ULI Land Use Policy Forum Report

ULI/NMHC/AIA Joint Forum on Housing Density

Prepared by Michael Pawlukiewicz and Deborah L. Myerson

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Urban Land Institute

About ULI

ULI–the Urban Land Institute is a nonprofit education and research institute that is supported by its members. Its mission is to provide responsible leadership in the use of land in order to enhance the total environment.

ULI sponsors education programs and forums to encourage an open, international exchange of ideas and sharing of experience; initiates research that anticipates emerging land use trends and issues and proposes creative solutions based on that research; provides advisory services; and publishes a wide variety of materials to disseminate information on land use and development. Established in 1936, the Institute today has more that 17,000 members and associates from more than 60 countries representing the entire spectrum of land use and development disciplines.

Richard M. Rosan
President

ULI Land Use Policy Forum Reports. ULI is in the forefront of national discussion and debate on the leading land use policy issues of the day. To encourage and enrich that dialogue, ULI holds land use policy forums at which leading experts gather to discuss topics of interest to the land use and real estate community. The findings of these forums serve to guide and enhance ULI's program of work. ULI produces summaries of these forums in its Land Use Policy Forum Reports series, available on the ULI Web site, www.uli.org. By holding these forums and publishing summaries of the discussion, the Institute hopes to increase the body of knowledge that contributes to the quality of land use policy and real estate development practice throughout the country.

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Contents

Introduction

Local opposition to proposed high-density housing developments is one of the greatest challenges facing efforts to promote smart growth in the United States. There is strong public support for limiting the excesses of suburban sprawl that cause such problems as environmental degradation, traffic congestion, and loss of open space. Yet, proposals for alternative housing development that could address many of these problems—such as infill development, cluster and mixed-use development, and especially high-density housing (apartments)—often meet intense community opposition.

The Urban Land Institute, in cooperation with the National Multi Housing Council and the American Institute of Architects (AIA), convened the Joint Forum on Housing Density on February 7, 2002, at the AIA headquarters in Washington, D.C. This interdisciplinary meeting sought to address the widespread problem of community and local government resistance to high-density development proposals.

Forum Summary

This national forum brought together a diverse group of 40 real estate professionals, designers, developers, architects, planners, and elected officials, as well as leaders of citizens, community, and environmental organizations. The goal was to examine the causes of community opposition to increased residential density and the ways to overcome that resistance—debunking myths, implementing good design, and showing how high-density development benefits the community, the region, and the environment. Presenters offered their perspectives in sessions titled "Community Education to Increase Acceptance of Higher-Density Projects," "Density and Design," and "Building Higher-Density Developments in Infill Settings."

Density: Perception versus Reality

Whether proposed on the fringe of cities or in maturing suburbs, higher-density residential development is often opposed by citizens because they believe that greater housing density contributes to problems such as traffic congestion, crime, lower property values, and loss of green space. These projects are also criticized for not generating enough tax revenue to pay for the services they require. Accurate or not, these perceptions commonly underlie objections to planning for higher-density residential use in general, as well as to specific high-density housing proposals.

Susan Ingraham Bell, director of the Arlington County, Virginia, Department of Community Planning, Housing, and Development, and Andrew A. Viola, regional vice president of Bush Construction Corporation, presented their experiences with successful implementation of high-density, transit-oriented projects in Arlington County.

Ingraham Bell identified critical attributes of Arlington County's development process that have encouraged high-density, transit-oriented development. They include the following:

■ Continuity of public policy, even through changes in elected leadership;

■ Extensive citizen participation, including public debate over policy impacts and benefits;

■ Affirmation of policy over time by elected leadership, regardless of market cycles; and

■ Formulation of implementation tools at the same time policy is enacted.

Adhering to these techniques, Arlington County has successfully introduced high-density residential, office, and retail space along the Metropolitan Washington Area Transit Authority (Metro) rail corridor, using a "bull's-eye" concept to concentrate rings of development around Metro stations. In this development pattern, the heights and densities are greatest in areas closest to Metro stations and are reduced as development reaches residential neighborhoods. Over the past 40 years, Arlington has added 14,000 dwelling units and 18.5 million square feet of office space while leaving 95 percent of the county—mostly low-density residential communities—unchanged.

