

Residential Development and Compatibility Issue Paper

Topic:

Single Dwelling Allowances and Density

Issue:

Residential density allowances on lots in some single-dwelling residential areas and zones exceed the density anticipated by the Comprehensive Plan and base zoning provisions.

Problem Statement:

In many parts of Portland, areas that are planned and zoned for single dwelling residential development - in the R10 through R5 zones - are experiencing development of attached and detached housing units at densities greater than anticipated by the Comprehensive Plan map and Zoning map designations because of allowances in the Zoning Code. This has created concern for some community members who see development at higher density incompatible with existing and expected neighborhood patterns. The fact that allowable densities are not easily “legible” by looking at zoning maps also creates confusion and uncertainty about permitted types of development.

Background:

Portland’s Comprehensive plan Policy 10.4 says that the *Comprehensive Plan Map* is the official long-range planning guide for uses and development in the city. It includes map designations that state the type of area each is intended for, general uses and development types desired, and the corresponding zone or zones that implement the designation. The plan includes five designations where the primary use is single-dwelling residential: Limited Single-Dwelling (R20 zone); Low Density Single-Dwelling (R10 zone); Medium Density Single-Dwelling (R7 zone); High Density Single-Dwelling (R5 zone); and Attached Residential (R2.5 zone).

The issue of development at higher density than originally anticipated by the Comprehensive Plan presents itself in a number of ways in different parts of Portland. They are generally the result of zoning code provisions that allow development on lots that would be considered non-conforming or substandard by code, or through special provisions in plan districts or overlays that allow more development potential under certain circumstances. Most of the issues that have arisen are occurring in High-Density Single Dwelling (R5 zone) areas, although the allowances also affect other zones. Some specific examples of these are listed below:

1. The Albina Plan District includes a provision that allows development of attached residential infill at R2.5 density on vacant lots in the R5 zone. This provision was developed in 1993 to encourage reinvestment in the Albina plan area, which had experienced disinvestment over time. It encourages development at higher density than allowed by the base designation, which has raised community concerns over development character. The provision has not been widely used.
2. The RF through R5 zones allow development on lots, lots of record, and lot remnants created prior to 1979 that meet the minimum area of the respective zones, but not the density anticipated in respective zones. Many community members express concern over creation and development of lots that do not meet the dimensional standards of the base zone, and may seem out of character with surrounding properties.
3. The R5 zone has special provisions that allow recognition of and development on lots that have less area than the minimum lot area allowed by the zone. This issue was the subject of much discussion over the past ten years. Many parts of Portland were platted with a 25’ wide lot pattern but much of the development occurred on combinations of multiple 25’ wide lots, leading to a 50’ wide typical pattern. In many cases, the 25’ wide lots may be eligible for development, which causes concern and uncertainty in neighborhoods about development patterns and allowances.
4. Duplexes are allowed on corner lots in R20 through R2.5 zones. Portland has traditionally allowed this type of development. In many older areas, the style of architecture and scale of development result in development that is in keeping with the character of an area. However, some recent developments have resulted in larger structures or design features that are viewed by some community members as out of scale and character with existing neighborhood patterns.

Challenges/Issues:

While the development allowances are problematic for some community members, others are supportive of the allowances. The development allowances are seen to provide housing potential, an incentive for development, and a means to maintain affordability. However, it is not clear that the new development is significantly more affordable than the existing development it may replace or other development that is more in keeping with present scale. It is also not clear that the provisions act as incentives for development that might not otherwise occur, or whether this is a significant means to meet housing supply goals.

In some neighborhoods, development at higher densities or on small lots is a significant exception to an established pattern. For example, in the Overlook Neighborhood, the Albina Plan District allowances for attached rowhouses are a significant change to the existing detached dwelling pattern of development. And in Eastmoreland, infill development is occurring on “historic” lots less than 50 feet wide, which is narrower than the standard minimum lot width in this neighborhood. Other neighborhoods where higher density single-dwelling infill is occurring may have a more varied pattern of development, but community members often still see development on narrow lots or in attached structures as a significant departure from established norms. Overall, there is considerable variability in this type of development among neighborhoods.

How should the Comprehensive Plan provide guidance and clarity for residential density in different neighborhood areas? If the city wishes to maintain this housing potential, should it provide more clarity for all by setting plan designations and zoning densities at the higher levels allowed? In considering that question, what role does adequacy of services play in designating areas for increased density?

Health Connection:

These include:

- Impacts of larger new development on smaller lots that may affect the light and air available to neighboring properties.

Equity Connection:

- Provisions and allowances are not available uniformly throughout Portland neighborhoods.
- The provisions may allow smaller and more affordable housing options in neighborhoods that may be otherwise unaffordable.
- Understand citywide implications of a new policy and its effect geographically and if it has any effect on the provision of affordable housing or housing types geographically.

Expected Outcomes:

DRAFT Policy: Provide development clarity and certainty in residential areas by limiting instances where single-dwelling residential zoning density allowances exceed the Comprehensive Plan density allowances

Implementation Tools: Possible adjustments to zoning provisions (limiting some types of development); changes to Comp Plan and Zoning map (rezoning to higher plan/zoning designations as appropriate), or other mechanisms.