

DENSITY AND DESIGN TO PROMOTE AFFORDABLE HOUSING

Density and Design

Residential density policy is one of the most important tools local governments use to influence their communities' character, growth, and resilience. Density policy is also the simplest way local governments can create opportunities for affordable housing development. While higher density can be controversial, it is increasingly important in achieving a thriving region. Specifically, higher densities:

- *Use infrastructure more efficiently.* Wastewater treatment, transportation networks, and other infrastructure cost less per household when they serve a larger population.
- *Preserve land.* Natural, recreational, and agricultural resources are important for our economy and livability; making room for them requires growth to occur at appropriate densities throughout the region.
- *Support desirable amenities.* Restaurants, shops, services, and transit need enough customers living nearby to support their businesses – the market cannot support these amenities without sufficient density.
- *Support market demand.* A variety of economic and demographic circumstances are creating extraordinary demand for multifamily housing; as a result, demographer [Arthur C. Nelson](#) found that demand is slowing for single family detached housing. Demand will peak after 2020 with enough single family homes in place to support market demand through 2040.
- *Allow for a full range of housing options.* Communities need both larger and smaller housing units within a variety of housing types to meet the needs of all of their residents.

Some communities wish to allow only low-density development. Sometimes single-family homeowners worry that higher-density developments in their neighborhood will negatively affect their property values, create traffic congestion, and alter the character of their community. But careful investigations such as [this analysis of family rental housing and nearby home values](#) find that these broad concerns tend to overshadow critical details that matter more than density. By focusing on excellent design, quality construction, and good management of properties, communities can protect property values and use higher densities to achieve multiple goals.

Communities throughout our region need a wide range of housing options. While well-established parts of the region have larger-lot single-family homes and are unlikely to change, a wider variety of housing types are in higher demand than are currently available. Visualizing how differently developments with the same density can look and feel helps address concerns about the impacts of higher density development is a good start. Adopting design guidelines for multifamily housing is another strategy that can address visual character, such as:

- Quality exterior materials that relate to the character of existing housing
- Building heights and having building stories “step down” as they near lower-density development
- Walk-up units that maintain a pedestrian scale connection with the surrounding neighborhood
- Building massing that mimics lower density housing nearby

Planning for Density

If your community is expecting sewer-serviced growth, your 2040 housing element and future land use plan must address [your share of the region's need for affordable housing](#) for 2021-2030. The most direct way a local government can exercise “land use planning to promote the availability of land for the development of low and moderate income housing” — a requirement of comprehensive plans' housing elements ([Minn. Stat. 473.859 Subd. 2 \(c\)](#)) — is to guide residential land at densities that make affordable housing more feasible.

Housing at higher densities can look very different depending on their context and design. You can see the variety in design and massing in the local examples of housing developments between 6 and 15 units/acre in the next page.

7 UNITS/ACRE



Vicksburg Commons, Plymouth

photo: commonbond.org



Maple Grove

photo: Metropolitan Council

10 UNITS/ACRE



Heart of the City Townhomes, Burnsville

photo: dakotacda.org



Trail's Edge Townhomes, Maplewood

photo: commonbond.org



St. Paul

photo: Metropolitan Council

15 UNITS/ACRE



Gables Reserve, Bloomington

photo: Metropolitan Council

Have A Particular Site in Mind?

A variety of resources are available to dig deeper into the density, design, and development opportunities posed by a particular site. If you have a key opportunity site in your community and would like to explore the (re)development opportunities, consider the following resources:

- Urban Land Institute Minnesota's [Technical Assistance Panels](#) provide an unbiased, interdisciplinary panel of volunteer real estate professionals who address a specific project, development or policy issue. Ranging from a half-day to two days, the workshops are preceded by analysis of background information provided by the sponsor, planning sessions, community interviews, and site tours.
- Twin Cities Local Initiatives Support Corporation's [Corridor Development Initiative](#) offers a facilitated process that brings together government, community, businesses and developers to understand market realities and opportunities facing a particular development site. The exercise occurs before any official proposals are submitted and can move development opportunities forward more efficiently.
- The Minnesota Chapter of the American Institute of Architects (AIA Minnesota) hosts an annual [Search for Shelter Design Charrette](#). AIA Minnesota connects housing organizations and other non-profit groups to volunteer architects, designers, and students to create site-specific designs and plans to address the organization's specific goals. This process can help your housing organization think about how your specific site could be used to support affordable housing solutions.