

PORTLAND

Portland trumpeted rosy numbers for controversial infill plan while burying a dimmer forecast

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Michael Lloyd-The Oregonian

A set of duplexes on North Mississippi Avenue in Portland.

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Portland planners publicly overstated by five times the number of new homes they expect a controversial infill plan could create over the next two decades.

City officials boasted that their plan projects “the addition of 24,000 units in triplexes or fourplexes” by the year 2035.

But the city's own forecasts paint a much different picture.

Planners expect a net of fewer than 4,000 new units to be built in residential neighborhoods citywide under their infill plan, according to numbers obtained by The Oregonian/OregonLive and not previously disclosed by the city.

What's more, the plan isn't expected to deliver those new homes to the inner eastside neighborhoods as planners have stated, an analysis of those numbers shows. Instead, it would disproportionately steer a majority of new units to poorer neighborhoods east of 82nd Avenue, where the risk of displacing residents is high.

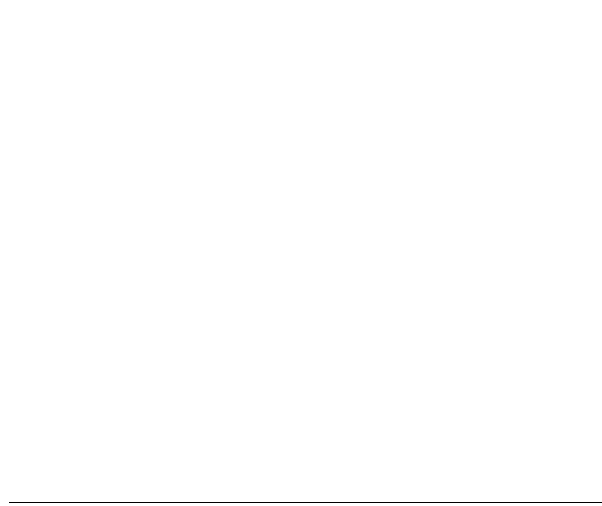
It's not clear which number might ultimately prove more accurate.

But planners have trumpeted the higher figure of new homes when they talk about ways to offer more housing options to keep prices affordable while using the lower figure to analyze specific neighborhood impacts and the potential that vulnerable residents could get pushed out to make way for the new homes.

The infill proposal could become official city policy by this summer. The city's volunteer Planning and Sustainability Commission is expected to vote on the proposal Tuesday before referring it to the City Council for final action.

While forecasting home construction is an inexact science, city officials acknowledge they haven't adequately communicated their infill projections. Nothing in their work was intended to be misleading, they say.

"We need to be more articulate," said Donnie Oliveira, a spokesman for Portland's Bureau of Planning and Sustainability.



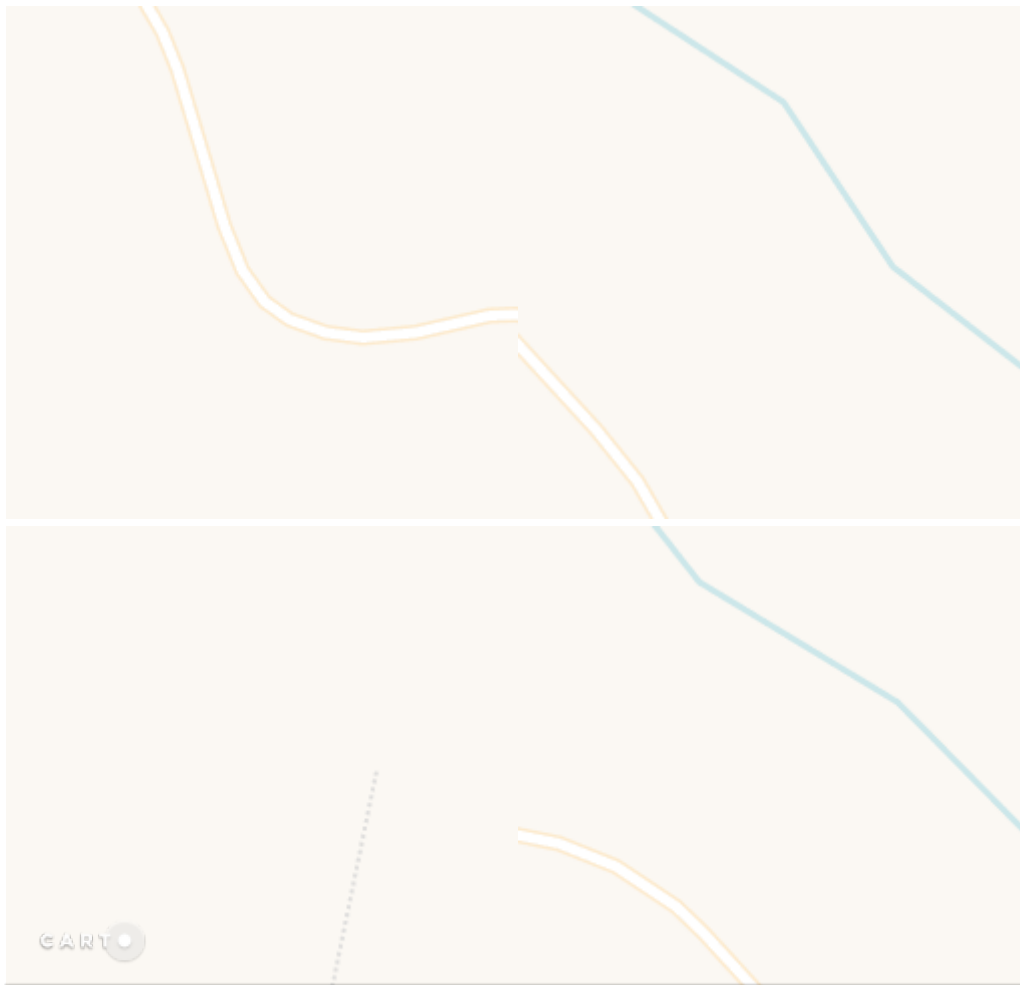
Planners say their overarching objective isn't to hit a quota for new infill but rather to create more choices about the types of homes available in residential neighborhoods.

