

# Density | A LIVABILITY FACT SHEET

When the topic is land use, the word “density” is generally defined as the amount of residential development permitted on a given parcel of land. The larger the number of housing units per acre, the higher the density; the fewer units, the lower the density.<sup>1</sup>

Dense, mixed-use developments come in a variety of forms, from small-lot detached homes, to condo buildings and townhouses in a suburban town center, to apartments atop downtown retail shops. These types of communities are proving to be very popular. In fact, a majority of Americans prefer such communities — and it shows.<sup>2</sup>

The Federal Reserve Bank of New York found that a doubling of an area’s density increases worker productivity by up to 4 percent.<sup>3</sup> When the housing market imploded in the late 2000s, the neighborhoods that held their property values the best were high density communities that featured a mix of uses (housing, retail, restaurants and office space) located within a walkable core.<sup>4,5</sup>

One reason these types of communities withstood the

storm is that many baby boomers and young adults are choosing to settle in walkable neighborhoods that offer a mix of housing and transportation options and close proximity to jobs, schools, shopping, entertainment and parks. Nationally, 70 percent of people born between 1979 and 1996 say they want to live in walkable, urban neighborhoods and that they don’t believe it’ll be necessary to move to a suburb once they have children.<sup>6</sup>

Demographic trends are changing what Americans need and expect from a home. From 1970 to 2012 the percentage of households consisting of married couples with children plunged from 40 to 20 percent, while households with a single person living alone jumped from 17 to 27 percent.<sup>7</sup> The nation’s decreasing birthrate and aging population will continue to boost the demand for smaller homes in more compact neighborhoods.

Regulation and site design practices such as form-based code<sup>8</sup> (we have a fact sheet about that too!) can transform urban, suburban and rural areas into thriving, connected, livable communities.<sup>9</sup>

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High Point, a former World War II-era public housing project in Seattle, Wash., is now an award-winning, sustainable, highly diverse neighborhood featuring a community center, library, medical clinic and dental clinic.

# Myth-Busting!

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## ■ “Density means big, ugly apartment buildings.”

Density is generally defined as the amount of residential development permitted on a given parcel of land. In previous decades, density often meant large complexes that concentrated low-income housing or long rows of nearly identical suburban homes.

Higher density projects can instead be townhouses, apartments, accessory units and live-work spaces that accommodate a broader range of lifestyles. These residences are in addition to, not instead of, single-family detached homes with front porches and small yards. Smart density also includes areas for parks and open space.<sup>10</sup>

## ■ “Density reduces property values.”

Well-designed density actually increases property values — at two-to-four times the rate seen with conventional sprawl. Good locations for increased density are typically along principle roads or in clusters such as mixed-use villages.<sup>11</sup>

## ■ “Density breeds crime.”

With good planning and design, high-density development helps populate streets and sidewalks, putting more “eyes on the street,” which is a known crime deterrent.<sup>12</sup> Over the past 30 years, the city of Vancouver, British Columbia, has watched its downtown peninsula become one of the most densely developed urban areas in North America, yet the city has seen crime rates drop as density has increased.<sup>13</sup>

## ■ “Density brings traffic and parking problems.”

By combining a mix of land uses (housing, businesses, schools, etc.) density brings daily destinations within an easy walk, bicycle ride or transit trip. People spend less time driving and looking for parking. Traffic counts fall

with well-designed higher density development and make transit a viable option.<sup>14</sup>

## ■ “Density is worse for the environment.”

Conventional subdivisions with single-family homes on large lots have a more harmful impact on natural systems than high-density areas. When land is developed compactly it leaves more green space for filtering stormwater runoff, providing wildlife habitats, absorbing carbon dioxide and reducing greenhouse gases.

Since people in transit-supported dense areas walk more and drive less, density causes less — not more — air and water pollution.<sup>15</sup>

## ■ “Density places a burden on schools and other public services.”

High-density housing typically places less of a demand on schools and other infrastructure than conventional subdivisions containing single-family homes on large lots. Compact urban areas require less expansive infrastructure, making them less costly than sprawl.<sup>16</sup>

## ■ “Rural towns can’t benefit from density.”

Many people are attracted to vibrant small towns that have higher population densities.

