

Residential Development and Compatibility Issue Paper

Topic: Development in R1, R2, and R3 multi-dwelling zones

Issue: Outdoor/open area, on-site building relationships, orientation to the public realm, connections to transportation network

Problem Statement: Current city policy and regulations for multi-dwelling development were designed to respond well to inner-Portland development areas with small lots and an established block and street pattern. However, they do not always provide adequate guidance for development and site planning on large or irregularly configured lots, many of which are found in East Portland and other parts of the city that were annexed from Multnomah County. The following are common deficiencies that have been raised and could be addressed by a more specific set of policies and regulations:

- Adequate outdoor space that can be used for children’s play areas, social interaction, gardening, or physical activity for youth and adults.
- Inter-site building relationships, such as buildings that orient to a common outdoor space, pedestrian paths of adequate width that connect all buildings and lead to one or more public streets, and lighting that ensures resident comfort and safety.
- Relationship of new development to the public realm and adjacent development: orientation of buildings and main entries along streets; development scale, style and type that blends in with development in the area; setbacks and relationships to side and rear property lines.

In addition to urban form and livability issues, these site design features also have effects on health (Heath Eating, Active Living - “HEAL” - tenets) and safety (Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) development best practices).

Portland’s current approach to multi-dwelling development “by-right” when standards are met does not provide the opportunity for staff or public review of development proposals, and can have mixed results. Development on large and irregular multi-dwelling lots may benefit from some form of site planning review under certain circumstances.

Background

The Comprehensive Plan includes many policies and objectives that speak to livability, appearance, stability, safety, and residential quality. In addition, the Outer SE Community Plan (OSECP), developed for much of the annexed East Portland area in 1996 and adopted into the Comprehensive Plan, includes policies that address density and housing diversity. The OSECP acknowledges the “super block” development pattern of much of East Portland and includes policy for CPTED, but does not include further guidance for future development on large lots that addresses livability and urban form, or HEAL recommendations. Current implementation tools found in the Zoning Code, including land divisions regulations, also do not address the unique challenges posed by large lots.

Portland’s Zoning Code allows both single- and multi-dwelling residential structure types as long as minimum density is achieved. For example, one lot can contain a number of houses, duplexes, triplexes, or an apartment building (all depending on density). The Zoning Code identifies this type of development as “multi-dwelling development” - multiple residential buildings on one lot. A “multi-dwelling structure” is one that contains 3 or more dwelling units, such as an apartment building. Regardless of the structure type, the development standards of the multi-dwelling zone are the same for all development. For example, 32 houses on one lot must meet the same setbacks, height, outdoor areas, etc. that 16 duplexes or 10 triplexes or one 32-unit apartment building would need to meet. This has implications for site layout, efficiency, usable open space, connections, and the relationship between buildings on a site. See the related RDC policy paper on “Building Form in Multi-dwelling Zones.”

Each of the topic issues is described below in more detail.

Outdoor Space

Outdoor space requirements for multi-dwelling zone development is 48 square feet per unit. A combined outdoor area that is at least 500 square feet may be provided but is not required. The total building footprint for a site varies from 45 percent in R3 to 60 percent in R1. In combination with other requirements, including surface parking and stormwater management, there often isn't enough land left to provide more than the minimum required for outdoor areas. Typically, the outdoor area is provided in the form of a balcony or a ground level patio that extends into a building setback. The policy for outdoor area in the multi-dwelling zones acknowledges that outdoor spaces are important for addressing livability, but the amount of required area often does not result in a usable space.

Relationships between buildings on-site

There are no zoning code requirements to consider the relationship between multiple buildings on a site and the site context or orientation of buildings. Implementation tools are available to allow development of a shared center courtyard for outdoor space and auto use (adopted with the Infill Design Code Amendments project in December 2005) but the provision is optional and rarely used.

Orientation towards the street and adjacent development

Existing policy and code requires single dwelling structures on individual lots to orient toward the street, but the requirement does not apply to the same type of development when it is constructed all on one lot (eg, multi-dwelling development). Further, the main entrance of a multi-dwelling structure is not required to face a street. Orientation to the street is a facet of CPTED, and the CPTED policy is required for city-financed multi-dwelling projects.

Site planning/review

There are no Comprehensive Plan policies or Zoning Code regulations that currently address site planning. The Zoning Code addresses site *layout* by describing the general character of each zone, but mostly in terms of density and building type (townhouses, garden apartments, duplexes, etc). Development standards describe physical requirements (setbacks, height, parking, landscaping, maximum building coverage, etc) but don't address site aesthetics or provide any guidance for the design or layout of the site. The lack of site planning guidance is not a problem for inner or more traditional neighborhoods because the smaller site size and generally lower-density provisions provide built-in limits that result in more homogeneous development with the surrounding neighborhood. Good site planning has the potential to address all of issues identified above.

Prior to annexation into the City of Portland, many parts of East and Southwest Portland were in unincorporated Multnomah County, which required design review for properties developed with a multiplex, garden apartment, or apartment dwelling. Unlike Portland's Design Review which focuses on architectural details, the county's review considered the layout and design of all existing and proposed improvements, including but not limited to buildings, structures, parking and circulation areas, outdoor storage areas, landscape areas, service and delivery area, outdoor recreation areas, retaining walls, signs and graphics, cut and fill actions, accessways, pedestrian walkways, buffering and screening measures. Once these areas were annexed into the city, the county's design review no longer applied.

Challenges/Issues:

The main challenge is how to address this set of issues in a way that does not limit flexibility or add significant cost or uncertainty for the development community while providing more clarity for community interests. There will need to be a way to address the "5 Portlands" to avoid a cookie-cutter approach, and also to acknowledge the unique geography of the areas in which the super block pattern still exists.

The issue of site planning is related to connectivity and density, so another challenge is to clarify and rectify any issues related to those 2 topics to ensure that site planning policy and implementation does not create additional problems.

Site planning or other reviews may result in additional costs borne by the development community which could affect affordability or production of housing.

Finally, further consideration of how state law regarding “clear and objective” standards for development may factor into the type of review possible. A “two track” approach similar to that used in Portland’s design review may be appropriate for some situations.

Health Connection:

Healthy Eating, Active Living - provision of enough outdoor area to allow for gardens, active recreation, and safe and comfortable pedestrian circulation as well as opportunities for social interaction and fresh air.

Equity Connection:

The majority of units built in the multi-dwelling zone are considered “affordable” and usually geared for the rental market - any policy or implementation that makes the developments more “livable” and healthy places to live helps address inequitable situations. But there needs to be a balance between livability and cost, as some regulations can increase building costs which may be passed on to the renter or owner and negatively affect affordability.

Expected Outcomes:

Development and/or revision of policy, implemented through amendments to the Zoning Code regulations, and possible the zoning map or comprehensive plan map.