

The Residential Infill Project is good – and could be better

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Portland is growing, fast. Our city is expected to add more than 120,000 new families by 2035 – both those born here and those just arriving. Through City planning efforts, most of this growth will be channeled into our central city and commercial corridors, but people need options in residential neighborhoods, too.

Most of Portland's residential land is locked up in zones that only allow a single home on each lot, yielding large and expensive new homes. However, nearly two-thirds of Portland's households are now just one or two people. People of all ages are looking for a variety of smaller homes – these homes are more affordable, more resource-efficient, and fit household sizes better.

As a city, we have a choice to make: Will we be a city that continues to push its lower- and middle-income residents out, or will we change our rules, to allow more choices and affordability in all our neighborhoods? Enter the Residential Infill Project, or RIP, which seeks to do just that.

Recently, there has been confusion and heated public debate around the RIP, and the changes that are being proposed in Portland's residential neighborhoods. In fact, the project was initiated largely in response to concerns from neighborhoods, including the recent increase in demolitions, lack of affordable options, new narrow houses with front-loading garages, and large "McMansions" out of scale and character with existing neighborhoods.

The Residential Infill Project addresses these things – pretty well. Here is what the current proposal does in all neighborhoods:

- Reduces the height and size of new homes and homes that are significantly remodeled by:
- Capping square footage at less than half

what's allowed now in most residential areas, and scaling down maximum house sizes on smaller lots proportionally.

- Measuring height from the lowest (as opposed to highest) point on a lot, and
- Increasing the distance between the front of the house and the sidewalk
- Limiting overall height of the house.
- Stops the spread of McMansions (by reducing maximum allowed height and size)
- Prohibiting front-loading garages and changing parking requirements for narrow homes to make them fit in more with the surrounding neighborhood.

With these changes, the current proposal creates disincentives for demolishing existing houses because a builder can no longer profit from oversized houses. This may prove to be especially successful in slowing "1:1 replacements," where a smaller, older house is replaced with a bigger, newer one.

In those neighborhoods within a quarter mile of established neighborhood business hubs and frequent transit corridors, the proposal also:

- Allows conversion of existing homes into two or three units, incentivizing the structure's preservation.
- Allows two Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs) per house (instead of one allowed now), as long as the total size is still within the reduced total square footage allowed for a single house, per the new design rules.
- Makes it easier for homeowners to add an ADU or "granny flat" to their property, whether for rental income, for their parents to age in place, or other family members and friends.
- Restores the ability to build discrete small-scale "middle" housing that Portland has phased out (namely duplexes, triplexes, and cottage clusters). This helps further support mixed-income, walkable and

transit-enabled neighborhoods.

Portland for Everyone believes these changes are a great start, but we strongly encourage the city to go further in four distinct ways. These will provide diverse and more affordable housing options in *all* neighborhoods and will further discourage demolitions:

- 1) Outer neighborhoods shouldn't miss a chance at better transit and walkability. Allow middle housing types in all Portland's neighborhoods, not just those that are already well connected. We need to create the conditions for all Portland neighborhoods to have the duplexes, triplexes, internal divisions and ADUs that make transit and vibrant neighborhood retail districts viable.
- 2) Offer incentives for affordable housing that's accessible to seniors and people with disabilities. The city is far behind its goals for affordable housing, and affordable housing is dramatically more effective when it's part of more income-diverse neighborhoods. We should offer incentives like a bonus unit and/or size exception if one of the homes is made permanently affordable and accessible.
- 3) Increase the flexibility of planning codes – in all neighborhoods – so that it's easier to design around and preserve more existing homes and trees. We could also offer financial incentives for tree preservation.
- 4) Offer incentives for conversion and preservation of existing homes, and disincentivise demolitions by allowing internal conversions, two ADUs, "middle" and other housing strategies being proposed near transit in *all* neighborhoods.

With these types of changes in the city code, we can anticipate that there will be more choices available to more Portlanders. For example, by allowing internal divisions of

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"The Residential Infill Project (RIP) will allow more opportunities for building smaller more affordable units like this small home in Woodlawn in single family zones without increasing threats to trees. The City's revised RIP proposal, due out this Fall, should go further in by removing regulatory barriers to preserving more trees and providing a unit bonus for preserving large, healthy trees.

PHOTO BY RYAN AUSTIN