

# Cities, Suburbs Deal With Increase In Super-Sized 'McMansions'

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New super-sized house in a suburb of Columbus, Ohio. Photo: Franklin County (Ohio) Auditor's Office and Jack Nasar.

About two-thirds of America's largest cities have reported the appearance of “McMansions” – new, much larger houses built on lots that once contained more modest homes, a new study has revealed.

And some cities have seen a boom in such super-sized homes: about one in five of the largest cities reported 30 or more McMansions within their boundaries.

The number of McMansions is even larger in suburban communities, the study suggests. And the growth is spurring local lawmakers to find ways to regulate super-sized houses.

“The phenomena of McMansions may represent a sea change in which residents with money are moving back into cities and older suburbs, rather than building new homes far from the central city,” said Jack Nasar, co-author of the study and professor of city and regional planning at Ohio State University.

Of course, what constitutes a “McMansion” is in the eye of the beholder. Nasar said research he is currently conducting suggests that the ratio of the size of the house compared to neighboring houses makes the biggest difference to residents. In other words, neighbors don't like a house that is too much bigger than others in the immediate area.

This study was an attempt to learn more about the prevalence of McMansions and what cities are doing to regulate them. Nasar conducted the study with Jennifer Evans-Cowley, associate professor of city and regional planning at Ohio State , and graduate student Vicente Mantero. The results appear in the current issue of the Journal of Urban Design.

The researchers surveyed officials from 29 of the 50 largest U.S. cities, and administrators from 30 other cities (mostly big-city suburbs) that were recommended by the original group of officials.

About 78 percent of these recommended cities reported the presence of McMansions, and 22 percent said they had 30 or more such oversized homes.

The growth of McMansions has spurred up to half of the cities to adopt new regulations within the past 10 years to manage the building of oversized homes, the study found. About 39 percent of the largest cities and 49 percent of recommended cities had adopted new regulations.

While cities reported a variety of regulations, the most common –

adopted by about 14 percent of all surveyed cities – was to limit building height as a way to control oversized houses. The next most common regulations were to create design review boards to approve plans for new homes (about 8 percent of cities) and to set limits on floor-area ratios (about 7 percent of cities).

“Many communities have been looking for a way to deal with McMansions,” Evans-Cowley said. “The issue is really about changing the character of a community. Most people don't mind if a neighbor builds a new addition that fits with the original house. But if you tear down a house and build a huge home that doesn't fit in with the rest of the neighborhood, that's when there are problems.”

As far as city officials go, they seem to have mixed feelings about McMansions, Nasar said. Administrators, like neighbors, may believe some McMansions clash with the character of a neighborhood. But for an inner-ring suburb with a limited tax base, a larger house brings in additional tax revenue, which city leaders appreciate. And while immediate neighbors may not like a huge house hovering over theirs, a larger home may increase home values in the area.

“You may not like it if someone builds a McMansion next door, but if you live a few houses away, you may think it is a pretty good deal if property values increase,” Nasar said.

The researchers said different cities may need different kinds of solutions for dealing with McMansions. The best plan may be for cities to be proactive and identify likely areas for McMansions.

“Then, instead of waiting, planners could try to put good controls in place before building begins,” Evans-Cowley said.

Source: by Jeff Grabmeier, Ohio State University

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