

# Residential Infill Project – Participant Observation Report

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## *A Participant Observation Study*

This report offers a perspective on Portland’s Residential Infill Project with a particular focus on the outcomes related to older adults and people with disabilities. The findings from the report are the outcome of the participation of Alan DeLaTorre as a member of the City of Portland’s Residential Infill Project Stakeholder Advisory Committee (SAC) – he has served on several City of Portland advisory and expert groups offering his views as a researcher at Portland State University’s Institute on Aging, co-coordinator of the Age-friendly Portland and Multnomah County Initiatives, and as a member to the Portland Commission on Disability (he now serves as an Auxiliary member of the Commission once his second term finished in 2016).

This report does not represent the views of the City of Portland or its staff, members of the SAC, the Portland Commission on Disability, or stakeholders from the community.

## *Overview of the Residential Infill Project*

The Residential Infill Project is a City of Portland effort led by the Bureau of Planning and Sustainability (BPS) to plan for the addition of 123,000 households by the year 2035; 20 percent of those new residents are expected to be housed in single-dwelling residential zones.<sup>1</sup> A 26-member SAC was recruited in summer, 2015, and began meeting in September of that year. The committee is composed of developers, designers, neighborhood-based advocates, and other members of the community. The project was intended to address the scale and design of new houses, to determine where new houses on narrow lots would be allowed, and to explore alternative housing options that could help keep housing costs down while increasing the variety of housing available for Portlanders.<sup>2</sup>

## *Draft Proposal for Residential Infill*

In June, 2016, BPS released a draft proposal to garner public input that highlighted the goal of the project: “Adapt Portland’s single-dwelling zoning rules to meet the needs of current and future generations.”<sup>3</sup> In general, the proposal would allow and encourage smaller, less expensive units within a quarter mile of a designated neighborhood center, corridor with frequent transit, high capacity light rail stations, or inner-ring neighborhood. Those smaller, less expensive units have been described as “middle housing”<sup>4</sup> and include allowances, by right, for single-family dwelling to add new infill such as two Accessory Dwelling Units (rather than one), triplexes on corners (rather than duplexes on corners), and cottage clusters on lots larger than 10,000 square feet. Additionally, the proposal streamlines aspects of the zoning code (e.g., simplifies zoning code pertaining to “skinny” and “narrow” lots), and changes parking requirements for houses in narrow lots.

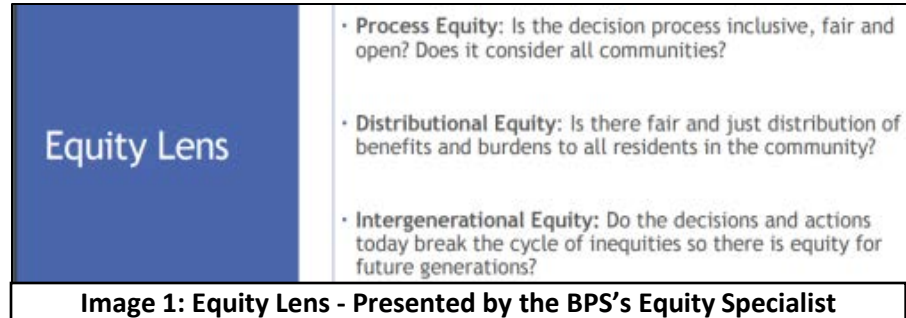
From June 15 through August 15, 2016, the project team focused on public participation, including a public survey and open houses. In fall, 2016, City Council will hold hearings on staff recommendation and gather additional public feedback before the BPS will craft zoning code amendments (additional public participation will occur in summer, 2017) before the Planning and Sustainability Commission and City Council conduct final hearings in fall, 2017.

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### *Equity and the Residential Infill Project*

On November 3, 2015, BPS’s Equity Specialist presented to the SAC and shared an equity lens that was intended to be used by BPS staff and SAC members when considering how and whether the Residential Infill Project was meeting equity consideration. Key questions focused on process, distributional, and intergenerational equity (see image 1).

