



Filling in the Spaces: Ten Essentials for Successful Urban Infill Housing



The Housing Partnership

November, 2003

Made possible, in part, through a contribution from the Washington Association of Realtors

This publication was prepared by The Housing Partnership, through a contribution from the Washington Association of Realtors.

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A growth management strategy that relies on extensive urban infill requires major changes from past industry and regulatory practice. For the strategy to succeed, builders and local governments must change the way they operate and work more closely together to further each others' goals. The ten essentials help guide the public and private sectors as they fill in the spaces with new homes in innovative developments.

The ten essentials are just that: essential. Communities that have struggled to bring about desired change and fulfill their visions will likely find some key steps they have missed along the way. None of the essentials is easy or cheap. But we must be realistic about the challenge of changing 100-year-old development patterns and promoting change in things people value highly. The rewards of growth management entail risk, and the payoffs require investments.

What we mean by infill and innovation

Current urban growth lines still allow development on the periphery of the metropolitan area, and in most cases this development will follow relatively conventional patterns of large subdivisions. Some small lot subdivisions have been developed in outlying areas, and the large masterplanned communities have a wide variety of housing types. There is plenty of innovation going on in the periphery, aided by sophisticated marketing strategies and the lack of conflict with existing established neighborhoods.

This study is about something different. As development has marched outward from central cities over the decades, some land has been left undeveloped or underdeveloped along the way. These islands can range from a half-acre with a dilapidated house, up to an abandoned school site of 20 or 30 acres. In most cases these parcels sit within established neighborhoods which have evolved in their own unique ways. Many of these sites were passed over because of steep slopes, sensitive areas, unstable soils or conflicts with adjacent uses (such as industry or freeways). Many vacant parcels end up serving as community open space with room for children and dogs.

In outlying areas, builders have more of a blank slate to work with, whereas infill sites come with a regulatory, market and aesthetic context the builder must work within and that resists change. For some sites the context works just fine and a builder can produce homes that fit right into the surroundings. For other sites, a builder cannot replicate the existing patterns and have a successful project. Without innovation and the ability to be innovative and break from the established context, many parcels will remain undeveloped.

Innovation and industry structure

An underlying principle of the Growth Management Act is that builders should use vacant or underdeveloped infill parcels before asking for more land on the periphery through an expansion of the urban growth line. This conflicts, to a large degree, with the trends in the homebuilding industry. Many of the small and medium sized builders and developers have disappeared. The remaining small builders have either moved to the very edge of the urban areas, where they can still find inexpensive land, or have moved into expensive niche markets. The large builders, pursuing economies of scale, now work primarily in masterplanned communities or large subdivisions on the periphery.

With this industry dynamic, an infill strategy becomes problematic. In high demand areas small builders will eagerly snap up available parcels, paying the extra development costs for difficult sites, confident they will get high prices for finished homes. It is not unusual to see developments of just a few expensive houses in East King County or Seattle. In most areas, however, infill opportunities have more difficulty attracting builders.

This is where innovation comes in. Higher densities, different product types and new development standards, combined with a focus on emerging markets, can turn unattractive infill sites into profitable opportunities for builders that meet critical housing needs. We now have quite a number of good examples of innovative housing developments throughout the region, but few jurisdictions allow these models in infill settings with established zoning and development standards. A successful infill strategy will make these innovative housing types into mainstream products built by small local builders.

Innovation and the Growth Management Act

Under the Growth Management Act (GMA) the state gives counties a projected population growth, and counties, in turn, divide this growth target among cities and unincorporated areas. Most jurisdictions have found that they cannot meet their assigned targets by growing in the same patterns and at the same densities as before. They need some areas of higher density.

Many jurisdictions have responded by planning for some areas of very high density (mostly in designated “urban centers”), while leaving the majority of land in single family neighborhoods at the prevailing zoned density. This approach has its political attractions, since the areas slated for high densities are usually in urban cores or commercial districts. It has not, however, attracted much interest from the building industry. The market for urban center housing remains limited and confined to areas of Seattle, Everett, Tacoma and some East King County cities. Most urban centers have seen little or no housing development since receiving designation as such a decade ago.

As an alternative approach to achieving higher densities, cities and counties can promote infill at mid-levels of density (between 10 and 20 units per acre). This might include small lot development, cottage housing, townhouses, auto courts and small multiplexes (see Figure 1 and Appendix A). Unlike urban center housing, there is proven demand for these housing types throughout the region, and builders have had success with them. For the most part, however, these models are found only in large subdivisions and masterplanned communities or as isolated demonstration projects. Jurisdictions will have much better success meeting their GMA goals by allowing these innovative housing types in a wide variety of infill settings.

