

Talking Triplexes: Missing middle message guide

Talking points developed for Oregon's Missing Middle Bill, HB 2001

Re-legalize mid-sized homes for middle-income affordability

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Oregon legislators passed legislation in 2019 to keep homes for middle-income families in the state's job centers more affordable, lifting restrictions that banned all but the most expensive housing options. Re-legalizing affordable choices like triplexes, duplexes, and quads (four-home buildings) in centrally-located, convenient neighborhoods means more households of different ages, sizes, and incomes can afford to live near work, transit, and schools. The legislation commits Oregon cities, population 10,000 and larger, to allow a range of home types in more neighborhoods.

Recommended messaging for missing middle solutions:

Focus on benefits for people and communities

- More home choices, all shapes and sizes
- Middle-class and workforce homes near jobs, schools, and transit
- Communities where all kinds of Oregonians can afford to live

Emphasize *Missing Middle Homes*: This is a "**missing middle**" housing bill that would re-legalize a variety of home choices in the state's job centers, like duplexes, triplexes, and quads, rather than reserving close-in neighborhoods for only the biggest and most expensive housing.

Center messages around the people who need middle-class, workforce homes: This is a workforce housing solution, helping keep cities across Oregon affordable for moderate-income, working families and small households like seniors or young couples.

Focus on *homes of all shapes and sizes for people of all incomes*: Allowing a range of home types in our cities' residential neighborhoods helps curb out-of-reach prices overall and makes sure homes of all shapes and sizes are available for people of all income levels where they make their livelihoods.

Frame zoning choices as choices about how we shape our communities—and who can live in them:

We have a *choice*; we either re-legalize homes like duplexes and quads to keep communities affordable for people of all incomes OR we continue to restrict housing to the most expensive and exclusive, pushing people further from jobs, schools, and transit and forcing longer, costlier commutes.

Re-legalize historically mixed-income neighborhoods. Reverse rules that forced prices up and segregated cities: The bill would re-legalize a range of more affordable housing options that are familiar in many neighborhoods. Historically in cities across the country, duplexes, triplexes, and small apartments were allowed—and were built alongside single-detached houses. Starting in the 1920s, cities began ratcheting up restrictions on what kinds of homes could be built, and by the 1960s, most had banned anything but single-household buildings, typically on more than half of a city’s residential area. Gradually returning neighborhoods to a variety of homes protects our communities from becoming increasingly segregated by income and protects our state from sprawl and pollution.

Middle-class homes, not McMansions: When we allow a variety of modest home types and allow more than one home on a single lot, we can also help reverse the trend toward bigger and bigger—and pricier—“McMansions” in cities across the state.

Focus on values—Protecting a range of home choices across the state reflects our state values:

Play up missing middle homes as a building block of shared opportunity and the American Dream.

Emphasize shared opportunity: Where we live shapes our lives and our long-term success—from the length and cost of our commute, where we are able to shop for groceries, and our children’s schools. To expand opportunity for all, our cities need plenty of affordable home choices in neighborhoods close to jobs, schools, transit, parks, and businesses.

Focus on seniors and young people: For many young people aspiring to homeownership, a “**starter home**” is out of reach. Since 1970, average sizes for new detached houses have soared by 64 percent. That’s a huge driver of rising home costs. Re-opening middle homes as an option would let many young Oregonians start building their American dreams, and let many older Oregonians savor their own.

Paint a picture—use images, concrete terms, and plain language:

Concrete examples, visuals, and familiar words help people envision a range of homes.

Show, don’t tell—use photos: When mental images are absent, exaggeration and fear can rush in. But duplexes, triplexes and quads are more inviting when people see what they look like. In fact, in most neighborhoods these home types are quite familiar. (Find free missing middle photos in [Sightline’s online image library](#).)

Use plain language, not buzz words: Avoid abstractions and jargon (like “density,” “units,” “zoning”

and “multi-unit”). Instead, describe in concrete terms the kinds of homes you’re talking about. It’s easier to envision missing middle home types and see them as affordable options when call them by name—duplexes, triplexes, basement apartments. Here is a cheat sheet for our top-tier talking points ([full file here](#)):

Talking Triplexes:

“Missing middle” housing messaging tips



Focus on the *benefits* of missing middle homes for communities and families of all incomes:

Affordable choices, of all shapes and sizes, for all our neighbors, with more middle-class and workforce homes near jobs, schools, and transit.

Frame a clear choice about how we shape our communities:

Re-legalize affordable, middle-class homes or build more McMansions? Allow mid-size homes or ban all but the most expensive ones?

Connect middle home solutions to shared values:

Expand opportunity for all and protect the American Dream for families of all incomes, especially young people and seniors.


Paint a picture *with photos and plain language (not buzz words)*:

Skip jargon (like density, units, zoning, multi-family). It’s better to *show what solutions look like* and name specific, familiar home types (like duplexes, triplexes, and small apartments).