Tools such as small-area sector plans and associated zoning—including density bonuses—have helped Arlington County to determine the type of development that can occur in a given location and to manage community impact. Arlington also has rigorously maintained the integrity of its land use plan.

The intensive public participation process known as "the Arlington Way" and a strong neighborhood conservation program have contributed to the success of the policies promoting higher densities and transit-oriented development. Today, Arlington has a AAA bond rating and the lowest real estate tax rate of any major jurisdiction in the Washington metropolitan region.

Based on Arlington County's experience, Ingraham Bell recommended that municipalities wanting to encourage higher-density housing start with high expectations and plan well with a vision and clear goals. Local governments need to formulate public policies that support these goals and to develop tools and ordinances to facilitate their implementation. As part of the process, it is important to build community consensus and to keep the community engaged; development of public-private partnerships plays a key role in doing this.

Viola of Bush Construction presented a developer's perspective on developing high-density projects in Arlington, using as examples his company's projects Ballston Place at Lexington Park, Lexington Square Condominiums, Pollard Gardens, and Courthouse Place apartments.

Features such as proximity to Metro stations, urban amenities, and accessibility for the physically challenged make these units appealing, Viola said, especially to singles, empty nesters aged 55 to 65, students, and others who to want to live close to the city. The average age of buyers is 38, most work in Washington, D.C., across the Potomac River, or in Arlington, and their average income is $70,000 to $80,000. Viola noted, however, that these communities do not attract families with children, or people who are unwilling to give up a second car.

During development of these projects, the local community expressed fears that residents of the high-rise, multifamily housing and their visitors would crowd neighborhood streets, increase traffic congestion, and compete for street parking. Some neighbors were also worried that a concentration of multifamily-housing dwellers would dilute the political power of voters in single-family units.

However, Viola noted, certain design features and amenities can help developers to gain neighborhood acceptance of such a development. Such features provided in Arlington include street-facing building facades, tapered high rises to allow more sunlight to reach the street, and guest parking.

From his experience developing high-density residential projects in Arlington, Viola said he learned that the approval process can be costly and time consuming. He recommended that to reduce exposure to risk, developers should acquire property contingent upon approval of the projects to be located on them. He also warned that just because the land plan permits it, high-rise residential development is not necessarily assured; neighborhood groups, planners, and elected officials may resist if they believe commercial development will have a more favorable tax impact.

The Changing Look of Density: Density, Design, and Desirability

J. Richard Kremer, president of Louis & Henry Group of Louisville, Kentucky, spoke on the role of design in making higher density more appealing and more marketable. He noted that design adds value to a development, and the role of the architect or planner is to build on a project's uniqueness.

By focusing on creating a unique place, architects can establish projects that have a sense of identity and ownership and serve a mix of incomes. Kremer suggested that designers can enhance the appeal of a dense development by combining smaller units with on-site public parks and open space, which, in turn, increase the value of the units. He noted, however, that it is a challenge to convince the development community that this type of project can be successful.

Kremer cited research indicating that quality design adds value to properties, presenting conclusions from a study comparing average prices for single-family homes in new urbanist developments—such as Kentlands in Maryland, Laguna West in California, and Celebration, Florida—with homes in surrounding areas. The results, he said, indicate that the home prices in new urbanist communities are an average of $20,000, or 11 percent, higher than those in surrounding conventional neighborhoods.

He also discussed a variety of projects that illustrate quality design in high-density developments, including 101 Market Street in San Diego; Park DuValle in Louisville, Kentucky; and Fruitvale Transit Village in Oakland, California.

101 Market Street, San Diego

In San Diego, Kremer observed, a strong housing market contributes to the demand for high-density housing. The city of San Diego has made it a priority to provide higher-density residential uses and mixed-use development downtown to complement the commercial and office core. Overlooking Market Street and Second Avenue in downtown San Diego, 101 Market Street is a development of 149 luxury rental apartments designed to cater to a diverse professional market.

The blend of angular and curved architecture includes such features as narrow glass partitions atop the interior walls. The units include walkup townhouses, standard apartments, and lofts offering 540 to 2,000 square feet, with monthly rents ranging from $1,000 to $2,000. Restaurants, cafés, and a major grocery store are nearby.