Although BPS staff and SAC members attempted to be inclusive of a variety of residents and communities that



**Image 1: Equity Lens - Presented by the BPS’s Equity Specialist**

would be impacted by the resulting zoning code changes and incentives offered through the project, this proved to be a difficult outcome to achieve; there was an observable trend that the majority of those who participated in the public participation (both in SAC meetings and open houses) were home owners. Additionally, although the presentation from the Equity Specialist highlighted questions pertaining to intergenerational equity, it was clear that “future generations” focused more on race and ethnicity, while not addressing the aging of our population and/or the increasing proportion of people with disabilities who are living in community settings. It is important to note that Portland’s future generations will be markedly older and will have higher needs with respect to functional ability and accessible environments than current generations.

### *Aging, Accessibility, and the Residential Infill Project*

In the first several SAC meetings, very few mentions of accessible housing, older adults, or people with disabilities were brought up by BPS staff or SAC members; those comments were mostly brought to the attention of the participants by Dr. DeLaTorre, who was representing those issues and populations. Interestingly, the accessibility issue that seemed to resonate most with SAC members and City representatives (including Mayor Hales) was one that focused on how housing in Portland fails to meet the needs of Portlanders across the generations; an example regarding the difficulty of getting a stroller up and down stairs was met with general agreement as problematic. Over the course of meetings in the winter and spring, other SAC members and BPS staff began to more fully understand the accessibility issues and began exploring opportunities for new residential infill that would benefit a wide range of users (e.g., people with disabilities, cyclists, families) and would allow people to potentially age in their communities.

As part of the June, 2016, proposal, the City highlighted planning for future generations by considering accessible and affordable housing incentives located in close proximity (i.e., 0.25 miles) to neighborhood centers, which are meant to be anchors to complete neighborhoods.<sup>5</sup> From an accessibility perspective, this is desirable as it will allow for more housing units to be in service-rich neighborhoods and would, in theory, result in developments that would be less expensive due to size restrictions (e.g., savings in material costs) and economics of scale (e.g., developer and home-buyer savings due to lower permitting and construction expenses). Furthermore, centers are inherently compact, near community services, and “prioritized for improvement as connected, accessible places that are...physically accessible for people of all ages and abilities.”<sup>6</sup>

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Two specific proposals within the draft BPS proposal have been tied directly to incentives for accessible housing. First, Proposal 4 would allow – in addition to two Accessory Dwelling Units, duplexes, duplexes with an ADU, and triplexes on corners – an additional bonus unit, in exchange for an affordable or accessible unit, or, an internal conversion of an existing home. Second, Proposal 5 would allow cottage clusters on lots larger than 10,000 sq. feet. Additional bonus units would be allowed in exchange for affordable or accessible units, or retaining the existing house on site. Both of these proposals would incentivize bonus units to be built in exchange for accessible features, which have not yet been determined (see page 5 for recommendations).

### *Efforts to Engage Older Adults and Members of the Disability Community*

On July 20, 2016, an open house was held to garner input on the proposal from older adults, people with disabilities, and advocates for accessible housing (see image 2 below). The event had approximately 35 community members who weighed in on the proposal. Important input from the event included: the clear desire for people with disabilities to be engaged in the development of accessibility standards, the feeling that affordability and accessibility (combined) were issues faced by people looking for accessible housing, that accessibility *and* affordability should be required for bonus units in the proposal, and both support for and opposition to the proposal from the City. Regarding the latter item, it should be noted that the open house was similar to other open houses in that some attendees, including older adults, offered resistance to the proposal as it was feared that the City’s proposal would lead to undesired changes in their neighborhoods. On the other side, support was offered from individuals who were interested in opportunities to age in their communities when the current housing stock would not support it.



**Image 2 - Open house focused on issues of accessibility at Portland State University on July 20, 2016**

This event was also designed to be equitable and inclusive. Outreach to the community included traditional email and social media channels (note: the flyer was made to be screen readable, including headers), as well as an appearance by BPS staff and a SAC member on Disability Awareness, a radio show on KBOO Radio 90.7 FM. Additionally, the Portland Commission on Disability, Oregon Commission for the Blind, the Age-friendly Portland and Multnomah County initiative, and other community partners helped promote the event. At the open house, American Sign Language interpreters were made available and real-time captioning was offered. BPS staff were also instructed to slow down their presentation and verbally describe visual displays that were not able to be viewed by blind and low-vision attendees. Overall, the open house provided an inclusive environment and learning experience for BPS staff.

