

Why is residential density important?

Urban sprawl is a wild fire that wastefully consumes open space and taxpayer dollars, causes automobile dependence, and contributes to inner city decline. While the population of America's 213 urban areas increased by 47% between 1960 and 1990, the urbanized land area increased by 107%. Not surprisingly, 8.3 million acres of farm and range lands, 5.4 million acres of forests, and 160,000 acres of wetlands and deepwater habitats were also developed between 1982 and 1992. One of our best strategies against this trend is to increase residential density.

Residential densities and Oregon's battle against sprawl

Oregon currently leads the nation's battle against sprawl by establishing urban growth boundaries around all of our cities and changing local land use zoning so that we use urbanized land more wisely.

By changing local zoning to allow more housing on the same amount of land, we can preserve a lot of resource land. Imagine 2 downtown city blocks, each 200 feet by 200 feet and about 2 acres in size. If we added just three more houses or an apartment on every 2 of those acres *over the next 50 years*, we could accommodate all of the Metro region's predicted growth without expanding the urban growth boundary at all.

Density is an old friend

Density is not a new development pattern. Many 1920s homes in popular older Portland neighborhoods have lot sizes of 5,000 square feet or less. Only since the 1950s, when zoning regulations established a larger minimum lot sizes, did the average size of a new family lot increase. At its peak in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the average new lot size was almost 13,000 square feet. This figure gradually dropped to about 8,000 square feet in 1990 and now rests at 6,200 square feet for new single family detached homes. Thus, it is not that people *choose* to live in low density housing, but that that is one of their only choices for housing.

Increasing density provides more choices and saves money

Changing zoning can increase the choices available to home buyers and renters. After all, a majority of Oregon's households are made up of only one to three people, and many small households don't want big houses on big lots. For other families there are still tens of thousands of existing big houses on big lots to choose from.

Higher density, not high density

The regional effort intends to allow the free market to build housing at the densities built here in the 1920s. Instead of averaging three or four houses per acre, new housing is being built at densities starting from 7 units per acre for single family homes.

Increasing parks and transit along with density

Higher housing density is only part of the regional strategy against sprawl. Integral to density's success are sufficient open spaces, nearby consumer services, and convenient transit

service. Since 1994, Metro has bought more than 4,500 acres for natural areas in and near the regional urban growth boundary to provide sufficient open space.

Transit-oriented developments throughout the region also supply a mix of transit service, higher density housing, and neighborhood services. Such development offsets increases in automobile trips per household because people can walk, bicycle or ride the bus to a park or grocery store. Continued investment in these features would not only produce successful high density, but also a higher quality of life.

What *is* density?

The same housing density can be expressed in very different ways.* The photos on this handout should help you visualize a density higher than that of most suburban single family houses, which currently average about 5 dwelling units per net acre. We've provided both good and bad examples of higher density developments to show that yes, density can sometimes prove problematic but that no, not every dense housing development is an inhospitable and unattractive apartment complex. Note that slightly higher densities can be achieved through a rich mixture of housing types - from small single family homes to duplexes, bungalows to row houses, townhouses to apartments.

*For our purposes, the density figures you see are net density calculations, or the number of dwelling units per net acre (size of the residential lot).
Some images on this handout were provided by Peter Keyes, University of Oregon.