

The Portland Tribune

City ponders about-face on density

*By Steve Law
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The city of Portland — often incurring the wrath of residents and neighborhood associations — has scrambled for two decades to increase density via infill developments, row houses, apartments and condos.

Now city planners are plotting something unthinkable in the 1990s and 2000s — reducing density.

In the proposed comprehensive land use plan designed to guide Portland's growth through the year 2035, planners are proposing lower densities on 2,100 acres of land throughout the city. It's known as down-zoning.

"It's been a half-century since we've had this much down-zoning," says principal planner Eric Engstrom of the Bureau of Planning and Sustainability. The last time the city undertook so much down-zoning was 1959, he says, when many close-in neighborhoods were rezoned to bar apartments and only permit single-family homes.

To put 2,100 acres in perspective, it's equal to the combined acreage of the Oregon Zoo, Mount Tabor and Washington parks, the Laurelhurst neighborhood, the River District and South Waterfront District, and the entire campuses of Portland State University and Oregon Health & Science University, including its Hillsboro campus.

Dozens of parcels are proposed for down-zoning, but there are only a handful of reasons for such actions:

- Protect historic neighborhoods such as those near Reed College and the Eliot neighborhood from future upheaval.
- Reduce building on hillsides near the Oregon Zoo, Powell Butte, and Tryon and Johnson creeks to protect trees, avoid landslides and prevent flooding.
- Alleviate crowding in David Douglas School District.
- Restrict developments in Brentwood Darlington and other areas without sidewalks or other infrastructure.

Some upzoning too

None of the proposals are written in stone, as the city has just started taking public testimony on the long-awaited update of the 1980 comprehensive land-use plan. And to be fair, that "comp plan" also calls for increasing densities in many parts of town, especially on commercial corridors and intersections such as Southeast Division Street and 122nd Avenue, Barbur Boulevard and Capitol Highway, Killingsworth near Portland Community College, and several inner-eastside corridors.

But the changing tide on density is notable. Ever since the mid-1990s, when Metro released its Region 2040 Plan to chart growth for the next 45 years, Portland and every other city in the metro area has been under pressure to increase densities and do their share to accommodate expected population growth.

Portland planners couldn't fathom how they could handle all the growth, Engstrom says, without some ideas now viewed as crude or ill-advised. A key example: rezoning to allow a slew of new apartments along Southeast 122nd and 136th avenues in East Portland, at a time when they didn't even have sidewalks. "That was the only way we knew how to meet those needs," Engstrom says.

At the time, he says, Portland couldn't demonstrate to Metro and state land use regulators that it could spur large new residential communities in existing inner-city neighborhoods such as the Pearl District or South Waterfront.

But residents have since flocked to those and other close-in neighborhoods. So now planners are saying they can accommodate growth in hot spots such as the Lloyd District, downtown, and four-story apartments on inner-eastside corridors such as Division, Hawthorne, Belmont and Burnside.

In addition, changes in family size and shrinking incomes mean 80 percent of Portland's new housing in the next decade is projected to be in multifamily projects.

That gives the city more "wiggle room to entertain down-zoning," Engstrom says, because there is plenty of land inside the city to accommodate population growth.

Technically, what planners are proposing are called "down designations" in the comp plan, Engstrom says. But if the City Council approves the proposals, it's expected that the city will issue new zoning designations to match what's in the comp plan.

Fourth go-around

Portland's first zoning plan was completed in 1918. The next major change didn't come until the rezoning in 1959.

Then, after the advent of state land use planning in the early-1970s, Portland completed its first comprehensive land use plan in 1980, which charted much of the city's subsequent growth.

In intervening years, the city reshaped parts of town, particularly with the Albina Community Plan in 1993 and the Outer Southeast Community Plan in 1996.

This is the first overhaul of the entire comp plan, though, so planners are using the opportunity to make hundreds of land-use changes.

Because most developable land in Portland is already built on, the impact of the down zoning likely wouldn't be felt for a while. For example, many parts of the Eastmoreland neighborhood near Reed College are zoned to allow denser housing, but that would require property owners to knock down their houses and rebuild more dwellings per lot.

"Under the current zoning rules, Eastmoreland as we know it could easily be gone in five years," says Robert McCulloch, president of the Eastmoreland Neighborhood Association. "Basically, a vast majority of the homes will be eligible for demolition."

By changing the zoning to match the existing density, though, the city in effect keeps the current character of the neighborhood, and removes an incentive to alter what is viewed as a historic neighborhood. "The key is, it will do nothing," McCulloch says.

