



BRIEFLY

Encouraging infill development is universally accepted as good public policy. But in spite of all the advantages, developers of infill housing face a number of impediments. Cities should work to remove these impediments.

Accommodating Growth Through Infill Development

The Growth Management Act, Washington’s Smart Growth law, establishes a framework for communities to plan for how to accommodate growth, provide housing opportunities, encourage economic vitality, and preserve the environment while protecting property rights. The state seeks to prevent sprawl, to encourage compact development, to preserve open space and critical habitats, and to insure that growth occurs in areas where there is adequate public infrastructure. Among the Act’s key tools are urban growth boundaries, which tightly constrain the land available for development.

One of the expectations of the framers of the Growth Management Act (GMA) was that the urban growth boundaries would direct a substantial share of new housing into existing urban areas. Housing projects such as these are known as infill developments, because they fill in vacant or underutilized land.

The City of Seattle is seeing a boom in infill housing. Overall, King County added 99,000 housing units in the 1990s, down from the 123,000 added in the 1980s. In the city of Seattle, however, the number of added units increased by 1,000 from 19,000 in the 1980s to 20,000 in the 1990s.¹

In the year 2000, the city issued permits for a record 6,685 housing units, double the number for 1999. With the demolition of 789 existing units, a net of 5,896 units will be added to the city’s stock of housing. More than one-half of the added housing is in buildings with 100 or more units. Over one-third of the new housing is downtown.²

Multi-family housing construction is much more volatile than single-family construction. The very high level of infill in Seattle in 2000 is probably a cyclical peak and not sustainable. If housing is to be affordable in the future under the constraints on development imposed by the GMA, infill must play an important role by ensuring housing opportunities are provided to accommodate projected growth.

Infill Benefits Inner-cities

Encouraging infill development is universally accepted as good public policy. Analysts cite a number of advantages to infill.³

Infill provides housing opportunities necessary to accommodate projected growth. There is a growing demand for the types of housing units that infill provides. Expanding downtown office employment creates a demand for housing close to downtown.

In addition, the demographic trend towards smaller households favors infill housing. The “traditional” household, two parents with school age children, represents a declining share of the housing market. Many single, elderly and



108 S. Washington St., Suite 406

Seattle WA 98104-3408

PH 206-467-7088

FX 206-467-6957

www.researchcouncil.org



empty nest households prefer the lower cost and lower maintenance of an apartment, condominium or smaller house on a smaller lot.

Infill encourages community revitalization. Businesses benefit from increased activity and demand for goods and services. Infill housing can boost a city's economy. Many of the US's larger cities (though not Seattle) have been losing population, as the middle class flees to the suburbs. In such, cities encouraging the development of high quality urban neighborhoods of infill housing may help to lure back the middle class.

Infill reduces sprawl. Directing the construction of new housing into existing urban areas conserves rural farmlands and open spaces.

Infill is less auto-dependent. Transportation planners love infill. In-city residents drive less than suburban residents. Infill near downtown will be served by existing bus routes, and will provide additional riders with virtually no increase in service costs.

Urban Land Institute (ULI) notes that infill is a very cost effective way to expand transit ridership. Tri-Met, the Portland, Oregon transit agency has emphasized infill development near to its stations as a tool for building ridership. An analysis by Tri-Met staff of one agency-supported development found that "developing ridership in this manner was eight to 20 times more cost effective than it would have been through rail extensions, *even if the land had been given to the developer* (the land cost the developer \$130,000)."⁴

When infill development put housing units within walking distance of shops and services, auto use is further reduced.

It may be less costly for government to provide services to urban infill development than to suburban greenfield development. New suburban developments may require public investments in roads, water and sewer lines, schools and so forth. Urban infill development may be able to take advantage of existing capacity. In addition there may be economies of scale in providing public services. As infill increases the density of a city, the cost per resident of providing a given level of service may fall.

However, there are obstacles

But in spite of all the advantages, developers of infill housing face a number of impediments.

Americans have a strong cultural preference for single-family houses. However, in urban settings, the paucity of undeveloped conventional lots and the high price of land make the addition of conventional single-family houses difficult.

The large multi-family projects that represent the majority of recent infill in Seattle are not the housing that the majority of the population desires. A September, 2000, survey by Public Opinion Strategies (POS) asked Washington voters a number of questions on housing.⁵ Only 23 percent of the subjects said it was important to them to live in an urban area with many people living close together.

An infill alternative to multi-family housing is to build detached houses on smaller lots. For example, zero lot line houses, wide-shallow lots and zipper lots



are strategies that allow detached houses to be built on smaller lots. Clustering houses on a single lot can also save space. Townhouses and row houses are a form of single-family housing that uses land more efficiently.

