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Op-ed: 4 steps to address the city's affordable housing crisis

By Jamie Smarr

Recent news of an astounding [45% drop in affordable housing production](#) compared with prior years should spur immediate action to reverse the trend.

The median rent for New York apartments, after plummeting during the Covid-19 pandemic, [has risen to the highest level ever](#): \$4,000. It's a market signal that supply is being choked off while rental demand remains high. Such sky-high rents are affordable for the rich but remain out of reach for regular New Yorkers, who deserve safe, decent places to live.

We are in a housing affordability crisis that requires an immediate, coordinated public policy response.

Failure to take serious action on housing would cripple New York's pandemic recovery efforts and threaten the sustainability of its economic base. New York must create crucially needed housing.

Here are four steps to do it.

Renew critical housing programs. This year the Legislature inexplicably allowed New York's [421-a](#) and J-51 programs to expire—incentives that created and preserved more than 1 million apartments since their inception. Gov. Kathy Hochul and the Legislature reportedly are studying how to replace or renew the programs, but without progress since the summer.

The two programs were proven housing incentives that worked well together to encourage new construction and the preservation of existing affordable housing. I know because I ran New York's tax and zoning incentive programs for years. They enabled the private market to partner with the government to create and preserve affordable housing, stimulating middle-class job growth.

Create even more market incentives. Beyond 421-a and J-51, New York needs [targeted incentives](#) to encourage [increased transformation](#) of moribund office space, hotels and industrial sites into more affordable housing opportunities. The private market must lead the way in [finding innovative solutions](#) to New York's housing crisis.

Streamline city reviews. Mayor Eric Adams' administration should create a "one-stop shop" that [streamlines all city administrative functions](#) to speed housing production: permitting, urban design/zoning and incentives. When I ran the city's tax incentive programs, for example, there were two agencies responsible for reviewing and approving affordable housing incentives: the departments of Finance and Housing Preservation and Development. Since then, a third agency, the Office of Management and Budget, has been added to the process. Do we really need three agencies reviewing the same application?

Trim time-consuming zoning processes. It is well past the time to correct serious problems with New York City's land-use reviews. Far from the ostensible goal of creating "comprehensive, [community-involved](#)" housing development, the uniform land-use review procedure, or ULURP, is instead used by NIMBY-driven, self-interested activists—without real constituencies or concern about societal needs—to kill housing production.

Most New Yorkers once reveled in our inclusive beliefs and progressive policies, but now we are confronted with unrepresentative interests that unashamedly seek to maintain the status quo at the expense of New Yorkers who need affordable homes. ULURP and related administrative reviews now stretch for years, resulting in affordable housing proposals once regarded as desirable now being sabotaged by interminable rezoning processes. Our elected officials and agency heads must figure out how to complete the reviews in a year or less.

In addition, New York should consider providing affordable housing projects with zoning exemptions, like the law that allows the city School Construction Authority to exempt its projects from some reviews. New Yorkers can't wait years for more affordable housing opportunities.

Jamie Smarr is chief executive of the New York City Housing Partnership.