City planners also are trying to undo some of the intense development they once piled onto neighborhoods like Brentwood Darlington, a Southeast neighborhood that still lacks basic sidewalks and paved roads.

"It's gone from row houses back to single-family," says chief planner Joe Zehnder.

City planners realized they have been working at cross-purposes with other bureaus by promoting more density, such as south of Foster Boulevard near Johnson Creek. The Bureau of Environmental Services has spent millions of dollars buying up properties along the floodplain to control perennial flooding of the creek.

So some of the down-zoning will alleviate city expenses down the road for storm drainage or extending roads and sewers into hilly or other hard-to-reach areas, planners say.

Some of the down zoning proposed south of Powell Boulevard near 122nd Avenue came at the request of folks working on the East Portland Action Plan, who complain the area got too much multifamily dumped onto it by the Outer Southeast Community Plan in 1996. The lower densities also could mean fewer students down the road in David Douglas School District, though the impact wouldn't come until later, when developers tear down existing apartments to build even denser ones, says Frieda Christopher, school board chairwoman.

"The district is already at capacity," Christopher says. "There is not a lot of land available in our district to build more schools. If it grows any more, it's just going to compound the issue."

Rose City caught in fast Gig City fight

*By Jim Redden
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Portlanders interested in broadband service might be a little confused about what's available or possibly coming to their neighborhoods.

The City Council made a big deal out of Google's announcement that it might bring its 1 gigabit per second service to Portland. The council held an enthusiastic press conference with Google officials in February when the company declared it was considering the city and several surrounding communities for the ultra high-speed service, called Google Fiber.

Since then, the council has passed a special franchise agreement for Google Fiber and agreed it could build the equivalent of relay stations called huts in the public rights of way. The company is scheduled to make its decision by the end of the year.

But on July 30, Frontier Communications Chief Executive Maggie Wildermore said her company has no plans to offer 1 gigabit service in Portland. Speaking at a local meeting of her board, Wildermore said that although Frontier's FiOS network is capable of delivering such speed, no one needs it.

But then Mayor Charlie Hales held a press conference on Aug. 5 to announce that CenturyLink already provides 1 gigabit service in parts of Portland. It is among the options offered in some Southeast Portland neighborhoods and seven residential buildings, including Burnside26, a 135-unit apartment building that just opened at 2625 E. Burnside St.

Company officials told reporters that they were offering 1 gigabit service without requiring a new franchise agreement or relay stations along streets and sidewalks. And they said the company would expand the service to other parts of town, where CenturyLink has offered slower service for years.

"We are building out our existing network, which is already available throughout the city," says CenturyLink spokesman Martin Flynn.

All this is happening while Comcast, which already serves all of Portland, is advertising that its XFINITY broadband service does everything that anyone could reasonably want, including downloading movies quickly and allowing multiple devices to be online at the same time.

National expansion

What's going on here?

Part of the answer is, many broadband companies are in the early stages of developing strategies to compete for "next generation" broadband service. Few people really need 1 gigabit service now. Although it is about 50 times faster than the average internet connection in Portland today, most residents probably wouldn't notice much difference. The existing speeds — which range from 15 to 105 megabits per second — are fast enough for most people for now. Prices vary depending on company and option choice.

Only someone moving large amounts of data online — like a high-tech engineer working on a complex project — would benefit much. And a variety of companies already offer such a service to those businesses which have a greater need for it.

But Google and CenturyLink are gambling that new technology and devices will substantially increase the demand for faster service in coming years. They include complex video games, multi-player games and ultra high-definition 4K streaming programming — especially if several people are using it at the same time.

Google is eyeing Portland as part of planned nationwide expansion. Its 1 gigabit service is only offered in a couple of cities right now, including Kansas City (Missouri and Kansas). The company is scheduled to announce which other cities are next in line by December. A company spokesman says CenturyLink's recent announcement will not affect its decision.

The same is true for CenturyLink, which only provides 1 gigabit service in Omaha, Las Vegas, Salt Lake City and very limited parts of Portland. The number will increase to 16 cities in coming years.

Even so, only a limited number of people are expected to be willing to pay for 1 gigabit service, at least at first. That is why Google expects to only go into select neighbors, at least at first. Even Flynn says CenturyLink's future investments must make economic sense.

Frontier and Comcast, which has not yet announced it will offer 1 gigabit service, are apparently gambling on its appeal to be relatively limited, at least for the foreseeable future.

Whether that's the right bet remains to be seen. Fifteen of the new tenants in the Burnside26 apartments have already signed up 1 gigabit service from CenturyLink.