Language dos and don'ts: Missing middle *re-frames*

We recommend avoiding opposition frames, jargon and misleading, unfamiliar, or inaccurate wording. Embrace instead a focus on benefits to people and communities, and as much as possible, use concrete examples and everyday language. Here are reframes and language dos and don'ts:



AVOID: REPEATING SCARE TACTICS; JARGON; AND MISLEADING, UNFAMILIAR, OR INACCURATE WORDING.	ADOPT: CONCRETE EXAMPLES; EVERYDAY LANGUAGE; AND A FOCUS ON BENEFITS TO COMMUNITIES.
STOP SAYING THIS...	SAY THIS INSTEAD...
Single-family	Single-detached
Supply bill, density bill	Workforce housing bill, missing-middle housing bill
Get rid of single-family zoning	Lift bans that prevent modest home choices, like duplexes and backyard cottages
Bold, dramatic, transform	Low-impact; a return to modest homes; protecting mixed-income neighborhoods
New housing types, legalize	Re-legalize familiar, modest home choices like duplexes and triplexes
Units	Homes; choices for renters; plenty of homes, all shapes and sizes
Multi-unit	Duplexes, triplexes, and quads
Developers	Local builders and contractors

Find more **tips and talking points** in our full MISSING MIDDLE HOUSING MESSAGING MEMO at www.sightline.org.



Pivots: Addressing skepticism and common concerns

Avoid repeating opposition framing, even to negate or refute it. Rather than repeating and reinforcing the negative narrative, pivot to a more productive message that addresses the root concern. Here are some examples:

You may be asked if this bill will **ban "single-family" zoning**. The truth is that merely re-legalizing missing-middle housing will not significantly change most neighborhoods. Existing homes will remain and changes will be gradual. But don't repeat the negative frame. Instead, say the truth: the bill lets Oregonians choose for themselves whether or not they want to save money by sharing their building or lot. The bill lets more people choose missing middle home options if it's right for their household. Duplexes, triplexes, and quads are great homes for families, too! **Pivot to re-legalizing missing middle, affordable home choices of all shapes and sizes for middle-class Oregon families.**

Avoid the word "**zoning**" when possible. It's jargon. Most people don't spend a lot of time thinking about zoning laws, even though they matter deeply to our lives and how we shape our communities. There are not many sentences with the phrase "single-family zoning" that couldn't be replaced with a phrase like "neighborhoods where duplexes are illegal" or "neighborhoods where only the most expensive type of housing is allowed." **Pivot to choices about how we shape our communities and lives: Exclusive or inclusive neighborhoods? More McMansions or encouraging modest, affordable choices?**

The word **density** itself is a turnoff. In fact, it conjures people's worst fears of skyscrapers and congestion. But most people in our bigger cities describe an ideal place to live as *convenient, walkable, and close to transit, schools, jobs, outdoor spaces, and things to eat, see, and do*. So, describe compact, convenient city neighborhoods, but don't use the word density. Don't call this a density bill. **Pivot to solutions for making sure Oregon families of all income levels have the opportunity to live in communities convenient to transit, jobs, schools, parks, groceries, restaurants, and cultural activities.**

Opponents will define this as **radical, as a bold, dramatic, transformation**. In fact, the radical experiment was limiting in-city lots to a single house. This is part of what led to housing prices out of reach for so many households. **Pivot: This is a common-sense return to a familiar kind of mix of home types in the mixed-income neighborhoods that Oregonians aspire to.**

People will express fears about **loss of "neighborhood character"** and concerns that cities will lose older homes to new, different-looking ones. Remember that people warm to duplexes and quads when they are reminded what those homes look like. But generally, try to keep the focus on people, not buildings. It's neighbors who give a community character. If all the homes are too expensive or replaced with McMansions, Oregon neighborhoods lose the quirky, diverse, unique charm people want to protect. **Pivot: When we allow only certain expensive building types, it determines who can or cannot afford to live in a community--the real character of the neighborhood.**

People will claim that **local control** is the best way to plan cities. This bill continues Oregon's healthy tradition of balancing fine-grained local control with broad statewide goals. It lets local governments set the size and general design of all new buildings—measures that give cities vast leeway to control how many missing-middle buildings will actually get built. It doesn't require triplexes, quads or cottage clusters everywhere---only on at least some lots within a given zone. **Pivot: this preserves great local control, but balances it with the statewide need for middle-income housing, while also protecting families' choices for where and how to live.**

If you are asked about **displacement of older housing**, shift to a choice frame about what homes we allow and what we don't. It's reasonable to be alarmed when smaller, older homes are torn down. But the rules we have today often mean that if a modest-sized, older home is torn down, the *only* type of home legally allowed to replace it is another single-residence on the lot. In today's market that almost always means a bigger, more expensive "McMansion" type house. **Pivot: We can allow a range of modest home types, or we can keep rules that prohibit all other options than replacing one house with one house, encouraging bigger and more expensive houses and forcing prices of even modest, older homes out of reach for middle-income Oregonians.**

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