In a 2013 survey in which 100,000 people nominated and voted for their favorite small towns, all but three of the 924 towns considered had a population density of more than 500 people per square mile.<sup>17</sup>

Increasing a small town’s density so it can feature the benefits of a more urbanized lifestyle can be key to the community’s future success. If increasing density in the town core becomes a priority of the community’s growth plan, it can decrease some of the negative effects of the kind of population loss common in many rural regions.<sup>18</sup>

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  2. The National Association of Realtors. (2013) *Community Preference Survey*. <http://www.realtor.org/articles/nar-2013-community-preference-survey>
  3. Abel, J. et al., Federal Reserve Bank of New York Staff Reports, no. 440. (March 2010; revised September 2011) *Productivity and the Density of Human Capital*. [http://www.newyorkfed.org/research/staff\\_reports/sr440.pdf](http://www.newyorkfed.org/research/staff_reports/sr440.pdf)
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  5. CEOs for Cities. (August 2009) *Walking the Walk*. <http://www.ceosforcities.org/research/walking-the-walk/>
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  7. U.S. Census Bureau. *American Families and Living Arrangements*. <http://www.census.gov/prod/2013pubs/p20-570.pdf>
  8. Form-Based Code Institute. *What are Form-Based Codes?* Retrieved March 7, 2014, <http://www.formbasedcodes.org/what-are-form-based-codes>
  9. Larco, N., Schlossberg, M. Oregon Transportation Research and Education Consortium. (January 2014) *Overlooked Density: Re-Thinking Transportation Options in Suburbia*. From <http://www.otrec.us/project/152>
  10. Local Government Commission, EPA. (September 2003) *Creating Great Neighborhoods: Density in Your Community*. <http://www.epa.gov/smartgrowth/pdf/density.pdf>
  11. National Multi Housing Council, American Institute of Architects, Urban Land Institute. (2005) *Higher Density Development Myth and Fact*. <http://www.nmhc.org/files/ContentFiles/Brochures/Myth%20and%20Fact%20FINAL.pdf>
  12. IStreetsWiki. *Eyes on the Street*. Website. Retrieved March 7, 2014, <http://streetswiki.wikispaces.com/Eyes+On+The+Street>
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  14. Ibid

# How To Get It Right



Nine residences sit above storefronts in Davis, Calif., population 6,600 people per square mile.



Street life is abundant in Davis. People walk and bike for fun, exercise, to run errands and get around.

Since density can be pursued in ways that don't contribute to livability, it's important to get density efforts right. Try the following:

## ■ Embrace a public process and build support

Develop an education and awareness campaign prior to implementation and reach out broadly to community members, elected officials and municipal leaders. Illustrate different alternatives for what high-density, mixed-use neighborhoods might look like.

## ■ Inspire the public with model projects

Because many Americans have strong feelings about high-density, mixed-use development, be prepared to highlight local or regional success stories.

## ■ Compatibility matters

Neighbors may worry that a new development will clash with the look and feel of the community, so engage residents in meetings where they can have input into the design. Ensure that any new development complements a neighborhood's existing homes and streetscape.

## ■ Get the design right

In many new suburban communities, developers have been permitted to build tract-style homes, each with identical two-car garages, large driveways and small yards. Sometimes the development code calls for overly wide streets as well, which undercuts the benefits of mixed-use

density by allowing cars to predominate over pedestrians and bicyclists. A way to achieve moderate density is to build smaller single-family homes on small lots with rear-access garages or street parking. This can also be done by creating accessory dwelling units, such as a 500- to 800-square-foot "in-law" apartment.

## ■ Review zoning and development guidelines

Make sure developers receive clear guidance about building design and placement. Consider ways to achieve transitions from higher to lower density areas, such as by creating special district densities.

## ■ Utilize form-based code

Form-based codes offer a powerful alternative to conventional zoning since it uses the physical form rather than the separation of uses as its organizing principle.

Such codes consider the relationships between buildings and the street, pedestrians and vehicles, public and private spaces and the size and types of streets and blocks.<sup>18</sup> The code also establishes rules for parking locations and limits, building frontages and entrance location(s), elevations, streetscapes, window transparency and block patterns (i.e., no oversized "super blocks").

