

Residential Development and Compatibility Issue Paper

Topic: Building form in multi-dwelling zones

Issue: All residential development types are allowed in the multi-dwelling zone.

Problem Statement

Comprehensive Plan policy allows a variety of structure types in multi-dwelling zones (single-dwelling, duplex, rowhouse, apartment, etc.) to foster variety, affordability, home ownership, income diversity, and to accommodate growth. There are also other Comp Plan policies that encourage housing that supports sustainable development patterns by promoting efficient use of land, resource efficient design and construction, and easy access to public transit. Because of energy efficiency, urban form, and neighborhood character considerations, allowing a variety of residential development types may not always support other policies.

In addition to allowances for multiple building types, the development standards that apply to development in the multi-dwelling zone make no distinction between building types - the standards apply to houses, duplexes, triplexes, and apartments alike. In some instances, development in the multi-dwelling zones have resulted in what appear to be small to medium subdivisions developed without the guidance of the land division regulations. The problem is most apparent on large lots in East Portland, where “multi-dwelling” developments with 30 and more detached houses are being constructed. The end result of such developments is that, while often affordable, they can lack amenities or other site features, and may not have good orientation to streets or adjoining development.

Finally, 44.3 percent of the city’s land area is designated as single-dwelling zones compared to 8.6 percent in multi-dwelling zones. Given the limited amount of land zoned for multi-dwellings, should Portland be more intentional about the type of structures allowed in the multi-dwelling zone?

Background

There are a number of Comprehensive Plan Goals, Policies, or Objectives that support a diversity of housing types in neighborhoods. There are also goals and policies that support the preservation of existing neighborhoods and neighborhood stability, or support energy-efficient development. Certain policies seem to support the variety of development forms in the multi-dwelling zones, but other policies appear to conflict. There is no guidance for which policies take precedence when there is a conflict.

Current Comprehensive Plan policies that focus on Housing (Goal 4) and Urban Design (Goal 12) speak best to inner-Portland neighborhoods where the lot and block pattern is smaller and more regular than that found in East and SW Portland. The portions of East Portland where these problems are most acute were annexed into Portland after the Comprehensive Plan was adopted.

It is important to note the definitions of multi-dwelling “development” and multi-dwelling “structure” to understand the scope of the problem:

Multi-Dwelling Development. A grouping of individual structures where each structure contains one or more dwelling units. The land underneath the structures is not divided into separate lots. A multi-dwelling development project may include an existing single-dwelling detached building with one or more new detached structures located to the rear or the side of the existing house. It might also include a duplex in front with either one or more single-dwelling houses behind or one or more duplex units or multi-dwelling structures behind. The key characteristic of this housing type is that there is no requirement for the structures on the sites to be attached.

Multi-Dwelling Structure. A structure that contains three or more dwelling units that share common walls or floor/ceilings with one or more units. The land underneath the structure is not divided into separate lots. Multi-dwelling includes structures commonly called garden apartments, apartments, and condominiums.

The definitions indicate that any housing type - from single-family to apartment - is allowed in the multi-dwelling zone (as long as minimum density can be achieved).

Challenges/Issues:

A key challenge is determining when and under what circumstances different building types should be allowed. Additionally, more specification or selective limiting of development/building types may add complexity to development regulations and create uncertainty for the development community about allowances.

Health Connections:

Certain development forms may provide more flexibility for other site features such as pathways, open areas, etc., that may not be feasible with less land-efficient forms of development.

Equity Connection:

Consider unintended consequences of limiting structure types in multi-dwelling zones on affordability, neighborhood character, non-conforming situations.

Expected Outcomes:

Develop policies that may be implemented through Comprehensive plan and zoning map amendments as well as development regulations.