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### *Conclusions and Recommendations*

The Residential Infill Project has made progress toward advancing equity when considering older adults and people with disabilities. However, more is needed as the accessibility-related proposals provided by BPS will

*“Most homes are what I call Peter Pan housing. They're designed for people who are never going to age nor grow old.” – Dr. John Pynoos*

have limited impact on the housing stock in Portland. A quote from Dr. John Pynoos detailed in an interview on National Public Radio provides context for the need for accessible housing, “Most homes are what I call Peter Pan housing. They're designed for people who are never going to age nor grow old. They do have stairs. They often have inaccessible bathrooms. Some of them have inadequate lighting. They don't necessarily have safety features that will help people avoid falls. And some of them present actual hazards to people.” It is important to note that while our population is aging in a rapid and unprecedented manner, the housing stock does not meet the need of current generations, and is expected to be woefully inadequate with respect to meeting the needs of future generations. This is an equity issue that has not been addressed and needs additional solutions that must be generated by the City of Portland and Portlanders, together.

Several conclusions and recommendations for BPS and the City of Portland follow:

#### Regulatory approaches:

- Best practices in the U.S. for regulatory (e.g., zoning code) changes that can be adopted and adapted by the City of Portland are not readily available.
- One example of a universal design ordinance can be found in Sacramento, California where single-family and two-family developments of 20 units or more are required to offer basic universal design features to make homes more accessible; however, builders are only required to provide options to buyers as well as being required to have universal design features in at least one model home in a subdivision.<sup>7</sup>
- Austin, Texas’s City Council passed a visitability ordinance in January, 2014, which requires visitability features for residential single family and duplex construction: 1<sup>st</sup> floor bathrooms, lower light switches, clear routes/wide hallways, zero-step entrance; requirements are limited to new construction and do not apply to remodels or additions.<sup>8</sup>
- The Fair Housing Council of Oregon published its *Guide for Developing Accessible Age Friendly Zoning Code*.<sup>9</sup> Although the Guide addresses many housing types and code language, no recommendations for regulatory approaches that will lead to accessible single-family homes are offered.

#### Incentive-based approaches:

- The Virginia Housing Development Authority recognized the need to create accessible housing and provides incentives for developers that integrate those design elements.<sup>10</sup> Tax credits are provided to developers for “going beyond accessibility to universal design” and those developers are required to attend Universal Design training.<sup>11</sup>
- “Visitability” is a growing trend nationwide. The term refers to single-family or owner-occupied housing designed in such a way that it can be lived in or visited by people who have trouble with steps or who use wheelchairs or walkers. A house is visitable when it meets three basic requirements: (1) One zero-step entrance; (2) Doors with 32 inches of clear passage space; and (3) One bathroom on the main floor you can get into in a wheelchair. Concrete Change, an international network advocating for visitability, offers visitable approaches for townhouses.<sup>12</sup>

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### Voluntary approaches:

- The City of Irvine has set up a voluntary program that allows builders to offer universal design features where permitted by architecture and elevation.<sup>13</sup>
- The Lifelong Housing Certification Project is a voluntary certification process for evaluating the accessibility and/or adaptability of homes. It was developed in partnership with AARP Oregon and is designed to help meet the growing market demand for accessible housing and enable older adults and people with disabilities to age in place safely and independently. There are three levels of accessibility: (1) Basic Accessibility; (2) Full Accessibility; and (3) Enhanced Accessibility.<sup>14</sup>

### Recommendations:

- Portland's Comprehensive Plan has policies addressing physically-accessible housing (policy 5.8), accessible design for all (policy 5.9), and aging in place (policy 5.19).<sup>15</sup> These policies have emerged from an equity framework and have been supported by older adults and the disability community. Implementation of these policies is needed as a part of the Residential Infill Project and other City-backed efforts.
- Changes to the zoning code that regulates/requires accessibility must be explored. The lack of available best practices provides an opportunity for Portland to be an innovator in promoting the equitable and sustainable goal of accessible housing.
- Appendix A offers draft suggestions for two tiers of accessibility: (1) visitable design, and (2) accessible design. These suggestions provide a starting point for accessibility guidelines and should be reviewed with the Portland Commission on Disability and the Age-friendly Portland Housing Committee.
- With respect to BPS's Proposal 4 of the current Residential Infill Project proposal, we would encourage the following (See Appendix A for details):
  - The Accessory Dwelling Units (ADU) allowed by right that are above and beyond the current zoning code (i.e., a second ADU) should adhere to visitability standards
  - The bonus ADU (i.e., the third unit) should adhere to accessible standards
  - The bonus ADU (i.e., the third unit) should require the resulting unit to meet affordability (not detailed as a part of this proposal) and accessibility standards
  - Exceptions for topographic reasons (e.g., slope) or limitations for retrofits and additions should be considered
- Incentive based approaches should be used and the City of Portland should be prepared to understand the costs and benefits associated with a wide-ranging accessibility incentive program that goes beyond that offered in the BPS Residential Infill Proposal.
- More research is needed to understand the equity and environmental justice implications of accessible residential infill and policies and programs.
- Alternative housing types such as stacked flats (rather than side-by-side townhomes), internal conversions, cottage clusters, and other provide opportunities for accessible residential infill (and multi-family development) that should be explored in more depth.
- Although the following suggestion is not vetted with community partners, based on discussion within the SAC, the City of Portland and the Residential Infill project should consider limiting stairs to one or two, when zero-step entrances are not possible (e.g., due to topography), which will aid in the ability for homeowners to install permanent and/or temporary ramps.

