

Graphic Detail

Geographic Information Systems (GIS) organize and clarify the patterns of human activities on the Earth's surface and their interaction with each other. GIS data, in the form of maps, can quickly and powerfully convey relationships to policymakers and the public. This department of Cityscape includes maps that convey important housing or community development policy issues or solutions. If you have made such a map and are willing to share it in a future issue of Cityscape, please contact alexander.m.din@hud.gov.

Mapping Equity and Exclusion in Neighborhood Associations in Bloomington, Indiana

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Abstract

Local governments often encourage neighborhood organizing efforts to support citizen participation and bridge a gap between public and private interests, yet the growth of neighborhoods in the United States also has had a long history of exclusion. A grassroots mapping initiative illustrates how private, voluntary neighborhood associations in Bloomington, Indiana, commonly exclude residents of multifamily housing. The visual evidence of those disparities creates important opportunities to pursue more equitable channels to engage residents in local decisionmaking.

Introduction

Neighborhood associations can provide a powerful voice for residents in communities throughout the United States, but what if neighborhood associations intentionally exclude nearby renters?

After realizing that his own neighborhood association in Bloomington, Indiana, deliberately excludes nearby multifamily properties, Mark Stosberg investigated how common such exclusionary practices were elsewhere in the city. Mapping those inequities made the invisible visible.

Neighborhood Associations and Local Governance

Neighborhood organizations in the United States have a history that stretches back to the late 19th century, but they came into full bloom in the 20th century. Many were “middle-class improvement and protective associations” that often established a substantial role in local governance (Silver, 1985: 164). In the past 50 years, the growth of neighborhood associations in the United States has been exponential (Ruef and Kwon, 2016).

Local governments often encourage neighborhood organizing efforts to boost citizen participation and local democracy and bridge a gap between public and private interests (Mathews, 2021; Meyer and Hyde, 2004). Homeowners are more likely to participate in neighborhood organizations than renters, however, creating an advantage in civic influence (McCabe, 2013).

Roots in Exclusion

The growth of neighborhoods in the United States has long been rooted in exclusion. Residential racial and socioeconomic segregation has frequently been codified by local zoning codes, enforced by social customs or coercions, and erected physically with gates, fences, and walls.

Even if overt housing discrimination is now more subdued, neighborhoods’ generations of systemic social and racial inequities persist via rules, regulations, and implicit biases (Solomon, Maxwell, and Castro, 2019). In studies by Kyu-Nahm Jun and Juliet Musso, as well as Elinor Ostrom (as cited in Mathews, 2021), researchers found that socioeconomic inequalities in civic involvement are mirrored in local governance.

Neighborhood Associations in Bloomington, Indiana

Bloomington, Indiana, is a city of about 85,000 residents (U.S. Census, 2019a), including 43,260 students at Indiana University (Indiana University, n.d.). Nearly 65 percent of the population rent their homes. More than one-third of residents experience poverty, including 15 percent of children (U.S. Census, 2019b).

As in many communities, Bloomington’s neighborhood associations seek to build social capital and serve as a channel of direct communication with local government, with support from agencies such as the city’s Housing and Neighborhood Development (HAND) Department as well as the Council of Neighborhood Associations - Bloomington, also known as CONA (City of Bloomington, Indiana, 2021; CONA—Bloomington, 2020).