Park DuValle

Park DuValle, a U.S. Housing and Urban Development HOPE VI project in Louisville, has been lauded as a well-executed example of new urbanist design in an urban setting, winning the 2000 American Institute of Architects Urban Design Honor Award. The mixed-income, mixed-density neighborhood includes 1,213 rental and home-ownership units.

Urban Design Associates created a new urbanist master plan for the development, which replaced the Housing Authority of Louisville's Cotter and Lang Homes on about 125 acres on the west side of Louisville. The housing, streets, and public spaces at Park DuValle are designed to build on Louisville's design traditions and to blend in with surrounding neighborhoods, Kremer noted.

The quality of Park DuValle's design is credited with contributing significantly to the project's market success, he said. All of the rental units, both market rate and public housing, are fully leased, and the developer has a waiting list of more than 4,000 applicants. Prices for average single-family houses range from $75,000 to $240,000—comparable with prices in conventional subdivisions in Louisville. The Park DuValle houses on Algonquin Parkway, a boulevard designed by Frederick Law Olmsted, are worth even more—$150,000 to $400,000.

Fruitvale Transit Village

The Fruitvale Transit Village is a mixed-use development to be built on 15 to 24 acres of land surrounding the Fruitvale Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) station in Oakland. Fruitvale, one of Oakland's seven community districts, is an economically distressed, low-income, predominantly Latino neighborhood. The Fruitvale Transit Village project resulted from a broad-based partnership among public, private, and nonprofit organizations, including the Bay Area Rapid Transit District, the city of Oakland, La Clinica de la Raza, and other public and private partners working together to revitalize a community through transit-oriented development. The development process has been spearheaded by the Fruitvale Development Corporation.

When BART announced plans in 1991 to construct a multilevel parking facility next to the Fruitvale station, the community objected to its design and location. In response, BART agreed to work with the community to develop an acceptable plan. This effort resulted in the design of a transit-oriented development project that includes plans for a mix of housing, shops, offices, a library, a child care facility, a pedestrian plaza, and other community amenities surrounding the BART station.

Making Density Popular

Overcoming community resistance to high-density residential development is often cited as one of the most expensive factors in building such developments. Debra Stein, president of GCA Strategies, Inc., spoke on handling community objections to higher-density plans. She described ways to build strategic support for such projects and to overcome resistance to them, including employing targeted community outreach, communicating pro-density messages, and identifying supporters.

Stein noted that community opposition to multifamily housing may be typical, but it is not inevitable. A targeted community outreach program—with one outreach effort aimed at potential supporters and another designed to

address opponents' concerns—can mobilize community support and reduce opposition, she said.

To enlist supporters, developers or public agencies should emphasize the added benefits of high-density development, such as increased tax revenues and creation of additional housing and community facilities, she said. Other specific, pro-density messages include how such projects can help alleviate traffic problems, meet housing demand, and offer public amenities.

However, when dealing with opponents, it may be more effective to consider the extent to which their concerns pertain to preserving the status quo and then show how a project can protect the quality of life, such as by setting aside existing open space. As part of this outreach, Stein recommended that developers or public agencies make only concessions that will change opponents' opinions about a project and avoid unnecessary tradeoffs that will have no impact on community sentiment.

To communicate with the community, Stein suggested that developers or public agencies hold a meeting to listen to citizen questions and concerns about a project rather than convene a public gathering to announce a new development. At the same time, she warned against holding very large public meetings that may draw a vocal group of opponents. Rather, developers and public agencies should seek to build support for a project in a series of small open houses: the more personal atmosphere can help to promote an exchange of information rather than opinion, she noted.

One of the goals of public meetings is not only to identify and win over opponents, but also to spot supporters. A person willing to make an initial commitment by signing a petition or endorsement card may be prepared to become more engaged later. Once identified, these supporters can become part of a constituency that will show up at hearings, contact public officials, and provide a voice in favor of a project.

In the end, Stein explained, to overcome "not-in-my-backyard" resistance from neighbors, developers and public agencies alike must implement a savvy community relations plan designed to minimize opposition to and to mobilize support for high-density housing projects.

