

GreenStep City Best Practice # 7 **- final draft for comment through May 2010 –**

❖ **Higher Density:** Enable and encourage a higher density of housing or commercial land use.

Optional for all cities

Category: Land Use

Summary

Accommodating city growth on the existing city grid and by expanding the grid at the same or higher population density has multiple and long-term financial, retail commercial, environmental and social benefits to a city. The alternative – large-lot single-family homes outside the city grid and distant business parks – cements in longer-term costs for provision of city services and in the generation of car trips, transportation costs and carbon emissions.

Best Practice Actions

- Any city that chooses to implement this best practice must complete at least one of the following Actions.
- (1) Limit barriers to higher density housing by including in the city zoning ordinance and zoning map a zoning district that allows:
 - a. Traditional urban neighborhood single-family density at six units per acre or greater.
 - b. Multi-family housing at a gross density of at least 15 units per acre adjacent to a commercial zoning district or transit center.
 - (2) Encourage higher density housing through at least two of the following strategies:
 - a. Incorporate a flexible lot size/frontage requirement for infill development.
 - b. Use density and floor area ratio (FAR) bonuses in selected residential zoning districts.
 - c. Tie a regulatory standard to comprehensive plan language defining compact city expansion zones that limit sprawl.
 - d. Allowing accessory dwelling units by right in selected zoning districts.
 - (3) Encourage a higher intensity of commercial land uses through at least one of the following strategies:
 - a. Include in the city zoning ordinance and zoning map a commercial district with reduced lot sizes and zero-lot-line setbacks, or a FAR minimum between .75 and 1.
 - b. Set targets for the minimum number of employees/acre in different commercial zones.
 - (4) Provide one or more of the following incentives for infill projects, or for life-cycle housing near job or retail centers, or for achieving an average net residential density of seven units per acre:
 - a. Building permit fee discount.
 - b. Expedited permit review.
 - c. Grant or tax breaks.
 - d. Other incentives.
 - (5) Modify the city zoning ordinance and zoning map to allow, without variance or rezoning in at least one district, developments that meet the prerequisites for LEED-Neighborhood Development certification.

See related actions in the *Efficient and Healthy Development Patterns* and *Demand-Side Planning* best practices.

GreenStep Advisor

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Implementation Resources

(tied to the relevant Action by number)

(1) and (2) *Higher-Density Development: Myth and Fact* (National Multi Housing Council: 2005):

<http://www.nmhc.org/Content/ServeFile.cfm?FileID=4647>

(1b) Multi-family housing includes attached housing, apartments and condos.

(2d) Accessory dwelling units: http://www.nextstep.state.mn.us/res_detail.cfm?id=4091

(1) through (4)

- Center for Housing Policy's Minnesota Toolbox:
http://www.housingpolicy.org/toolbox/index_MN.html
- 21 model ordinances in *Smart Codes: Model Land-Development Regulations* (American Planning Association's PAS Report 556: 2003): <http://www.planning.org/research/smartgrowth>
- *Essential Smart Growth Fixes For Urban And Suburban Zoning Codes* (U.S. EPA: 2009):
http://www.epa.gov/smartgrowth/pdf/2009_essential_fixes.pdf
- *Playbook for Green Buildings and Neighborhoods*, promoting the goals set out in the U.S. Conference of Mayors Climate Protection Agreement:
<http://www.greenplaybook.org/neighborhoods>

(5) Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) for Neighborhood Development:

<http://www.usgbc.org/leed/nd>

(5) *A Local Government Guide to LEED for Neighborhood Development* (USGBC: 2010):

<http://www.usgbc.org/ShowFile.aspx?DocumentID=6131>

Benefits

- Market research shows that a majority of future U.S. housing demand lies in smaller homes and lots, townhouses and condominiums in neighborhoods where jobs and activities are close at hand. Demographic changes, shrinking households, rising gas prices, lengthening commutes and cultural shifts all play a role in this demand: http://www.nextstep.state.mn.us/res_detail.cfm?id=4021
- Cost and environmental scenarios for a denser 217-acre mixed use development in Lakeville, MN: http://www.nextstep.state.mn.us/res_detail.cfm?id=2434
- Due to location efficiency, compact neighborhoods produce less CO₂ per household related to driving. See the on-line maps at <http://htaindex.cnt.org/> where you can compare denser neighborhoods with more dispersed communities.
- The most reliable studies estimate that doubling residential density across a metropolitan area might lower household vehicle miles traveled by 5 to 12 percent in the short term, and perhaps by as much as 25 percent in the longer term, if coupled with higher employment concentrations, significant public transit improvements, mixed uses, and other supportive demand management measures. See *Driving and the Built Environment: The Effects of Compact Development on Motorized Travel, Energy Use, and CO₂ Emissions* (National Research Board: 2009):
<http://onlinepubs.trb.org/Onlinepubs/sr/sr298summary.pdf>

- The population typically residing in a minimum of 7 to 8 dwelling units per acre (DUA) is required to economically support a bus line running at least once an hour through such a neighborhood. Other rules of thumb: a viable bus system providing service every 10 minutes requires 15 DUA; light rail requires about 9 DUA; rail service requires 30 DUA.
- Free software tool for accurately quantifying the traffic reduction benefits of denser New Urbanist, transit-oriented and infill development projects:
http://www.nextstep.state.mn.us/res_detail.cfm?id=2940

Connection to State Policy

- The Metropolitan Council's *2030 Regional Development Framework* and *Water Resources Management Policy Plan* require municipalities within the statutory seven-county metropolitan area to plan for an average net residential density of at least three units per net residential acre.
- A new type of tax-increment finance (TIF) district was signed into law during the 2010 legislative session (House File 2695; Senate File 2568) intended to foster higher density development by allowing for redevelopment of a site that meets coverage requirements of 70% and guarantees that the new development will increase buildings three-fold.

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