

March 8, 2015

Planning & Sustainability Commission

1900 SW 4th Avenue

Portland, OR 97201-5380

psc@portlandoregon.gov

RE: Comprehensive Plan Testimony

(via postal and electronic mail)

Dear Planning & Sustainability Commission:

We would like to write in support of specific recommendations for the comprehensive plan that was put forward by the Northeast Coalition of Neighbors (NECN). We strongly support their recommendation for de-incentivizing the destruction of affordable existing homes, as this current tidal wave of demolitions is resulting in the conversion of these homes to either much larger and more expensive new homes, or to two tall ‘skinny’ homes on what was formerly a single-dwelling plot. We know that many of our established neighbors, ourselves included, would not have been able to buy into this neighborhood if such large new homes had been available. The introduction of skinny houses in increasing numbers is changing the nature of neighborhoods, away from the type of housing most Portlanders would prefer to seek.

We are also concerned because these new homes are changing the nature of existing neighborhood’s building stock in other ways. They tend to often be among the tallest as well as being wider (extending close to the property line). This can leave neighboring houses both more often in the shade, and with less privacy. It also means that the new homes cannot support the type of gardening that is of interest to many home-owners (or potential home-owners).

We feel that the nature of the city’s housing stock is being changed so rapidly, driven by the goals of developers, with minimal consideration of what kind of housing the residents want or can afford. It is time to address this trend.

We have copied below, after our signatures, sections from the NECN letter to this commission regarding demolitions and skinny houses.

Sincerely,

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Residential Demolitions:

New planning guidelines should discourage unnecessary demolitions of single-family homes and encourage preservation of dwellings and other buildings where feasible. At present, demolitions in our neighborhoods are typically no longer just replacing dilapidated dwellings or filling in previously-vacant full-size lots. Instead, new construction is replacing older, generally sound homes that tend to be affordable to median-income households, with much larger single-family homes that tend to be unaffordable to all but the highest-income households within our neighborhood. This trend is slowly chipping away at the historically affordable housing stock within our neighborhood, is environmentally destructive, and does little or nothing to contribute to density.

The Plan should adopt policies to favor preservation and renovation over demolition where feasible. Demolition should be a tool of last resort, deployed only when the existing structure has reached the end of its useful lifespan.

Skinny houses on undersized lots in the R5 zone:

R5 zones are viewed by neighbors as areas with roughly 5,000 square foot lots. Though it is understood that the City has allowed lot sizes down to 3,000 square feet in some areas of R5 zones, there should be a minimum lot size in the R5 zone, below which development of new primary dwelling units is not allowed (because, in fact, a legal “lot” does not exist; instead, the area in question is the yard of the adjacent house). In certain areas, “lots of record” or “historically platted lots” were sold off with dimensions of 25x100, two, three, or four at a time, so that buyers could choose whether they wanted 5,000, 7,500, or 10,000 square foot lots for their upscale homes and gardens. The City has recently taken the opinion that these are, in fact, all buildable 2,500 square foot lots, despite the fact that they are located in an R5 zone, and thus

are smaller than the minimum lot size required to be buildable in that zone. The City should halt all new development on lots of substandard size, and require that a lot be of a certain size, within R5 zones, in order to be considered buildable without a zone change. This policy would still allow for the construction of accessory dwelling units; and, if implemented along with the other recommendations in this letter, would also allow for the primary residential structure to be divided into multiple dwelling units. The yard size, however, would remain large enough to preserve the character of the R5 zone.

NECN Recommendation: Modify the Zoning Code to clarify that all new construction requiring permits within the City in R5 zones shall be on lots that are as close as possible to 5,000 square feet. A single lot of 5,000 square feet in size shall not be subdivided, nor any interpretation of historic plat lines interpreted to allow, for two skinny houses to be constructed in such a zone. The minimum buildable lot size for a new primary structure in the R5 zone shall be 4,000 square feet.