

**Portland's Comprehensive Plan:  
Citywide Urban Design Policy Updates**

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Goal 12, Urban Design, was adopted in 1993 with the Albina Community Plan. Goal 12 includes policies related to Portland's character and sense of identity, historic preservation, the pedestrian experience, promotion of the arts, preservation of neighborhoods, quality of design, and guidance regarding how community planning should take place.

The design policies and objectives are primarily written at a neighborhood-, block- and pedestrian-scale. With respect to larger citywide goals, Goal 12 does not provide sufficient guidance.

**URBAN DESIGN 101**

**WHAT is Urban Design?**

Urban design is an approach employed to make great places. It brings together many things, including physical characteristics of the built and natural environment, key corridors and connections, and the people that see, feel and use these places. In practice, urban design respects the existing qualities of a place and integrates changing physical, social and economic conditions to enrich the quality, health and diversity of human experiences. Urban design works at a variety of scales, including the design of buildings, streets, open spaces, districts, the city and region.

At the City of Portland, urban design is implemented using the following principles:

**Make places for people:** Develop a wide range of distinctive places where the public and private realm are integrated and people have opportunities to interact

**Strengthen connections:** Link places with safe, direct connections and a healthy system of green corridors

**Enhance the existing:** Sensitively integrate new development within existing districts that honor historic and cultural identity

**Embrace the future:** Create new places within the urban fabric that offer new uses, buildings and patterns

**Lead by example:** Foster Portland's international identity as the premier green city, where vibrant, active neighborhoods are the foundation of a sustainable city

**Make it happen:** Create big picture visions for the future of Portland's places, while offering smaller-scale strategies and partnerships for near term implementation

**WHAT is an Urban Design Concept?**

Urban design concept diagrams help people understand, quickly and easily, big ideas and principles about growth and change. For the Comprehensive Plan process, the concept will express broad principles or objectives that serve as the intent behind more specific decisions regarding land uses, zoning, transportation or other changes to development regulations. The concept will highlight Portland's key defining features and attractions – its waterbodies, hills and buttes; its organizing network of major streets and connections; its distinct places; and the areas that will experience the most change.

### **Policy Direction**

The Portland Plan (April 2012) and the Urban Form Background Report (2009) provide direction for updating the Comprehensive Plan policies and objectives for Goal 12, Urban Design. The following includes a list of identified issues which need to be addressed:

- Need to incorporate Portland Plan's "Healthy Connected City" strategy
  - Network of greenways, civic corridors, habitat connections
  - Portland's Five Major pattern areas and context-responsiveness for infill
  - Neighborhood Centers: prioritized areas, corridors and districts for public investments (areas of change)
- Need a citywide map to identify the above strategy, along with places of civic importance to give spatial order to the city
- Need an overall framework or "big picture" set of policies for approaching design in the city and how to connect all of the pieces together

### **Areas that Require updates**

The following list characterizes three broad areas for updates in the current plan. (Policy updates for Historic Preservation, also included in Goal 12, are included on a separate handout.)

1. An Urban Design Concept diagram
2. Portland's Public Realm: streets, open spaces and natural landscape
3. Portland Five Pattern Areas approach

## **1. An Urban Design Concept diagram**

### Existing Comprehensive Plan Policy

Currently, there is no citywide urban design concept diagram.

### Portland Plan Guiding Policy

**H-1:** "Incorporate the principles of the Healthy Connected City into the City's Comprehensive Plan and use this to coordinate policy, land use, and investment decisions."

Background The need for a guiding, citywide urban design concept has been well documented in both the *Urban Form Technical Working Group's Comprehensive Plan Evaluation* (March 2008) and *Urban Form* (July 2011), a Portland Plan Background Report.

Because the Comprehensive Plan currently includes no concept diagram, the "big picture" of the city and its major organizing themes and ideas were never made clear. Typically, districts and neighborhoods develop an urban design concept diagram as part of an update, but without a citywide direction, there is no way to identify how each piece fits into the city's larger context and goals.

An urban design concept diagram will identify place-related policy language and location to help carry out and lay the groundwork for the principles of the Healthy Connected City. In addition, it will convey where and how the city intends to grow and identify the key places, features and connections that should be continued or fostered over time.

### New Approach:

- A citywide urban design diagram that identifies:
  - Portland's public realm: streets, open spaces and natural landscape
  - Portland's five pattern areas
  - Areas of growth

## **2. Portland's public realm**

### Existing Comprehensive Plan Policy

12.4 Provide for Pedestrians. Portland is experienced most intimately by pedestrians. Recognize that auto, transit and bicycle users are pedestrians at either end of every trip and that Portland's citizens and visitors experience the City as pedestrians. Provide for a pleasant, rich and diverse experience for pedestrians. Ensure that those traveling on foot have comfortable, safe and attractive pathways that connect Portland's neighborhoods, parks, water features, transit facilities, commercial districts, employment centers and attractions.

12.1C Enhance the sense Portlanders have that they are living close to nature. Improve access to the City's rivers, lakes, creeks and sloughs. Establish a system of trails that connect Portland's urbanized areas with nearby woods, forests, meadows, wetlands and riparian areas. Increase the degree to which natural areas and public open spaces penetrate the City. Extend forest and water corridors and join them to provide a network of fish and wildlife habitat

areas that mesh with the City's parks, open spaces and circulation system for pedestrians. Design new development to enhance the natural environment that is so much a part of Portland's character.

- 12.1G Extend urban linear features such as linear parks, park blocks and transit malls. Celebrate and enhance naturally occurring linear features such as rivers, creeks, sloughs and ridge-lines. Tie public attractions, destinations and open spaces together by locating them in proximity to these linear features. Integrate the growing system of linear features into the City's transportation system, including routes and facilities for pedestrians, bicyclists and boaters.