Since form-based code can be customized, the code in one area might be about preserving and enhancing the character of the neighborhood while the goal elsewhere is to foster dramatic change and improvements. Often, a community's form-based code does both.<sup>19</sup> (Learn more by reading our Livability Fact Sheet about form-based code.)

15. Ibid

16. Budget Travel website. "America's Coolest Small Towns 2013." <http://www.budgettravel.com/contest/americas-coolest-small-towns-2013,14/>

17. Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis. (2013) Increasing Density: A Small-Town Approach to New Urbanism. <http://www.stlouisfed.org/publications/br/articles/?id=2451>

18. Form-Based Codes Institute. Website. Retrieved March 17, 2014, <http://www.formbasedcodes.org/what-are-form-based-codes>

19. Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning. (2013) *Form-Based Codes: A Step-by-Step Guide for Communities*. [http://formbasedcodes.org/files/CMAP\\_FBCI\\_GuideforCommunities.pdf](http://formbasedcodes.org/files/CMAP_FBCI_GuideforCommunities.pdf)

# Success Stories

## ■ Davis, California: Old North Davis

One of the most walkable places in America, the Old North Davis neighborhood evokes a classic small town feel even though the community has an overall density of 10.7 units per acre. The neighborhood features a variety of housing types: Some homes take up an entire lot while others have a large yard or two small houses sharing the lot.

Walking is popular, especially to the neighborhood's five-acre park, which twice a week hosts the nation's largest farmers' market. (The venue attracts 600,000 visits a year.) The city provides a bus service and uses angled parking for cars. In addition, there's enough bicycle parking to accommodate hundreds of cyclists. (See the pair of Davis photos on the previous page.)

## ■ Portland, Oregon: Fairview Village

Fairview Village is a cohesive network of neighborhoods built around a community core that has shopping, civic buildings and public parks that are all scaled to people rather than cars. Village designers wanted to create a community that has the warmth and security of a small town while offering the vitality and convenience of an urban setting.

Fairview has become a popular place to live and work, with a range of housing types and density, parks and open space, a library, a school, civic buildings and a small downtown.

## ■ Langley, British Columbia: New Villages

This Canadian city expects to double its population in 30 years to about 200,000. To be ready, Langley plans to create eight distinct villages, separated by large stretches of open space and agricultural land. Plans call for most neighborhoods to be developed densely enough to leave nearly 80 percent of the land green, providing residents with direct links to trails and fresh food from local farms.

## WHY IT WORKS

### Before and After

Communities can be transformed by integrating land use and transportation planning. Streets become human scale, new investments are made and the building density is diversified, as illustrated by the photovision below.



An actual roadway in rural Hot Springs, Ark., (above) and after imagined streetscape improvements.



## RESOURCES

1. **Creating Great Neighborhoods:** Density in Your Community. Local Government Commission, EPA. (September 2003) <http://www.epa.gov/smartgrowth/pdf/density.pdf>
2. **Form-Based Codes: A Step-by-Step Guide for Communities.** (August 2013) Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning. [http://www.formbasedcodes.org/files/CMAP\\_FBCL\\_GuideforCommunities.pdf](http://www.formbasedcodes.org/files/CMAP_FBCL_GuideforCommunities.pdf)
3. **Reshaping Metropolitan America: Trends and Opportunities to 2030.** Nelson, A.C. (2012) Washington, DC: Island Press. Presentation.[http://utah-apa.org/uploads/files/135\\_Nelson\\_-\\_Utah\\_APA\\_10-1-10.pdf](http://utah-apa.org/uploads/files/135_Nelson_-_Utah_APA_10-1-10.pdf)
4. **The New Real Estate Mantra: Location Near Public Transportation.** Center for Neighborhood Technology, National Association of Realtors, APTA. (March 2013) <http://www.apta.com/resources/statistics/Documents/NewRealEstateMantra.pdf>
5. **Overlooked Density: Re-Thinking Transportation Options in Suburbia.** Larco, N., Schlossberg, M. Oregon Transportation Research and Education Consortium. (2014) <http://www.otrec.us/project/152>



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