

TOPIC PRIMER: Density

Increase housing supply by rethinking density maximums

Image credit:
The Cottage Company

What is density?

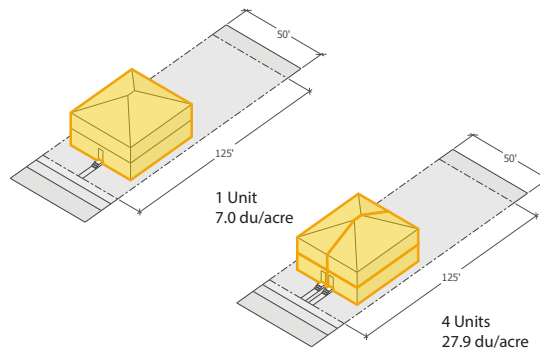
Residential density is a measure of the number of dwelling units on a given area, usually expressed as dwelling units per acre.

What's the challenge?

Most cities set maximum densities in their zoning standards in an effort to plan ahead for infrastructure. While density can be useful when projecting needs for future growth, it doesn't account for the reduced per-unit infrastructure load of smaller units. Instead, density maximums can limit efficient development and prevent the construction of a variety of attainable homes and apartments, especially on small infill parcels.

What's the solution?

Remove or increase density maximums to allow additional homes within the same building envelope as allowed by current zoning. Pair this approach with size and form standards that provide predictability for neighbors and ensure that these new homes add "gentle density" that is compatible with the existing context.



Above: The top image shows a building with one unit, and the bottom image shows the same building divided into four units. Dividing into more units results in those units being smaller and more attainable. In many cities, density maximums would allow the single-unit house but not the four-unit configuration.

Community benefits

- More units within the same building can result in more compact, affordable homes.
- A higher concentration of residents helps support amenities like transit, corner stores, and parks. Residents who want a walkable lifestyle have their bus stop, coffee shop, or workplace a few steps away.
- This concentration of residents can support the local main street, creating jobs and benefiting the local economy.
- Higher density development provides more homes on less land area, curbing sprawl and conserving land elsewhere for natural habitat or agriculture.



Image: Multiplex (front) next to single-unit home in Norfolk, VA

Places to Study

Portland, OR
Removing density as a standard and regulating by floor area ratio instead

State of Massachusetts
Requiring communities to have at least one zone with a minimum (rather than maximum) density

Spokane, WA
Piloting density minimums in new zoning code

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