### Portland Plan Guiding Policy

- H-2:** "Develop the Healthy Connected City network."
- H-24:** "Develop the network of habitat connections, neighborhood greenways and plan for civic corridors as a spine of Portland's civic, transportation and green infrastructure systems. Enhance safety, livability and watershed health and catalyze private investment and support livability."
- H-25:** "Preserve and restore habitat connections and tree canopy to link stream and river corridors, landslide-prone areas, floodplains, wetlands and critical habitat sites into a system of habitat corridors. This provides connections for wildlife, supports biodiversity, improves water quality, reduces risks due to flooding and landslides, and supports Portland's adaptation to climate change."
- H-26:** "Plan, fund and manage green infrastructure as part of the City's capital systems."
- H-27:** "Build on Portland's green street, sidewalk and bikeway efforts to create a citywide greenway network of trails and pedestrian and bike-friendly green streets. Locate neighborhood greenways to serve currently underserved communities, improve accessibility, and make connections to the central city, neighborhood hubs, major employment and cultural centers, schools and universities, community centers, parks, natural areas and the Willamette and Columbia Rivers."
- H-28:** "Design neighborhood greenways and civic corridors to integrate safe and accessible facilities for pedestrians and cyclists, sustainable stormwater facilities, tree planting and community amenities."

Background: Much of the existing policy for Portland's public realm focuses on the pedestrian scale, which has contributed to the fact that many areas throughout the city (but not all) provide a walkable environment. There is no currently guidance to ensure equitable access to street, trail, and open space connections.

An illustration for the "Healthy Connected City network" was included in the Portland Plan. It shows a network of neighborhood centers, habitat connections, neighborhood greenways, and civic corridors. These areas will be incorporated in the new citywide urban design concept diagram. Policy describing these components and their citywide role should also be incorporated.

While streets are the largest component of the public realm and have historically served multiple community functions, they have been treated and managed by the City primarily for transportation. Portland lacks clear policy guidance on the role of streets as part of the broader public realm, including more public gathering places and green places that bring

more natural elements into the city. Because public resources for creating new parks to serve these functions are limited, streets could provide opportunities to help meet such needs. As mentioned in #1 above, the city needs a strong guiding map to help prioritize areas, especially where it could identify places to address equitable access.

Additionally, the current Comprehensive Plan does not specifically identify Portland's most significant geographic and natural features, such as the Willamette and Columbia Rivers, or Portland's buttes and ridges that would allow special place-based decisions to carry weight. Most of the language in the Comprehensive Plan refers to views of mountains outside the city.

New Approach:

- o Create a unified, citywide plan for Portland's public realm to include habitat connections, civic corridors, and city greenways
- o Focus on areas "under-served" by access to open spaces and connections
- o Expand the functionality of streets beyond movement
- o Highlight Portland's most significant geographic, natural and cultural features

### **3. Portland Five Pattern Areas Approach**

Existing Comprehensive Plan Policy

The Comprehensive Plan does not call out specific neighborhoods except for the Central City. The five Portland pattern areas were identified during background research for the Portland Plan.

- 12.2A Promote the use of strong design features located in distinct areas of the City that help to define the area's character. Developers should consider the character enhancing role of color and light.
- 12.2B Enhance the residential scale of Portland's neighborhoods while accommodating the growth allowed by the City's Comprehensive Plan. Encourage the development of a distinct and attractive urban identity in each of Portland's neighborhoods. As each new community plan is created, give consideration to how it links to and coordinates with urban design elements of adjacent areas.
- 12.2C Foster the development of an attractive urban character along Portland's commercial streets and in its commercial districts. Accommodating pedestrians as shoppers and visitors in commercial areas is a major priority of development projects. Commercial areas should allow the development of a mixture of uses, including residential uses. Add new building types to established areas with care and respect for the context that past generations of builders have provided.
- 12.6A Encourage new developments to respond to the positive qualities of the place where they are to be built and to enhance that place through their development. Developers should consider the character enhancing role played by the use of color and light.
- 12.6B Respect the fabric of established neighborhoods when undertaking infill development projects.

12.6C While accommodating increased density build on the attractive qualities that distinguish the area. Add new building types to established area with care and respect for the context that past generations of builders have provided.

Portland Plan Guiding Policy

**H-7:** "Preserve the distinctive characteristics and history of Portland's neighborhoods and districts when making decisions regarding growth, urban design and the design of improvements."

**H-20:** "Protect and enhance defining places and features of neighborhood centers, including historic resources, with special attention to redevelopment areas."

Background: The current Comprehensive Plan includes several objectives that are geared toward preserving neighborhoods. This acknowledges the responsibility to undertake infill and accommodate increased density while preserving existing character and quality. However, existing development regulations tend to follow "one size fits all" approach. Highlighting Portland's unique physical pattern areas can help future development better relate to its context.

"One size does not fit all". The Portland Plan provides a map to Portland's five major areas: Western, Eastern, and Inner neighborhoods, Central City and the Industrial and River Area, citing that "Each area has unique needs and characteristics." These areas are based on the physical characteristics of buildings, streets, relationship of buildings to streets, and natural features of each area. To date, there is no guiding policy that acknowledges each of these distinct areas in Portland nor their unique characteristics and needs. Unique characteristics are steeped in not only the "past generation of builders" but also in the area's topography and landscape features, including trees and wetlands. Each area's needs may include access to open spaces, transportation choices, and natural areas, as well as the need to meet Portland's future growth.

New Approach:

- o Recognize and strengthen Portland's five pattern areas
- o Build on the existing assets of each pattern area while moving forward
- o Support and strengthen areas identified for growth