

The Portland Tribune

City seeks creative infill housing ideas

By Steve Law

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Portlanders turn their noses up at “skinny houses” and “McMansions.”

They go ballistic when developers tear down old homes and build two in their place.

They’re hopping mad over new four-story apartments built with little to no on-site parking.

And they’re fed up with clogged traffic in general, blaming it on increased density in the city.

So where will we house the thousands of newcomers moving to Portland — or our children when they grow up and want homes of their own? And how can we make those affordable to rent or own?

Trying to respond to this seemingly impossible mandate, Mayor Charlie Hales has asked city planners and a citizens group to come up with viable ways to do “infill” housing.

Though the Planning and Sustainability Bureau’s Residential Infill Project is still in the early stages, participants are honing in on ways to lure more housing to already built-up areas — some innovative and some tried-and-true — that aren’t so objectionable to most neighbors.

Why infill?

Young adults keep moving to the city, and many want existing neighborhoods already blessed with good parks, coffee shops, restaurants and bars.

“The millennials are growing up and saying ‘why would I want a big house in the suburbs, and I don’t drive,’ ” says Sandra Wood, a planner working on the Residential Infill Project.

They just want to live in Portland, she says, and they often don’t need a four-bedroom house on a 5,000-square-foot lot. Besides, Portland has little bare land left to put those kinds of subdivisions.

In recent years, though, residents have complained that the new four-story apartments on Division Street, Williams Avenue and other major streets are too pricey. And traditional single-family homes in close-in eastside neighborhoods are costing upwards of \$1 million or more, pushing Portland in the direction of San Francisco, Seattle and Vancouver, where minorities and working-class families with children are increasingly forced out.

High rents on those new apartments is a “supply and demand thing,” says Eli Spevak, a developer who favors tiny homes, cohousing projects and accessory dwelling units. As economists note, development hasn’t keep pace with the demand, and the low vacancy rate translates into a landlord’s market.

“We need abundant housing of all shapes and sizes,” says Spevak, newly appointed to the Portland Planning and Sustainability Commission. And it means moving beyond the one house on one lot model, say Spevak and planners working on the Residential Infill Project.

“If you want to have affordability in amenity-rich neighborhoods, we’re going to need to get a little more density there,” Spevak says.

But Hales empaneled the infill exploration effort due to the backlash against demolitions and density, so the group is moving slowly. It’s trying to take the public’s “temperature” before advancing new ideas, says Morgan Tracy, project manager.

Two ADUs per lot?

There was a lot of controversy when the Portland City Council voted to allow an accessory dwelling unit on practically every single-family lot in the city in the early 1990s, Wood recalls.

“There’s a general acceptance of ADUs now,” Tracy says, whether a simple attic or basement conversion or freestanding garages or cottages. Some call it “invisible density,” he says.

Skinny houses and McMansions often are perceived as “in your face,” says Kol Peterson, a local ADU consultant. But ADUs, he says, “create more density without creating more significant visual impact.”

The infill advisory group is not only talking about promoting ADUs, but allowing two on a property instead of one, as Vancouver, British Columbia does. One would be inside the house and the other would be detached or freestanding.

ADUs, smaller in size by city code, also tend to be more affordable as a result. They’re cheaper to build, because the homeowner doesn’t have to pay for land.

Other creative infill ideas

Another idea being vetted is allowing owners of large older homes to split them into two dwelling units. Or a grand old house could be converted into a fourplex.

“Converting a house into multiple units . . . still looks like a single-family house,” Tracy says. Allowing it, particularly on older homes, could help families that are downsizing, and alleviate economic pressures to sell the house to a developer who wants to build two on its place.

Another idea being promoted is allowing “stacked flats,” where one dwelling unit is on one floor and another is on an upper floor. Those are common in Chicago, and, in taller versions, New York City.

Portlanders have not been keen on rowhouses, but flats are like rowhouses turned vertical, Tracy says.

A fourth idea under discussion is allowing more units in clustered developments, perhaps by grouping several cottages around a central green. The examples cited most are Spevak’s Cully Green cohousing project in the Cully neighborhood, or the Hastings Green project in South

Tabor. Both were planned developments that required special city approval, and neither has more density than allowed by the zoning. But those in the infill project are discussing ways to promote similar clustered cottages that are easier to approve and provide more density.

Missing middle

The Portland Housing Bureau and nonprofit groups are tackling the affordability crisis by building more subsidized rental properties. But there's also a way to promote affordability through zoning changes, Spevak says.

A simple walk through Northwest Portland and other older neighborhoods reveals many duplexes, fourplexes and small apartments of eight to 12 units sprinkled among single-family homes. Those were commonly built in the 1920s and 1930s, but are rarely done nowadays in Portland, due to a combination of zoning limitations and market conditions.

Folks call it the “missing middle.”

Portland rezoned most of the eastside decades ago into single-family residential zoning, where such plexes and small apartments aren't permitted. On land zoned multifamily, developers seek to maximize the number of units.

