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Letters: Chicago doesn't lack cranes. It lacks balance in its housing.



Multifloor apartment buildings in Chicago. (Terrence Antonio James/Chicago Tribune)



By **CHICAGO TRIBUNE**

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Rents are rising in Chicago, but blaming zoning rules or construction slowdowns misses what's really going on. The recent editorial [“Apartment rents in Chicago are rising faster than you think”](#) (Oct. 27) points to Zillow data and concludes that we simply aren't building enough. The truth is more complicated.

Chicago's problem isn't how much we build. It's what we build. The city has steadily lost its most affordable apartments — two- to four-unit buildings that once housed much of the middle class. The [Institute for Housing Studies at DePaul University reports](#) that these buildings made up about 38% of all rentals in 2012 but only 32% in 2021. As they disappear, the supply of reasonably priced units vanishes even as cranes fill the skyline.

That loss is showing up in the data. Chicago faces a shortfall of roughly 119,000 affordable units — the largest gap in more than a decade. About half of all renters now spend over 30% of their income on housing. New luxury towers won't solve that imbalance.

The editorial's comparison to Denver also leaves out key context. Denver's slight rent dip came after a flood of new construction — about 20,000 new apartments in a single year — and slower population growth. Chicago isn't facing those conditions. Even in Denver, [the biggest rent drops](#) have been in newer, high-end buildings, while older, more affordable units continue to rise in price.



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In neighborhoods from Rogers Park to Bronzeville in Chicago, older walk-ups and two-flats are disappearing faster than they're replaced. Affordability isn't about building endlessly upward. It's about protecting the homes that already keep our city livable.

Chicago doesn't lack cranes. It lacks balance.

— *Brett Barnes, Chicago*

We need more housing

Rents are rising, inventory is tight and the city's housing gap is growing. We agree with the recent editorial citing a Zillow report showing rents in our region are growing faster than in any other major metro. The root cause is not because demand is suddenly spiking, but because supply isn't keeping up. When we fail to build enough housing, affordability slips further out of reach for working families, young professionals, seniors and those most in need.

The solution isn't government-imposed arbitrary price limits but instead streamlining development processes, reducing bureaucratic hurdles and incentivizing investment in housing construction to bring much-needed inventory to the market. Chicago's housing gap is real and growing. [According to the nonprofit Up for Growth](#), our metro area now ranks among the top three nationwide for housing underproduction, with a shortfall of roughly 165,700 units. This imbalance between supply and demand is one of the biggest threats to our city's long-term affordability and competitiveness.

To the city's credit, there are encouraging steps underway. The administration's approval of the LaSalle Street conversion project — transforming vacant office space into more than 1,000 new apartments — is a smart example of adaptive reuse that both revitalizes downtown and adds much-needed housing. The City Council's unanimous approval of a \$1.25 billion bond to support housing and neighborhood development sends a strong signal of commitment, as do recent efforts to expand the accessory dwelling unit pilot program citywide.

But to more rapidly close Chicago's housing gap, we must accelerate this progress. Policies that add new layers of regulation or punitive measures such as rent control will only make it harder and more expensive to build, deterring investment and slowing development. Cities that have gone down this road, from New York to San Francisco, have seen housing supply shrink and affordability worsen.

The solution is clear: Build more housing. We must encourage investment, partner with developers and property owners, and make it easier — not harder — to create new homes in every neighborhood.

— *Michael J. Mini, executive vice president, Chicagoland Apartment Association, Chicago*

End qualified immunity

On Monday, Springfield's Massey Commission held its [final of 14 meetings](#) that began following the tragic and fatal shooting of Sonya Massey by a Sangamon County sheriff's deputy. Over the course of more than a year, the commission gathered expert and community feedback into the systemic failures that led to Massey's death, culminating in [more than 25 formal calls to action](#). Many of those focused on city and county needs, but one such call urges "the Illinois General Assembly to enact Qualified Immunity Reform to Strengthen Civil Rights Accountability."

Qualified immunity is the judicial doctrine that can make it nearly impossible to vindicate your constitutional rights in court if a government official violates them. It requires that victims of these rights abuses find cases nearly identical to their own in which a federal judge already ruled that a violation took place, meaning that any slight deviation in the way in which your rights are violated can make the perpetrator immune to civil accountability.

When I presented to the Massey Commission [in July](#), I shared [model qualified immunity reform legislation](#) based on work by the Institute for Justice, a nonprofit, public interest law firm that fights in court and in state capitols across the country to ensure accountability for civil rights abuses.

The bill, similar to New Mexico's Civil Rights Act passed in 2021, would ensure that the rights enshrined in the state and federal constitutions actually mean something and that government officials who violate them (from law enforcement officers who use unnecessary force to game wardens who trespass on private property without a warrant) would be held accountable.

That also includes the rights guaranteed by the [Illinois Crime Victims' Bill of Rights](#), a point made by my co-presenter at July's meeting, Amy Endicott from CARE for Victims, a community group focused on victim advocacy, accountability and transparency in the justice system.

Illinois has a chance to join the growing ranks of states standing up for the rights of their citizens, and state legislators who care about justice and accountability have the chance to prove it by ending qualified immunity in 2026.

— Chad Reese, *Institute for Justice, Arlington, Virginia*

Portillo's ownership

In the Oct. 27 editorial about Portillo's ("[For Italian beef palace Portillo's, there's no place like home](#)"), the focus is on overaccelerated growth leading to decline. Not the first time that a restaurant has decided to expand and it doesn't work. But I don't think that was the main factor. Since Dick Portillo sold the fabulous Chicago restaurant chain, the food quality has gone downhill!

People are voting with their wallets. As longtime Chicago-area residents, going to Portillo's was always a special treat for my family and me. We went several times a month. But when the ownership changed, we noticed the difference. The beef sandwich isn't as good. The fries aren't as good. And the chopped salad is definitely different. Not for the better.

— Jane McGrath, *Delavan, Wisconsin*

When is enough enough?

I'm not picking on Portillo's. I'm asking corporate America this. Is there a point when you have taken care of your company and your family? You are proud of your product and update it if necessary. You are paying your employees a good wage and health care. You respect the environment and take care of the resources you use. Pay your fair share of taxes, realizing that they help you through roads and utilities.

Is it possible to achieve this? I would like to think so.

— *Frank Chambers Jr., Chicago*

Cyclists bound by law

Letter writer Lisa L. Smith ("[E-bike, e-scooter riders](#)," Oct. 25) evidently does not know that riders of regular bicycles are also supposed to follow the rules of the road. Seeing bicycle riders sail through red lights and stop signs and have no lights at night and such makes me wonder just how soon they will be hit.

The other night, I saw three riders all in black and with no lights. They were almost invisible. They may be able to see, but they could not be seen.

— *Marie Stevens, Wilmette*

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