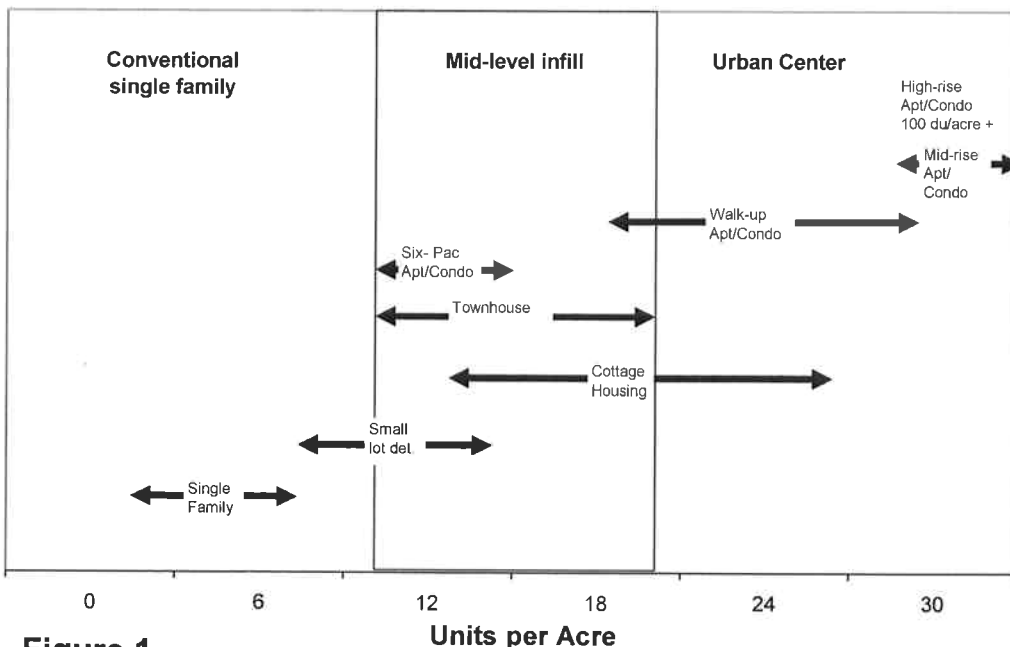


Figure 1

The Ten Essentials

Homebuilding is a large, fragmented and complex industry, governed by a bewildering array of jurisdictions and regulations. The fundamental changes in homebuilding required by the GMA will not happen easily or overnight. The old saying about turning a battleship applies very well. The ten essentials provide local governments and members of the industry with a framework for pursuing change and fostering the more interactive and cooperative environment that must evolve for that change to happen. The ten essentials are:

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| Political | 1. Build public understanding and acceptance of GMA obligations
2. Make innovation a positive outcome for current residents |
| Industry | 3. Make innovative housing the preferred choice for builders
4. Make infill housing a profitable business |
| Marketing | 5. Help new housing fit well into old neighborhoods
6. Identify market demand and plan to meet it |
| Design | 7. Design sites for livability and functionality
8. Put aside the old stock plans and start over |
| Regulation | 9. Write new development codes that promote good site and home design
10. Develop processes that promote rather than penalize innovation and infill. |

Each of the ten essentials has four parts:

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|-------------------------|--|
| Why it matters | Or put in the negative, why failure to observe this essential will keep a community's objectives from being achieved. |
| What it means | What specifically has to be done. The focus is on the variables in the political or development process that will be affected. |
| How to do it | In the past decade we have learned a lot about successful infill development and have seen a burst of energy in developing tools and techniques to promote it. |
| Responsibilities | The public and private sector players will each have responsibilities, and some will be joint. |

Like any framework, the ten essentials are somewhat arbitrarily drawn. There could be eight or twelve. Nor are they complete. The reader will find, however, that they suggest more than enough work to keep builders and local governments busy for a long time.

Political Essentials. Elected officials must have reasons to support infill and innovation and must see them as politically safe or even beneficial

***Essential #1:
Build public understanding and acceptance of GMA obligations***

Political support for infill and innovation begins with the recognition by the public that communities within urban growth areas have an obligation to accept infill and higher densities in exchange for preservation of rural and resource areas in the region.

Why it matters

In 19th Century cities, dense infill was common, since there was great demand for housing within walking or streetcar distance of job centers. Builders filled in vacant lots and replaced light uses with more intense ones. With the build-out of central cities and the advent of the automobile, however, metropolitan areas began to grow mostly on the periphery. As successive rings matured, mostly as single family neighborhoods, prevailing development patterns became politically locked in. Local governments have viewed it as their job to protect the “character” of their neighborhoods, and that means maintaining existing densities. Moreover, residents tend to view vacant land in their neighborhoods as community open space, regardless of its ownership and legal development potential.

With the mature areas mostly built-out, housing demand would have to be satisfied in the next ring out. These peripheral areas feature large parcels which are economic to develop, fewer existing neighbors to affect, and, often, a more development-friendly atmosphere. From a marketing perspective, builders on the periphery can create entirely new communities, which are popular with buyers in the new-construction market.

Then along comes growth management, which turns this community and political dynamic on its head. Now, with less land available on the periphery, growth will be channeled into those existing mature areas in the form of infill and redevelopment, often at higher densities. But this is exactly what the structure of local government is set up to prevent. Residents of mature communities do not want changes in densities and do not want their open spaces filled in. Their elected officials will respond to those desires. Being pro-housing and pro-density is politically irrational and will often cut a councilmember’s career short.

The central problem is that, since the advent of growth management, state and local governments have done a very poor job of convincing their local citizens of the requirement to accommodate infill and higher densities as part of the growth management framework. Research has shown that awareness levels of growth management are extremely low, and thus the call for infill and higher densities seem arbitrary and in violation of the implicit and explicit political bargain that has governed land use for decades.