Changing the zoning code is the only way to add new housing options, they say, even if it takes several decades for developers to build significantly more infill units.

"It's a major step in removing the regulatory barriers, but not the market barriers," said Morgan Tracy, a lead planner on the project.

Infill map

Portland neighborhoods would see disparate changes in new housing construction if a residential infill plan is adopted. Portland is already expected to add about 16,000 new units in neighborhoods zoned for single-family housing. But if the infill plan is approved, that number would grow to about 20,000 – with areas east of 82nd Avenue taking more than half of the net gain. This map shows how the infill proposal would either increase or decrease new home construction, by census tract, above the current forecast.



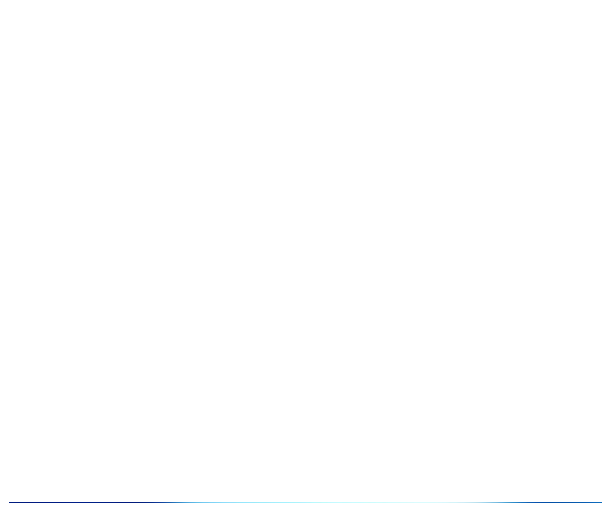
Map created by  enjus

Called the [Residential Infill Project](#), the zoning proposal has been four years in the making.

Planners set out to revise zoning codes to discourage developers from demolishing an old home to make way for a single, expensive McMansion. It also aims to address Portland's "missing middle," providing more housing choices for residents looking to live in something other than a detached single-family home or an apartment along a bustling commercial drag.

Planners devised a plan that would greenlight the construction of duplexes, triplexes and quads in leafy neighborhoods currently zoned to allow only single-family housing.

The concept is beloved among progressives who believe zoning constraints limit housing supply and exacerbate Portland's mounting affordability crisis. But residents from influential neighborhood associations, such as Eastmoreland and Multnomah, deride the project as a Trojan horse that would cram more people into neighborhoods and encourage demolitions of old homes.



In reality, the project could do neither.

Confusion about Portland's infill project can be traced to two numbers: one prominently displayed in [a February city report](#) and one that is nowhere to be found.

The city report spelled out the proposed infill zoning changes for the planning commission and general public.

The figure that the city emphasized in the report, 24,000 new infill homes, initially came from [an economic analysis by an outside consultant](#), Johnson Economics. It analyzed redevelopment potential given previous development trends, underlying land values and projected sales or rental prices. It represented maximum growth in an unfettered market.

But the city didn't spell out results of a second, similar analysis that reached a much different conclusion: about 4,000 new units. That number never appeared in the report and could be found only by obtaining data used to draw the report's maps -- which The Oregonian/OregonLive did.

The two numbers are so disparate because the consultant and the planners used different projections to calculate population growth and movement.



Portland planners started with the assumption that the city would add about 123,000 housing units by 2035 -- a number already vetted and used in the city's comprehensive zoning plan. Most of those are projected to be built in high-density areas like downtown or busy commuter corridors. Portland's single-family neighborhoods would get 16,000 new units, according to the comprehensive plan.

With the adoption of the infill proposal, planners shifted some growth from apartments along corridors into single-family neighborhoods. They now project about 20,000 new households in residential neighborhoods -- a 4,000-home net increase in those areas.

The planning bureau considers the 4,000 tally a "more realistic view" of projected infill growth, said Oliveira, the spokesman, though planners say the differing forecasts are intended to complement rather than compete against one another.