Planners are talking about seeking new zoning that would allow such middle-density projects in transitional areas next to corridors filled with four-story apartments. Spevak would favor allowing builders to construct more units in exchange for building smaller homes. Those are inherently more affordable and have less environmental impact, he says.

The new comprehensive land use plan before the City Council calls for policies that promote more affordable and infill housing, though not zoning changes. But city planners may be ready to propose new zoning if the City Council so desires in the new comp plan, Spevak says.

Leaders of the Residential Infill Project fully recognize there are strong concerns about growing density in Portland and are proceeding carefully, trying to find “sweet spots” that are acceptable to the public.

But some residents don't realize that many of Portland's older neighborhoods used to be more dense than they are now, simply because families were larger in past generations. Now those larger houses are filling up again, sometimes without the proper permitting.

“People are doubling up,” Spevak says “People are doing this below the radar screen whether it's legal or not.”

Find out more

The Residential Infill Project advisory committee holds a design charrette Thursday to show some of the ideas being floated and what they look like, including appropriate places to put skinny houses. The public is welcome to sit in, from 9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. at the Portland Building, 1120 S.W. Fifth Ave., Room C.

There will be an open house from 5 p.m. to 6:30 p.m., after the charrette. Planners will give an overview of the project and share initial results of an online survey on infill housing.

For more on the Residential Infill Project: <http://www.portlandoregon.gov/bps/article/532949>

The Portland Mercury

A Cleaner Sweep

Low-Key Talks Between the State and City Could Further Alter Portland's Approach to Homelessness

By Dirk VanderHart

January 20, 2016

FOR PORTLAND homeless advocates, the Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT) is often seen as something of a ceaseless broom.

When camps spring up on ODOT property, state employees are quick to post the clean-up notices they're compelled to give under a court settlement, and prompt about moving people along when those notices come due.

We've seen this machinery kick into gear at least twice in the last two months—once when ODOT prepared to toss campers off state-owned land adjacent to the new Hazelnut Grove encampment on North Greeley, and again when activists sent up an alarm over a pending sweep near I-205 and SE Holgate.

But here's what's remarkable about those two instances: ODOT didn't follow through.

In the case of the North Greeley campers, the agency opted to give the land to the City of Portland. And ODOT workers left the I-205 camp when demonstrators showed up to protest the planned sweep.

Even more interesting, there's some indication there could be increased flexibility in the agency's stance toward camps going forward.

Last week, ODOT officials met with folks from the City of Portland and a staffer in Governor Kate Brown's office for the first of what may be several talks about how the city and state can better coordinate enforcement of camping laws.

Right now, that coordination is all askew. Mayor Charlie Hales' office is in the midst of crafting a new city policy about camping enforcement—one that acknowledges the city's lack of housing and shelter space, and seeks to ensure camps are moved only when it's deemed necessary. Hales' office says it's also on the verge of formally permitting the Hazelnut Grove camp, and his staff is actively seeking other plots of land where camps might be allowed.

ODOT, on the other hand, hasn't budged much. But here it is at the table.

Josh Alpert, Hales' chief of staff, told me last week that the discussions have been tentative so far. The city wants a clear idea what ODOT's policies and goals are. ODOT wants the same from the city.

ODOT has also agreed to look for plots of unused land it might give the city, as it did on North Greeley, Alpert says.

More significantly, Alpert is mulling what role the Portland Police Bureau should have in ODOT cleanups going forward. The agency often asks for officers to be on hand when staffers think there might be resistance from campers.

"We are not mandated to allow police to work with them," Alpert says. "At the same time, ODOT is a partner. Before we just walk away and say 'absolutely not,' we want to understand."

Obviously, if Hales were to snatch police away from ODOT, it would be a new twist in what's already been a corkscrewing four months in the city's approach to housing and homelessness.

For now, it's just interesting to know the talks are occurring—and that ODOT's ever-sweeping broom might be slowing.

Daily Journal of Commerce

Deconstruction grants still up for grabs

By Garrett Andrews

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The city of Portland has around \$25,000 remaining in grant money available to people interested in deconstructing their home.

The grants are offered to promote the salvage of reusable materials and discourage the waste associated with mechanical demolition.

The previous funding period ended Dec. 31. The Bureau of Planning and Sustainability has accepted applications for the current funding period since September, and about half the allotted money has already been awarded.

The maximum grant size is \$2,500 for full deconstruction, and \$500 for partial projects. Applications are limited to houses or duplexes within Portland city limits. People interested in grant money can apply online by visiting www.exploredcon.com.

Though the current funding period doesn't have an end date set, the money could run out by spring, said Shawn Wood, the city's construction materials specialist.

BPS has applied for an additional \$50,000 for deconstruction grants from the state Department of Environmental Quality. DEQ will announce the grant recipients next month.

As part of a push to address long-standing issues related to housing and homelessness, Mayor Charlie Hales recently proposed and then dropped a plan to charge developers \$25,000 for "one-for-one" home demolitions.