Density: A Smart Growth Tool for Livable Communities

While higher-density housing that can support nearby retail and commercial uses is often touted as an important component of smart growth, local land use policy, as well as citizen reaction, can play a major role in discouraging such development. Robert R. Harris, executive partner and real estate attorney with Holland & Knight, LLP, discussed examples of higher-density projects in the greater Washington, D.C., metropolitan area employing smart growth principles, and the role of land use regulations and community opinion in those developments.

Fallsgrove, a 257-acre mixed-use, master-planned development on the former Thomas Farms site in Rockville, Maryland, when completed will include 1,530 residential units, a 150,000-square-foot pedestrian-oriented neighborhood retail center, and 950,000 square feet of office and research and development space. The modified traditional neighborhood design calls for a diverse mix of traditional single-family and patio homes, townhouses, stacked townhouses, and low- and mid-rise multifamily units. Harris explained that the development also will comply with Rockville's requirement that 12.5 percent of all housing types be moderately priced dwelling units to ensure affordability for working families.

Harris noted that in the Rockville master plan, the property originally was designated for 950 residential units and 2 million square feet of office space. To allow a more balanced mix of residential and commercial use for the project, Fallsgrove Associates—a coalition of developers building the new community—sought nearly to double the number of residential units to 1,800 while scaling back office space by 50 percent.

The final housing density—determined after much negotiation among the planning commission, the city council, and the developers—was scaled back by the mayor and the city council in response to concern about increased traffic congestion and crowding in schools.

To relieve anticipated traffic complications, the Fallsgrove developers pledged $2.2 million to pay for transportation improvements that include adding lanes, installing stoplights, and reconstructing several intersections. Mass transit also will be encouraged, and a multimodal transit hub will be established at the development's retail center.

Other amenities in the development's master plan include an allowance for green space, bike paths, preserved upland forest, and land for a community center.

Harris also commented on two other Montgomery County, Maryland, mixed-use proposals—transit-oriented, infill developments in Chevy Chase, on the border with the District of Columbia, and Bethesda, another close-in Washington, D.C., suburb.

In the Friendship Heights neighborhood of Chevy Chase, a 26-acre parcel owned by the GEICO insurance company has been approved for infill development for multiple uses, including four buildings with a total of 300 garden apartments, 200 townhouses, three mid-rise office buildings, and a small section of open space. The plan for the site—much of which is now a parking lot and open space—calls for more underground parking and a significantly increased density of both commercial office and residential uses. The site has excellent access to a nearby bus hub and Metro rail station. However, community and local officials have expressed concern that the increased housing density will change the character of the area. Concessions negotiated with the developer include retention of as much of a tree canopy as possible, construction of a new baseball diamond, and creation of a landscaped biking and hiking trail.

In downtown Bethesda, a project is reversing the usual housing-before-retail pattern for mixed-use developments, Harris said. Instead, the success of the retail and office phase of the Bethesda Row downtown redevelopment project has sparked interest in construction of higher-density infill residential space nearby. This prospect, however, has generated resistance from neighbors.

Harris noted that these examples show how higher-density development—whether greenfield or infill development—can create concerns for local officials and members of the community. Echoing a theme from Stein's presentation, he advised that a developer "needs friends for more controversial projects."

Conclusions

During the forum, participants discussed the merits of denser residential development and a range of related issues, including design considerations, community education, the roles of public policy and political will, best practices, and the future of density.

The Benefits—and Challenges—of Density

Participants acknowledged multiple factors critical to the success of denser developments, such as good design, access to public transportation, advance planning of land use, and community participation in site development.

They agreed that more compact residential development can benefit communities and the environment in the following ways:

■ Reducing automobile trips, encouraging biking and walking, and supporting public transit;

■ Better supporting the viability of nearby neighborhood retail, thereby further reducing the number of errands that must be run by car;

■ Fostering a sense of community and creating safer neighborhoods, because people living at higher densities are more likely to walk, shop locally, and get to know their neighbors;

■ Offering the health benefits of a walkable, bike-friendly environment;

■ Providing more green space: with denser housing, the same number of units can be clustered in less space on a given site, allowing the remaining land to be reserved for open space as parks, trails, or woods; and

■ Providing greater opportunity for mixed-income housing that is within reach of many income levels; such development can be encouraged by offering developers density bonuses.