The Daily Journal of Commerce

Expert: Portland transportation development is in slow lane

*By Inka Bajandas
August 15, 2014*

Portland is falling behind its East Coast counterparts when it comes to innovations in multimodal transportation, according to Urban Land Institute fellow Gabe Klein.

Klein, former transportation chief for the cities of Chicago and Washington, D.C., spoke in Portland last week at a presentation on multimodal innovation and sustainable design. The event at the Multnomah Athletic Club was hosted by the Pacific Northwest chapter of the Urban Land Institute, a nonprofit research and education association for real estate and land use planning professionals.

Klein praised Portland's pioneering investments in light rail and streetcars when much of the country's transportation planners were still focused on car-centric infrastructure. As technology shifts rapidly, however, city officials could do more to embrace transportation innovations, such as mobile ride-sharing apps, he said. Klein also wondered why Portland doesn't have a bike-sharing program.

"It's an intimidating crowd," he told presentation attendees. "You guys have done some amazing stuff. Then you'll see some things on the East Coast, and I think the East Coast has actually been leading the country."

Klein has spoken around the country as part of a six-month ULI fellowship. He said cities are reaching a key turning point in embracing multimodal transportation.

"We're rebuilding our country right now," he said. "It's really a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to change our built environment and rectify some of the mistakes we've made."

The biggest driver for reshaping cities is new technology, Klein said. This includes innovations that support communal cars, bikes, office space and housing, he said.

"I think in the future we'll actually design houses and vehicles for sharing," he said. "We're really transitioning to a different type of consumption."

Bike sharing programs in places like Washington, D.C. and Chicago have had a huge impact on transportation systems, he said. These programs increase ridership across a larger segment of the population by eliminating the up-front investment of purchasing a bicycle. This often leads to cities improving bike lanes and pedestrian crossings, Klein said.

"One thing that the mayor of Chicago did was publically declare 'We prioritize pedestrians,' " he said. "The movement in the U.S. is to design around people and not around cars."

Klein predicted that in a few years, cars will drive themselves; they will also be smaller, and fewer people will own them.

"People know they're not as good as a computer driving," he said. "It means the end of parking as we know it. If you're building a parking garage, just stop."

Shifting priorities among Generation X and empty-nesters alike to live and work in walkable, bikeable neighborhoods with easy access to mass transportation means public spending on infrastructure that supports private development, Klein said. In Chicago, he found that businesses around bike share stations often did better than others.

"Look at the increase in spending on retail corridors just by putting in a bike lane," he said.

When the Chicago Transit Authority reopened its Morgan subway station in 2012, for instance, Google announced plans to locate an office nearby and a new hotel was proposed, Klein said. Emphasizing this positive impact of mass transportation projects is key to gaining community support, he said.

"A lot of people don't understand that these are investments," he said. "Go out and talk about bike share and streetcars as a driver of economic development."

Klein's lecture was followed by a panel discussion on applying what he'd discussed in the Portland-metro region. One of the speakers, Jillian Detweiler, policy director for Portland Mayor Charlie Hales, said she was particularly intrigued by his points about parking. City officials are trying to address parking issues in Old Town Chinatown and Central Eastside neighborhoods, she said.

"The biggest light bulb that went on for me is the end of parking garages," Detweiler said. "I'm now realizing maybe we need to be more forward-thinking about that."

Klein encouraged Portland officials to consult private developers when reshaping transportation policies and open doors for things like allowing ride-sharing, taxi alternative Uber to operate in city limits.

"What's going to be really important over the next five or 10 years is to allow the private sector to invest in your city," he said. "You can embrace the change and shape it or you can let it happen."

The Portland Business Journal

Report: 'Granny flats' thrive in Portland following city's incentive scheme

*By Alli Pyrah
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So-called "granny flats" — residences built onto or adjacent to another structure typically for elderly relatives — are thriving in Portland following the city's introduction of an \$11,000 building permit credit, according to one realtor.

Real estate firm M Realty reports that granny flats have surged in popularity, with almost seven times as many being built last year compared to 2010. The self-contained apartments on the site of another dwelling are officially known as Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs).

The trend is likely due to the city of Portland's waiver of system development charges, which is worth up to \$11,000 in building permit reductions. Unless the scheme is extended, however, the waiver will only be available until the end of July 2016. The property owner does not have to live on-site in order to qualify for the waiver.

Granny flats have traditionally been used to accommodate elderly relatives. But with Portland City Council considering an amendment that would legalize short-term rentals popularized by sites like Airbnb, granny flats could offer a potential source of extra income to property owners.

"Not only does it add versatility to the property in its ability to accommodate the needs of friends and family, but ADUs create significant income potential from both long-term and short-term renters," M Realty reported.