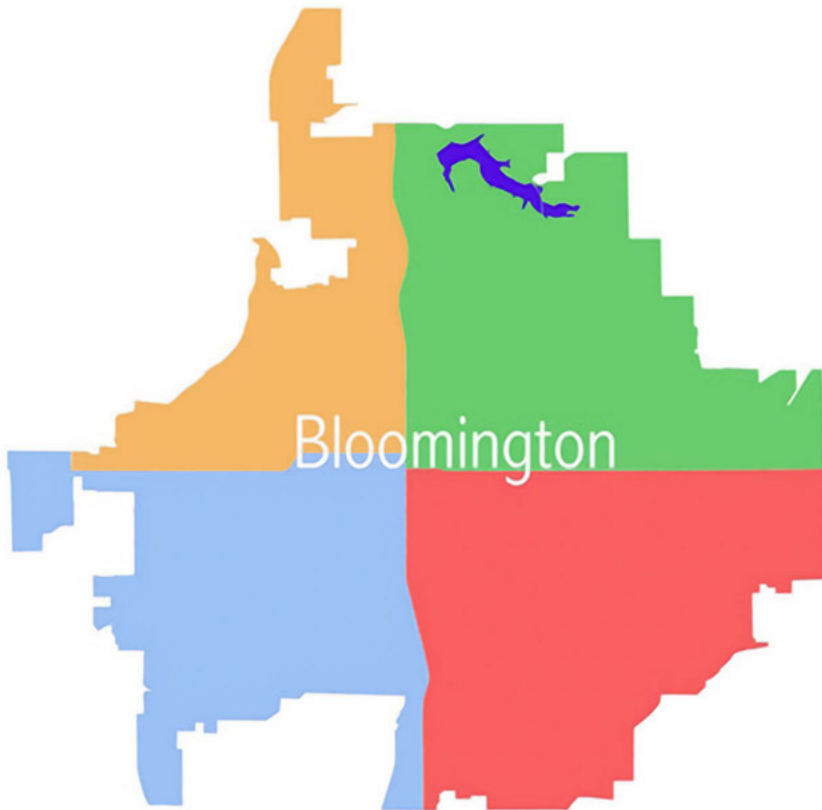
CONA is an independent, nonprofit volunteer organization that has regularly collaborated with the city over the past 30+ years. In the past decade, it has been particularly active in land use issues and revisions to the city's zoning code.

Mapping Exclusion

This CONA icon (exhibit 1) is composed of the geographic shape of Bloomington, with the city divided arbitrarily into yellow, green, blue, and red quadrants that connote the presence of neighborhood associations.¹ Although the colors and shapes do not correlate with anything, the design implies that neighborhood associations reach all corners of the city.

Exhibit 1

CONA Icon of Bloomington, Indiana



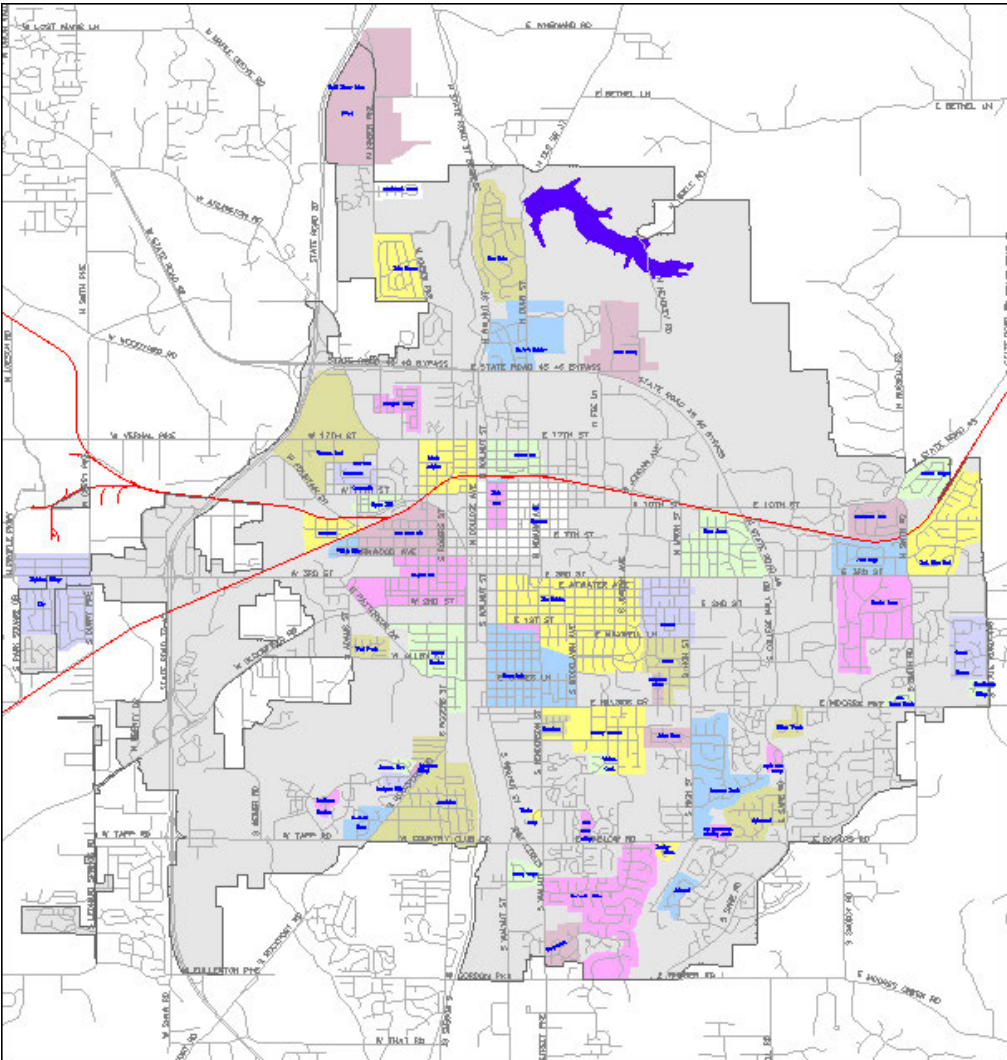
Source: CONA—Bloomington, n.d.

