

# Housing Mix is Key

City manager's growth plans examined

City Manager Jon Ruiz rolled out his summary version of Eugene's growth plan for the next 20 years at a Eugene City Council work session March 14.

Over the course of the week of March 19, his presentation and the supporting staff materials, including overall maps, became available for viewing on the city website.

The broad conceptual directions of the city manager's recommendation follow the Seven Pillars of Envision Eugene, a framework distilled by staff a year ago from the several day-long meetings of the 75-person Community Resource Group (CRG).

However the public has seen few details during the last 12 months of technical refinement work. Perhaps 80 percent of that detailed research, study and documentation has been done through the Technical Resource Group (TRG), a joint working team of about half a dozen citizens and several staff, sometimes also working with outside consultants.

Perhaps 20 percent of the city manager's Envision Eugene recommendation has been worked up by city staff working quietly, with essentially no public input. This leaves some important questions for the community to consider, and just a few weeks to weigh in on them. If you've been wondering when Envision Eugene would ever get to the bottom line, in terms of the key provisions, that time is now.

**Historical housing mix.** The single biggest open issue in Envision Eugene is what's known as the "housing mix." This is the ratio of new housing which will be built as detached single family homes, compared to all other types of housing, called multifamily, including single family attached (such as row houses), small apartment and condominium buildings, and large apartment and condominium buildings.

Eugene had about 43,000 standalone homes and about 26,000 homes in multifamily buildings of some type, through about 2008. Comparing all the exact numbers gives us the city's "historical housing mix" of 61 percent single family and 41 percent multifamily.

With our 20 year population growth projection locked in at 34,000 people (about 0.9 percent per year growth), we are planning to build about 15,000 new dwelling units of all kinds over the 20-year planning period, through about 2031. We know that about 6,000 of those new dwellings will be single family, and we know that about 6,000 will be multifamily. The question boils down to the remaining 3,000 dwelling units. How many of those will be standalone, and how many will be multifamily?

This is not a question of pushing people who want them (and can afford them) out of standalone houses. In 20 years, in anyone's current proposal, we expect to have somewhere between 50,000 and 53,000 single family homes in Eugene — all those we have today, plus several thousand more.

**Future housing mixes.** When the TRG looked at housing mix, it documented impacts of housing ratios to bookend a reasonable range of options, 60 percent single/40 percent multi (similar to the historical rate), and 40 percent single/60 percent multi (a strongly progressive, sustainability-oriented rate). However, because it has

worked as a strictly technical research team, the TRG did not take a policy position.

The city of Springfield is planning for 52 percent single/48 percent multi. Corvallis is planning for 50 percent single/50 percent multi. Albany is planning for 47 percent single/53 percent multi. And the actual housing mix built in Eugene for 2009 and again for 2010 was 39 percent single/61 percent multi.

The city manager's current recommendation of a 55 percent single/45 percent multifamily housing mix would be most regressive of any of these comparators. It projects construction of 8,250 new single family dwelling units, and 6,750 new multifamily housing units, including student housing.

**What housing mix means.** Friends of Eugene (FoE) is advocating a 45 percent single/55 percent multifamily housing mix, the reverse of the city manager's recommendation. FoE recommends that we plan for construction of 6,750 new single family dwelling units and 8,250 new multifamily housing units.

A pivotal difference is the amount of land it takes to add more standalone houses, compared to adding more attached dwellings. As it turns out, if Eugene plans for a housing mix of 50/50 or anything more progressive, our residential land need can be met sustainably, without the need for an urban growth boundary (UGB) expansion, thus preserving our surrounding rural farm, forest, and natural areas — and the life choices of the people who already live in those outside-the-UGB areas.

Most housing observers find that a higher proportion of multifamily housing provides better affordability for the citizens who need it most. A higher proportion of multifamily housing also fits better into Eugene's plans for compact urban growth through mixed-use redevelopment of core commercial areas.

Many housing observers also note the unprecedented large demographic shift of baby boomers hitting retirement ages, and project that 20 years from now there will be a growing excess of single family homes nationwide — not because anyone who can afford it will be pushed out of a house they want to be in, but simply through the process of consumer choice over time.

**Jobs and people.** Another important policy dial in balancing Eugene's growth within the existing UGB is the projected jobs growth rate. The city manager is currently recommending a 1.4 percent per year jobs growth rate. That means that over the next 20 years, while we add 34,000 new people in Eugene (about two thirds of whom are likely workers) we would be planning to add 35,800 jobs. More jobs than the total of new people!

FoE currently recommends that Eugene instead plan for a 1.27 percent annual jobs growth rate. That is the average of the 0.88 percent population growth rate, with the high 1.67



percent rate projected for the next 10 years by the Oregon Economic Department (OED) while we hope to be recovering from the deep job losses of the Great Recession.

Projecting 1.27 percent per year jobs growth for Eugene is not only more sound and reasonable than aiming for a pie-in-the-sky number of new jobs greater than the number of new people, but it would also put less unreasonable pressure on our plans for constructive redevelopment in the commercial and industrial land base.

**Expanding questions.** Overall, the city manager's recommendation would expand the 34,000 acres currently inside the UGB by more than another 1,000 acres. About 250 acres of the expansion is for park areas which seem reasonable and appropriate.

Important questions remain about the proposed 475 acre expansion in northwest Eugene for large lot industrial growth, and the proposed 350 acre expansion, mostly in southwest Eugene, for residential growth in the form of new subdivisions with single family houses.

If Eugene gets to a housing mix of 50/50 or better, the residential expansion area would be moot — which would let the whole community better focus on our primary job of high-quality core-commercial redevelopment.

In the meantime, for both the industrial and residential areas, FoE believes the community needs to see a full and accurate accounting of the both the taxpayer and utility customer costs of public infrastructure to support growth in those rural areas, and of the full environmental costs of growth into prime farmland, across wetlands in a critical habitat path, and over oak savannah hills.

Once the actual costs of expanding are understood, then the community should simply apply equal criteria to the options of growing inward or growing outward. This fair and balanced "alternatives analysis," which is required by state law before expanding the UGB, has not yet been done.

**Growing better, not just bigger.** Eugene's long-standing growth management policies say, "Support the existing Eugene UGB by taking actions to ... use existing vacant land and under-used land within the boundary more efficiently."

With a more modern housing mix, a more neutral jobs growth rate, and with a close look at a real alternatives analysis before jumping to propose expansion, we can actually do what our community policy asks of us.

FoE believes the result will be a strong plan to grow Eugene better, fully maximizing the value of all our personal and community investments within the current UGB.

FoE believes the result will be a safer, greener, more prosperous Eugene for all who call this place home.

*Kevin Matthews is a community volunteer on the Envision Eugene Technical Resource Group, president of Friends of Eugene and Southeast Neighbors, and editor-in-chief of ArchitectureWeek magazine.*

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