

Comment on Definition of Family policy

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Think Before You Click: This email originated **outside** our organization.

Dear Council Member:

I've been studying the history of planning in Saint Paul and US cities for many years. I wanted to share my thoughts with you about the use of the "definition of family" in City Code as a policy and zoning tool.

The definition of family policy comes from the intersection of two problematic historical social realities. The first is a set of patriarchal assumptions about gender norms and how people should live. Victorian-era thinkers created powerful ideological constraints around gender and families. Through a set of religious, class-based, and moralistic social codes, influential people created expectations about how and where families should live, including that women should remain in the home, and that good "Christian" people required these kinds of heteronormative environments in order to avoid immorality.

The flip side of this ideology was that people who lived in diverse, complex urban spaces were morally inferior. Meanwhile, many forms of social castigation applied to women who resisted the confines of this value system. Many early assumptions about city life, in particular the supposed superiority of single-family neighborhoods, stemmed from this oppressive cultural tradition, which was baked into the zoning code in numerous ways. The definition of family — which for decades excluded domestic servants — was the most explicit expression of this moralistic zoning .

The other historical origin of this rule is even worse: anti-immigrant racism. Typically, people who arrived in cities like St. Paul brought with them cultures and traditions that relied on complex family and community ties for many different forms of mutual support. Grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and acquaintances often formed larger communities of solidarity, or these ties were forged in diverse communities in their new country. Together, as a "family," people would pitch in to purchase property, take care of chores or improvement projects, help with child care, provide cultural connections, and many other things besides.

You can trace family definition policies directly to the racist worldview that saw immigrant communities and traditions as problematic and inferior. Anti-immigrant racism, which was quite prevalent throughout the 20th century, led to the widespread adoption of the definition of family as a way to limit the options of immigrants, people of color, and non-WASP cultural groups. In fact, in St. Paul, keeping immigrants out of the certain neighborhoods, and away from the city as a whole, was an explicit goal stated openly in city planning documents as recently as the late 1950s. While that language has thankfully been exorcised from city documents, the definition of family, which comes from many of the same motives, is still on the books.

Moralistic assumptions about what constitutes a “family” have no place in our City Code. There is no excuse for a city like St. Paul, that purports to be working toward building an anti-racist society, to keep these kinds of rules on the books. Please get rid of it.

Thanks,
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