feel the deep insecurity in our neighborhoods: fear of displacement, fear of more people moving in and driving up rents, fear of taller buildings that change the look of our streets.

These are anxieties that have grown in our city over decades. At times, they can overwhelm us. But they cannot hold us back from acting decisively to protect our neighborhoods and keep this city affordable to working people.

The results our administration has achieved in just two years show what real action looks like. In the past two years, working closely with communities and their elected officials, we've put shovels in the ground on more new affordable housing than at any time since 1978. The apartments we've built and preserved are enough for 100,000 New Yorkers, and we're just getting started.

Affordable housing for the very poorest New Yorkers — people making around \$20,000 a year — is going up at a record pace. We increased funding for their housing four-fold, financing more affordable housing for them in the last two years than my predecessor did in the last five.

More than a million rent-regulated tenants received their first-ever rent freeze.

Working with the City Council, we've increased funding for free legal representation for tenants ten-fold to fight evictions and harassment. Evictions by city marshals have gone down 24% since I took office.

We protected thousands of families at Stuyvesant Town and Riverton Houses, and have kept those complexes affordable for a whole generation.

That's my record, and I'm proud of it. But the crisis we face demands more tools, and right now two of the most important ones we need are just weeks away from a vote in the City Council.

One reform will put in place the strongest mandatory affordable housing requirement of any city in the nation, meaning all new residential development in newly zoned parts of the city will have to include 25-30% affordable housing in order to build. Mandatory Inclusionary Housing will, for the first time, replace voluntary affordable housing incentives with new hard and fast minimums. It's a game-changer that will mean a new floor of permanently affordable housing for low- and moderate-income families in our neighborhoods.

The second set of changes is the biggest update of our land use rules since the 1980s. Obscure and outdated rules make it difficult, costly and time-consuming to build affordable housing, especially for seniors-adding years to timetables, all while 200,000 seniors are on waitlists that stretch back years. The changes we've put forward will ease restrictions on new senior housing and give builders slightly more height on affordable projects to ensure we get every apartment we possibly can.

Our reforms will also eliminate unnecessary requirements for off-street parking that date from the days of Robert Moses. They force us to build parking spots that ultimately go unused, rather than more of the affordable apartments our seniors need.

We're in the worst housing crisis in generations, and we're not going to allow these wasted opportunities anymore. AARP supports us. So do labor unions representing half a million working New Yorkers. So do leading clergy, small business groups and the non-profit organizations that build much of our affordable housing.

I don't underrate the tremendous fear and uncertainty still out there. It's a fear so deeply held that some voices say any development at all—even 100% affordable housing—would just make matters worse. Others are setting a bar so high as to be completely unreachable, setting us up for a city in which it's impossible to build anything at all.

Without action, without building, this crisis will only deepen. That's why we aren't waiting any longer. From town hall meetings to churches, from barber shops to beauty salons, I'm making the case for urgent action.

**We'll protect our neighborhoods' diversity.**

We need Mandatory Inclusionary Housing to build affordable housing where the private marketplace won't. With ironclad rules, we won't let neighborhoods become gated oases for the rich. Developers will have to build affordable housing in order to put a shovel in the ground — period.

A recent study by a local councilman showed that had our new mandatory rules been in place in Williamsburg-Greenpoint, where a purely voluntary program was put in place a decade ago, twice as much affordable housing would have been built there. In Bushwick, we would have had three times as much affordable housing as has gone up in recent years. We won't let down families who need affordable housing like that ever again.

**We'll invest not only in better housing, but better neighborhoods.**

I want neighborhoods that have struggled in the past to get better for the people who live there now—that's why we've invested \$1 billion in the new schools, parks and community centers growing neighborhoods will need. And it's why we want all neighborhoods to have housing for a more diverse range of people, so that a young woman who studies hard and goes to CUNY can one day come back and have a home and a neighborhood she can be proud of. We will honor our promises and back them up with real resources.

**We can do all this while protecting current tenants and fighting displacement.**

For decades, tenants have been struggling to keep their heads above water. Now, they finally have a government on their side. We've instituted free legal services to fight harassment and eviction, the first rent freeze in City history, stronger rent laws, and affordable housing protections extended to more than 26,000 apartments in just two years.

Several weeks back I met Luz Santiago, a born and raised Brooklynite who serves her community helping neighborhoods overcome addiction. After years of working three jobs just to afford a small studio, she had finally found a decent apartment she could afford—a true place to call home. But its rent was poised to shoot up just like all the other housing in this corner of Brooklyn.

Because the city stepped in and locked the building into a long-term affordability agreement, Santiago now knows the apartment she loves, where her grandchildren come to visit her, will be affordable for another 30 years. That's the peace of mind we will ultimately give to more than 300,000 New Yorkers through our preservation programs.

**This is a plan that serves everyone, from the poor to the middle class.**

The affordability crisis has grown so dire that even once solidly middle-class families aren't able to find an apartment they can afford. We need more housing affordable to everyone from our low-wage workers to our first responders.

Our Mandatory Inclusionary Housing program will lead to truly diverse buildings and neighborhoods where a custodian, a carwash worker, a teacher and a retiree can all live side by side—as they have for decades.

And we'll tailor that approach for each individual neighborhood. In East New York, for example with zoning and subsidies working together, we'll build 1,200 affordable apartments in just the next two years — all of them at far lower rents than newly rented apartments in the neighborhood today.

**We have to look out for our seniors.**

New York City is getting older — quickly. We have more than 200,000 seniors on waitlists — and no one living the remaining years of their life should ever be told to wait years for a safe, affordable home. We cannot be a city where a senior with a disability becomes a shut-in because she cannot afford to live in a building with an elevator, where a couple who has lived together 50 years needs to split apart because there's no place that can accommodate their differing medical needs. These are the problems senior housing solves.

Despite the crisis we're in, senior housing is one of the hardest things to build in New York City. It's achingly slow to get approvals, it takes waivers to outdated rules written decades ago, and it demands costly additions like parking, even when there's no need for them. And despite the need of every community to provide homes to its elders, there are huge swaths of the city where we can't build senior housing at all.

Our reforms will cut through all that. It'll be possible to build new senior housing, with all the services seniors need to age in place with dignity, in all five boroughs.

**We have to build up, and do it smartly.**

I raised my family in Park Slope, and I care about the unique character of our neighborhoods. But a community's character isn't just about buildings, it's about its people. Over two decades, I saw plumbers, social workers and retirees priced out of

the neighborhood they built. If we want to keep our communities whole, we must be willing to build more affordable housing, even if it stands a little taller.

We have to decide what we value more: keeping a building from rising one extra story, or keeping someone who has lived in a neighborhood for 40 or 50 years from being forced out. I won't put skyscrapers where they don't belong, but we have to get comfortable with becoming a denser city.

Now is the time to double down on this commitment, and pass the two critical reforms: Mandatory Inclusionary Housing and Zoning for Quality and Affordability.

The fear out there is very real. I understand it. And I know we can overcome it. That proof will come when buildings finally rise in our neighborhoods that aren't just for the wealthy few, but for the seniors, the first responders and the working families who make this city what it is: a place for everyone.

*De Blasio is mayor of New York.*