Participants agreed that increased housing density can solve many of the environmental, land use, and transportation problems that smart growth advocates seek to address. However, some participants suggested that the environmental community could be more aggressive in helping to raise awareness of the environmental benefits of higher-density development.

Participants discussed ways to increase public acceptance of proposals for denser residential developments, noting that the word "density" can be a red flag that provokes negative reactions from citizens and local officials. Participants suggested that developers do the following to address concerns about density:

■ Use the phrases "efficient, walkable communities" and "compact development" instead of the word "density," and explain how more compact development can benefit declining, transitional, and stable communities;

■ Recognize the importance of high-quality design in creating appealing compact residential developments; and

■ Employ persuasive visual aids to illustrate examples of quality denser housing and good urban design.

Density and Design

Most new development is taking place in the suburbs, where many people move to enjoy the green space, bringing with them the belief that density belongs back in the city. Many inner-ring suburbs, which are becoming more urban, struggle with the conflict between their low-density tradition and an evolving character that includes greater density. Even in the inner city, there is often an emotional desire to create a suburban neighborhood and avoid denser development. Much of this resistance stems from the belief that denser housing is inevitably ugly, when in fact the real issue is the quality of design rather than density.

A well-designed denser housing development can preserve green space and create an attractive living environment. Participants identified the following opportunities and challenges involved in bringing together density and good design:

■ Municipalities and developers should give design a higher priority. Often, higher-density residential developments are poorly designed; in some cases, development companies do not fully consider the importance of designing for higher densities.

■ A comprehensive municipal plan should recommend specific design elements; municipalities also should consider how local codes affect design.

■ Design considerations should be reflected not only in the structure, but also in the site plan, landscape architecture, and the plan for community walkability.

■ Design for suburbs, which were engineered for traditional families, should reflect the increasing number of nontraditional households.

Community Education

Participants also considered a variety of actions that developers and public officials can take to encourage development of higher-density housing, among them providing professional and public education on the subject. At the same time, the participants recognized challenges to achieving some of these goals. Some of the measures suggested by the participants for developers and public agencies follow.

General Public Education—Land Use Planning

Developers and public agencies should:

■ Provide a general educational forum on land use planning and develop a local land use plan with ongoing community involvement to help establish expectations for future developments. This effort also can educate citizens about the development process and discredit the notion that *any* kind of development is objectionable.

■ Educate citizens about the benefits of transit-oriented development in a "big-picture" context so they can see how a particular development would fit into a larger land use and transportation plan.

■ Emphasize that the nearby commercial/retail businesses that many residents enjoy in mixed-use developments require a certain critical density to support them.

■ Recognize and collaborate with a variety of natural allies, such as environmental groups, faith communities, community development corporations, and civic groups.

Specific Public Education—Development Proposals

Developers and public agencies should:

■ Recognize the value of the citizen education process, and seek to identify project supporters and to persuade interested, but undecided, neighbors. Understand that opposition is unavoidable.

■ Show community members different development options and solicit their opinions as part of the public participation for a project. This will help neighbors feel fully engaged in the process.

Developers also should get the backing early in the process of elected officials who can help to broker community support.

Professional Education

Developers and public agencies should:

■ Develop leadership on a national scale—perhaps through organizations such as the Urban Land Institute or the American Planning Association—to act as advisers for state and local efforts to accommodate density. With training, local ULI district councils or APA chapters could also play an advisory role.

■ Explore mutually beneficial, collaborative relationships with area universities to provide public or professional education on housing density. Faculty could train planning commissioners or other public employees while developing presentation materials that could be used in housing, planning, or real estate classes.

Public Policy and Political Will

Much of the success of a community's higher-density residential development rests on the political will of municipalities, participants agreed. Local officials should explore whether and under what conditions a community is willing to accept growth, and incorporate those conditions into land use plans and community design guidelines. Developers require a consensus to move ahead with a project; municipalities need to create a framework for that consensus.

Other public policy considerations that participants identified to foster higher-density housing are:

■ Municipalities should craft a comprehensive plan—one that deals with every site in a municipality and that is regularly updated—to guide the development process and designate sites for higher-density housing. Updating of the plan should be a community activity—for example, involving community volunteers in periodic reviews of the plan.