¹ In the print copy of this *Cityscape* issue, exhibit 1 appears in grayscale.

The City of Bloomington uses geographically specific shapes and a variety of colors to map the 55 neighborhood organizations registered with the city (exhibit 2).² The streets and landmarks make it possible to identify exactly where neighborhood associations exist in the city.

Exhibit 2

Map of Neighborhood Organizations Registered With the City of Bloomington, Indiana



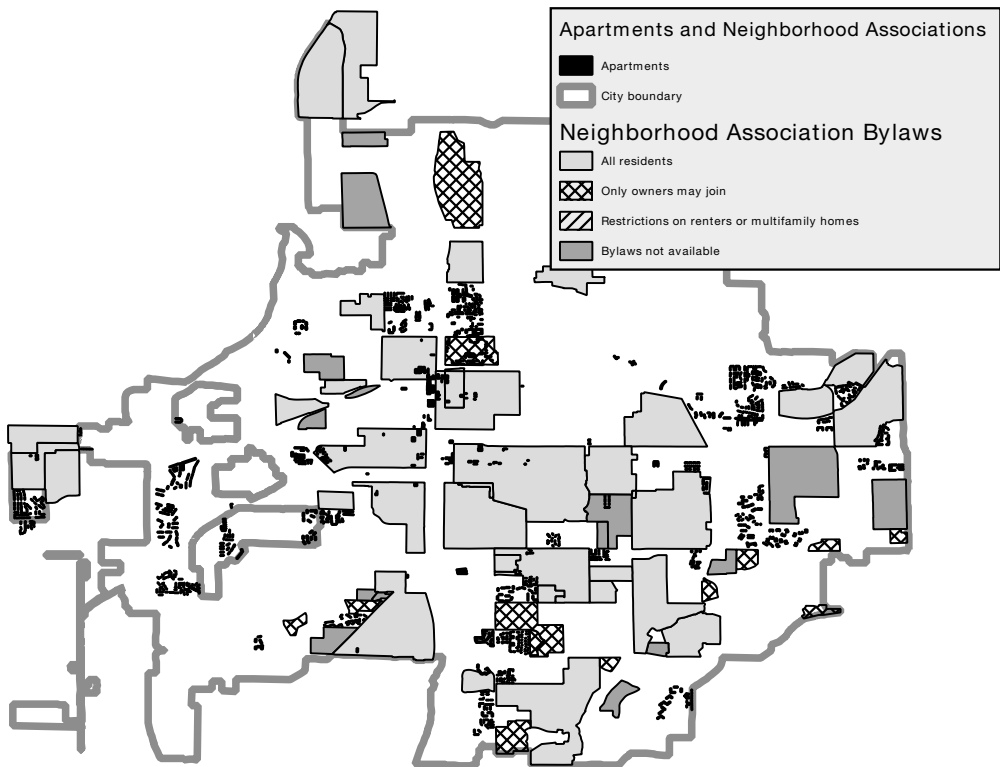
Source: City of Bloomington, Indiana, 2017