But people like larger lots. In the POS survey, fully 83 percent of the Washington voters said that they wanted to live in an area where they can have large front and back yards.

Neighborhoods often resist efforts to increase density. The owners of single-family houses may oppose infill for fear that apartment houses will alter the character of the neighborhood. The POS survey finds that 77 percent disapprove of development that allows taller apartment and condominium buildings or single-family houses on smaller lots to increase density of their neighborhoods.

The uproar in Seattle following former Mayor Norm Rice's proposal to channel growth into "urban villages" is an example of this.

Developers need to be creative to overcome this resistance. Smaller multi-family building can be designed to look like houses. Urban cottages can be clustered on a single lot. Mixed-use development can place apartments over commercial uses. Existing historic structures can be creatively redeveloped as apartments or condominiums.

Mixed-use development faces special obstacles. As is the case with increased density, the POS survey shows mixed-use development to be unpopular, with 60 percent disapproving.

Both Seattle's Belltown neighborhood and downtown Bellevue have recently experienced booms in mixed-housing. However, as the Housing Partnership notes, the regulatory and land use policies allowing such developments have been in place for 20 years in both locations.⁶

Many Seattle area suburban cities are counting on mixed-use developments in their urban centers to meet housing goals. The examples of Seattle and Bellevue show that cities need to actively encourage mixed-use if it is to happen. Retail is trickiest part of mixed-use development. Cities need to assure that there will be an adequate base of customers for the retail to be successful.

Vacant land comes with baggage. The Urban Land Institute observes, "It is important to remember that sites that have been passed over for development or have not been redeveloped for another use are generally idle for a reason." Vacant land may be oddly shaped or difficult to build on. It may be environmentally contaminated. Or the need to demolish or remove the remnants of previous uses may increase development costs.⁷

Similarly, the adaptation of existing structures may bring problems of their own, including the constraints imposed by historic preservation and environmental concerns.⁸

Infrastructure. It is often asserted that the ability to use existing infrastructure is an advantage. However, in some cases the existing infrastructure is not adequate. "In many inner-city neighborhoods existing infrastructure needs to be repaired, replaced, or modernized to serve both new and existing development."⁹ If the developer is forced to pay for these upgrades, the project may not pencil out.



Regulatory burdens are high. Infill tends to be more heavily regulated than new development in newly developing places.

Sometimes infill requires rezoning. Building codes can be unrealistic for rehabilitation projects. Restrictions on use can limit the types of units that can be developed.

Existing neighborhood groups can feel threatened by infill. The ability of these groups to participate in and slow down the regulatory process increases the time it takes to complete an infill project, raising costs.

Questions concerning safety and school quality discourage many people from infill housing. Urban areas are perceived by many people to be less safe than the suburbs. Families with children often choose suburban locations because they believe that suburban school districts provide a better education.

What to do

To encourage infill development, and ensure each city provides housing opportunities necessary to accommodate growth, cities should:

Assure that the city’s regulatory framework encourages rather than discourages this type of development. Regulation must accept the sorts of projects that are economically viable in the urban setting.

Provide for the prompt processing of regulatory approvals and permits needed for infill development. Delay adds significantly to costs.

Make public investments and provide services that support infill development. Government should provide the infrastructure that infill needs. People must feel that the neighborhoods targeted for infill are safe. Urban school districts must be improved.

Gain community acceptance for infill development. The government can identify neighborhoods where infill development should occur. It can work with the members of these communities to articulate a vision of the type of infill that will strengthen the neighborhood. Then, when developers come forward with projects that advance that vision, they should be allowed to move quickly through the regulatory process.

Endnotes

¹ Based on U.S. Census figures for 1980 and 1990 and Office of Financial Management estimates for 2000.

² “Record number of Housing Units Approved in 2000,” City of Seattle News Advisory, Department of Design, Construction, and Land Use, January, 2001.

³ Municipal Research and Services Center, *Infill Development: Strategies for Shaping Livable Neighborhoods*, Report No. 38, June 1997.

⁴ Diane R. Suchman, *Developing Infill Housing in Inner City Neighborhoods: Opportunities and Strategies*, Urban Land Institute, 1997, page 9.



⁵ Public Opinion Strategies, *An Oversample Study of 800 Voters in Washington on the Topic of Smart Growth and Land-Use Issues*, conducted for the National Association of Realtors and the Washington Association of Realtors.

⁶ The Housing Partnership, *Mixed Use Housing in Urban Centers*, October, 1999.

⁷ Suchman, page 39.

⁸ Suchman, page 40.

⁹ Suchman, page 41.



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