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### Appendix A – Accessibility Guidelines for City of Portland

*Visitable Guidelines* - The term visitability refers to single-family or owner-occupied housing designed in such a way that it can be lived in or visited by people who have trouble with steps or who use wheelchairs or walkers.<sup>16</sup>

The three main visitability criteria are:

1. Zero Step Entrance
  - A step less path no steeper than 1:12, preferably less steep, which leads to the entry door;
  - A 3'0" entry door;
  - A threshold preferably no higher than ½ inch<sup>1</sup>
2. 32" clear passageways
3. One bathroom/powder room on the main floor (ground level) with mobility device access and maneuvering

### *Accessibility Guidelines*

The accessibility criteria are:

1. All visitability criteria as detailed above;
2. Single level living or, at the very least, a full bathroom and kitchen on the ground floor;
3. Bathroom with required turning space for person in a mobility device (circular or t-shaped);
4. Curb less shower or wet bathroom ;
5. Backing of bathroom walls to enable variable grab bar position;
6. Varied and/or adjustable kitchen countertops;
7. Sinks and stoves with roll-under cabinetry;
8. Electrical outlets and phone jacks at least 18-24 inches above floor;
9. Task lighting and natural light sources;
10. Ventilation and air conditioning for comfort;
11. Lever handle hardware, rocker light switches, and D-shaped or loop-style cabinet hardware;
12. Pocket doors (when possible) or outward swinging doors in bathrooms (when pocket doors are not possible), and front entryways that allow for a door to open while a mobility device is present;

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<sup>1</sup> According to ACCESSIBLE AND USABLE BUILDINGS AND FACILITIES ICC A111.1 - 2009 American National Standard 404.2.4 that relates to thresholds: If provided, thresholds at doorways shall be ½ inch (13 mm) maximum in height. Raised thresholds and changes in level at doorways shall comply with Sections 302 and 303. EXCEPTION: An existing or altered threshold shall be permitted to be ¾ inch (19 mm) maximum in height provided that the threshold has a beveled edge on each side with a maximum slope of 1:2 for the height exceeding ¼ inch (6.4 mm).

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### References

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- <sup>2</sup> City of Portland (2016) *Residential Infill Project: An update to Portland's single-dwelling zoning rules – June 2016*. Retrieved from: <https://www.portlandoregon.gov/bps/article/533961>.
- <sup>3</sup> City of Portland (2016) *Residential Infill Project: An update to Portland's single-dwelling zoning rules*. Retrieved from: <http://www.portlandoregon.gov/bps/article/580581>.
- <sup>4</sup> Parolek, D. (n.d.) Missing Middle. Retrieved from: <http://missingmiddlehousing.com/>. Note: Middle housing is a range of multi-unit or clustered housing types compatible in scale with single-family homes that help meet the growing demand for walkable urban living; examples include duplexes, courtyard apartments, live/work units.
- <sup>5</sup> City of Portland (n.d.). *Centers: Anchors to complete neighborhoods*. Retrieved from: <https://www.portlandoregon.gov/bps/article/471233>.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>7</sup> City of Sacramento (2010). *Universal Design Ordinance*. Retrieved from: <http://www.cityofsacramento.org/Community-Development/Building/Universal-Design-Ordinance>.
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- <sup>16</sup> Visitability.org (2016). *Visitability – what is it?* Retrieved from: <http://www.visitability.org/>.