"They're both valid in terms of providing a range of what the outcomes could be," said Tyler Bump, a senior economic planner for the city.

The infill plan likely would cause fewer new homes to be built in Portland's popular amenity-rich neighborhoods closest to downtown, The Oregonian/OregonLive's review found.

That's not what planners have stated publicly. New homes under the city's proposal would be "distributed in neighborhoods across the city" while "inner Portland neighborhoods like Buckman, Richmond, Eliot, Humboldt and Northwest" would see "moderate increases in new housing units," planners wrote in their February report.



But a review of the city's forecast for 4,000 new homes shows the opposite.

Some of those same neighborhoods – Buckman, Richmond and Northwest Portland – could instead see no change, or even less development, because of the city's infill plan. Areas such as Sellwood-Westmoreland, Eastmoreland, Laurelhurst, Grant Park and Alameda would also see a decline in new houses.

And far from being distributed across the city, new homes under the infill plan would largely be concentrated only in a handful of areas: St. Johns in North Portland, Brentwood-Darlington and Mt. Scott-Arleta in Southeast Portland, Cully in Northeast Portland and many neighborhoods in east Portland.

In fact, areas east of 82nd Avenue stand to collectively gain about 2,000 new units, or more than half all of the units citywide projected under the infill plan. That's because land prices are lower, increasing the odds a given lot will be redeveloped.

In an earlier version of the city's infill plan, from October 2017, officials specifically excluded much of east Portland and St. Johns from such development because those areas "lack access to services, safe active transportation and transit connections, and they have poorer access to living-wage employment opportunities." Not steering additional growth to those would be consistent with city policies "to prevent displacement," they wrote.

City planners say they are no longer worried.

Tom Armstrong, a supervising planner for Portland, said city leaders are committed to making necessary improvements in east Portland. As an example, he pointed to a 10-year-old action plan for the area that has helped spark city-funded improvements.

“There has been renewed focus on investment,” he said.

Tom Lewis, chairman of the Centennial Community Association, said he’d gladly welcome more people but doubts the Portland City Council will spend more money in his outer eastside neighborhood.

Lewis bought his three-bedroom ranch house on Southeast 148th Avenue 46 years ago and has seen the city encourage the growth of thousands of new residents to the surrounding area.

“For 30 years, the infrastructure has not come with the growth,” he said. “That’s my main concern. We’ve lost grocery stores. We’re a food desert. We’ve just been run over on the boulevards left and right, with pedestrians being killed.”

Meanwhile, city planners claimed in their report that west Portland neighborhoods would “see minimal change in new housing units.” In fact, neighborhoods collectively west of the Willamette River would see about 500 fewer units built because of the infill proposal, The Oregonian/OregonLive found.

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Reductions on the westside are linked to new rules that would cap the square footage of new single-family homes, making redevelopment there less appealing for both buyers and builders.

“I don’t think it’s necessarily inequitable,” Armstrong said of the projected disparities in growth between west Portland and neighborhoods east of 82nd Avenue.

Michael Andersen, a senior researcher for the urban think tank Sightline Institute, who has supported elements of the plan that promote more housing, said the newsroom’s findings appear to reflect the city’s effort to find a compromise solution.

“Advocates in Cully, east Portland and St. Johns have spoken to say they want the option to have these housing options in their areas, and it’s good that they may be getting some,” he said. “But the fact that so few might be built in general, and so few in high-amenity areas, is concerning.”

If the infill project faces one daunting hurdle, it may be the risk of displacing low-income renters.

City planners say their infill plan would result in less displacement citywide by 2035 than by simply leaving existing zoning rules in place. About 600 low-income renters in single-family homes are at risk of displacement under current zoning but that number would drop to about 480 under the infill plan, according to the city.

But Portland's analysis is based on the proposal generating roughly 4,000 net new units. Planners say they haven't run numbers to determine displacement if the number of new units built under the plan is higher, as the economic forecast suggested.

"It's time-consuming work to do," Tracy said. "And certainly if we're asked the question we're going to answer to the best our ability."

The potential for displacement is greatest in neighborhoods where development is more likely and there's a higher proportion of low-income renters, according to the city's analysis.

Virtually every neighborhood slated to add significantly more units under the infill plan -- including Brentwood-Darlington, Mt. Scott-Arleta, Cully, St. Johns and much of the area east of 82nd Avenue -- is considered by planners to be at risk for displacement.

Andre Baugh, a member of Portland's Planning and Sustainability Commission, has been critical in recent public meetings about the potential for the project to hurt low-income renters and communities of color in vulnerable neighborhoods.

"I really worry that we're being asked to displace certain populations faster than others, for this benefit of this greater good," he said at a public meeting last month. "The greater good of more units is not benefiting everybody equally."

Baugh was more restrained in comments to The Oregonian/OregonLive.

“There’s risk here,” he said, adding that he plans to press his case Tuesday. “I’m going to push it really hard, because it’s the last chance to do that.”

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