■ States should encourage municipalities to develop or update comprehensive plans with incentives such as grants.

■ Municipalities should recognize that enactment of zoning ordinances is not a substitute for land use planning. Zoning is often designed defensively to guard against bad projects and thus can inhibit quality development.

■ Public policy should take into account the fact that housing density has different impacts in different settings: housing density appropriate for an urban area may not be appropriate for a suburban setting.

■ Municipalities should recognize that quality urban design and amenities such as green space are essential to creation of a denser housing development that is desirable and fits in well with the community.

■ When revising public policy, municipalities should remove or ease existing regulatory barriers to higher-density housing, such as a burdensome special review process.

■ States should provide local elected officials with technical assistance and advisory support on and incentives for incorporating density into comprehensive plans.

■ Municipalities should offer density bonuses as part of inclusionary zoning to create more moderately priced housing.

■ To encourage good practices, smart growth advocates should consider developing a system of standards for rating the quality of higher-density housing, similar to the LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) system developed by the environmental community to rate environmentally friendly buildings. Each project could go through a voluntary evaluation process to determine its level of compliance with particular objectives, and municipalities could consider offering incentives for developments that are built to meet that standard.

Best Practices

Participants identified several tools and techniques for best practices to foster community acceptance of greater housing densities. These include:

■ *Home equity insurance.* Widen homeowner awareness of and the availability of home equity insurance to reduce the fear of lost property value that can accompany increased density. Under a home equity insurance plan, if a homeowner cannot sell his or her house for its assessed value, the insurance makes up the difference. The insurance is funded by a small tax assessment on area homes, and the policy requires that participating residents wait at least five years after the purchase of the policy before a sale below the assessed value entitles them to file a claim. Neighborhoods in Chicago and Baltimore have successfully employed this tool.

■ *Visualization and resource tools.* Geographic Information Systems (GIS), the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's Affordable Housing Design Advisor Web site, and other community visualization

techniques can be effective tools to promote denser developments.

■ *Urban growth boundary.* Some participants described Portland, Oregon's urban growth boundary as a good tool that has helped that city to manage land use and transportation planning in the region and to support denser housing development.

The Future of Density in Housing

Because over the next 50 years much of the development in the United States will be at the edges of developed urban areas, it will be important to be prepared to accommodate high-quality, denser growth. Participants agreed that significant public policy changes and leadership are needed to streamline the development of higher-density housing. To bring this about, advocates of density need to:

■ Cultivate leadership and political will to promote greater housing density;

■ Encourage municipalities to work through important public policy issues and establish land use plans in advance of development proposals; and

■ Publicize examples and best practices from other municipalities that may be useful to determine the necessary public policy shifts.

Forum Agenda

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 7, 2002

8:15 a.m. **Welcome and Introductions**
Alan W. George, *Forum Chair, Executive Vice President, Equity Residential Properties Trust*
Norman Koonce, *CEO/Executive Vice President, American Institute of Architects*

9:00 a.m. **Density: Perception versus Reality**
Introduction
Clarine Nardi Riddle, *Senior Vice President and General Counsel, National Multi Housing Council*

Presentation and Discussion: Arlington County, Virginia, Case Study
Susan Ingraham Bell, *Director, Arlington County Department of Community Planning, Housing, and Development*
Andrew A. Viola, *Regional Vice President, Bush Construction Corporation*

10:30 a.m. **The Changing Look of Density**
Introduction
Lisa Blackwell, *Managing Director, Government Affairs, American Institute of Architects*

Presentation and Discussion
J. Richard Kremer, *President, Louis & Henry Group*

Noon **Lunch: Making Density Popular**
Speaker
Debra Stein, *President, GCA Strategies, Inc.*

1:00 p.m. **Density: A Smart Growth Tool for Livable Communities**
Introduction
John K. McIlwain, *Senior Resident Fellow, Housing, ULI–the Urban Land Institute*

Case Study and Discussion
Robert R. Harris, *Executive Partner, Holland & Knight, LLP*

2:30 p.m. **What Comes Next?**
Open Discussion and Questions

3:00 p.m. **Adjourn**

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