² In the print copy of this *Cityscape* issue, exhibit 2 appears in grayscale.

Mark Stosberg's map adds more layers of detail—the location of large multifamily properties compared to neighborhood association boundaries—plus links to organizational bylaws (Stosberg, 2021). Among all apartments³ illustrated in exhibit 3, 81 percent are not in any neighborhood association.⁴ Most people in the mapped apartments are truly neighbors, however: 67 percent of excluded buildings are within one-fourth mile—about a 5-minute walk—from the nearest neighborhood association boundary.

Exhibit 3

Location of Large Multifamily Properties Compared to Neighborhood Association Boundaries



Source: Mark Stosberg

Exhibit 3 reveals how neighborhood associations' self-selected boundaries often bypass nearby apartments. The shading also shows which neighborhood associations' bylaws contain text that excludes renters.

³ In the context of exhibit 3, “apartments” and “renters” are largely similar but not completely synonymous. Many single-family homes in the City of Bloomington are also occupied by renters but are not identified as apartments on this map. Also, some of the apartments highlighted on the map are technically owner-occupied condominium properties.

⁴ The multifamily properties mapped in exhibit 3 are buildings that OpenStreetMap labels “apartments.” This data set in OpenStreetMap is significant but not comprehensive.

Bloomington has recently revised the city’s zoning, including allowing duplexes in areas that for decades have permitted only single-family homes. In one virtual public hearing, about two-thirds of roughly 80 commenters opposed the change, with homeowners generally opposing the inclusion of duplexes and renters largely supporting the initiative (Ladwig, 2021).

Studies indicate that in the United States, those who choose to participate in public hearings on housing proposals are frequently socioeconomically privileged and often hold overwhelmingly negative views of new housing (Einstein, Glick, and Palmer, 2020). Highlighting renters’ exclusion from neighborhood associations thus reveals a systemic flaw that perpetuates disparities, especially given the powerful organizational clout in local land use and housing policy decisions.

Summary

Neighborhood associations have a vital role to play by providing a voice for residents on local issues, yet it is essential to recognize that neighborhood organizations dominated by homeowners may seek housing outcomes that do not reflect the needs of the larger community. Future research could investigate homeownership rates within—and outside—neighborhood associations. Mapping can provide visual evidence of disparities, creating important opportunities to pursue more equitable channels to engage residents in local decisionmaking.

Appendix

Creating the Map: A Grassroots Effort

Creating this map did not require professional planning or Geographic Information System (GIS) skills. ArcGIS Online was used for an interactive online map. The free Quantum GIS (QGIS) desktop software was used to adapt the map in exhibit 3 for this publication.

Data	Source	Notes
Neighborhood association boundary data	Open data portal, City of Bloomington	
Large multifamily properties	OpenStreetMap using Overpass Turbo (https://overpass-turbo.eu/)	More than 100 apartment buildings were not initially mapped. Mark Stosberg taught others how to add buildings in OpenStreetMap to complete that layer.
60 PDFs of bylaws for neighborhood associations registered with the city	Open records request, City of Bloomington	Bylaws transferred to spreadsheet for analysis. Software written to merge the spreadsheet and the boundary data.

Authors

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