

Communities By Design, a
nonprofit 501c(3) training and education
organization, in cooperation with the
City of Redwood City,
is pleased to present:

The Forum *at Redwood City*

A CONTINUING CONVERSATION ON CITY DESIGN



DELIGHTFUL DENSITY :

Strategies for Creating Comfort,
Convenience, and Choice in the Cities of
the New Reality

2008-09 SEASON: FORUM #6
THURSDAY, MARCH 5, 2009
LITTLE FOX THEATER
2209 BROADWAY
REDWOOD CITY
6:00 P.M. - 7:45 P.M.

On March 5, 2009, the City of Redwood City and the nonprofit "Communities by Design" held the sixth presentation of the 2008-2009 Forum season. **Dan Zack**, Downtown Development Coordinator for the City of Redwood City, discussed how well-designed density can create comfort, convenience, and choices in cities in his presentation, "Delightful Density."

Mr. Zack began his presentation by claiming that a mistake most cities make is to set excessive housing density limits. While cities limit densities to preserve a suburban or rural character, or to prevent problems such as parking shortages and traffic congestion, overdoing it can also create problems such as housing shortages, automobile dependence, and suburban sprawl.

According to Mr. Zack, density is the number of housing units per acre for a given project, and is calculated by dividing the number of housing units in a project by the number of acres the project covers. It is a measure that is often the main focus of planning efforts, however it does not convey much about the look, feel, or relative success of development.

Mr. Zack demonstrated the limitations of the measure of density in a game he played with the audience. Participants guessed the densities of about a dozen projects, ranging in density from very low to extremely high. One of the most shocking comparisons was the Cabrini Green public housing project in Chicago vs. an average apartment building in Paris, France; the

"Density needs a good PR guy."

- Dan Zack

massive high-rise buildings of Cabrini Green were 50 units per acre, whereas the six-story building in Paris is 384 units per acre. This example demonstrated that tall and bulky does not necessarily translate into high density. Also, the measure of units per acre doesn't describe the character of the project—whether it is affordable or luxurious, tall or short, beautiful or ugly, occupied by owners or renters, crime-prone or safe, or overcrowded or spacious.

While density as a measurement can't tell us much about the character of the place, it is an important measure to focus on since it is related to environmental, social, and economic goals. If we want to achieve goals such as preserving farmland and wildlife habitat, conserving water resources, and reducing infrastructure costs, air pollution, and dependency on oil, increasing densities in the right places can help. Mr. Zack illustrated reduced resource demands with increased densities with a series of graphs that analyzed land use, water use, vehicle miles travelled, gallons of gasoline used, air pollution emissions, parking spaces needed, and square yards of road needed per household as it varies from low densities to high densities. Whereas low density development is very consumptive of land, high density development concentrates growth and requires less land per unit. As land use per unit decreases, water consumption is reduced with less land to irrigate per unit. Additionally, as density increases transit ridership and walking trips substitute for vehicle trips, reducing vehicle miles travelled and gallons of gasoline consumed, and requiring fewer roads and parking spots per household. Lastly, electricity use decreases as densities increase due to insulation from surrounding units in row houses and apartment buildings, as well as smaller units (which are possible in part due to the high number of neighborhood amenities supported by high densities).

Density drives up the amount of amenities that can be made available in an area and puts people closer to these amenities, offering more choices and making those options more accessible and convenient. In a comparison of Greenwich Village in New York City and a conventional suburban neighborhood in Fresno, CA, Mr. Zack showed that the number of amenities within a quarter mile walking distance increases significantly with higher densities. In Greenwich Village, there were substantially more restaurants, theaters, clothing shops, shoe stores, grocery stores, hardware stores, and schools within a quarter mile walking distance of a brownstone row house when compared to the ranch house in Fresno.

In addition to the benefits that higher densities in the right locations can provide, there is also a great demand for more of it. According to Mr. Zack, the urban preference is dramatically underserved, with as much as 40% of American home-seekers wanting walkable urbanism, but only 5% to 20% of current housing supply fitting that description. Higher densities can help communities achieve sustainability goals; the challenge is locating, arranging, and designing it to make it delightful.

"Increasing density can't be perceived as making people take their medicine. It must be a rewarding choice."

- Dan Zack

Mr. Zack pointed out that high density doesn't belong everywhere, but that it should be located in areas where it creates the most positive benefits—in existing cities where there are infill opportunities near transit, job clusters, and services. Also, density should be arranged using a transect approach, which calls for a range of densities appropriate to the different settings found within cities. In designing for density, attention should be focused on convenience, walkability, transit orientation, and beauty. Building facades should be treated like the walls of an outdoor room—proportioned and ornamented to give comfort to the

streets and make the city a desirable place in which to walk and socialize. Increasing density can't be perceived as "making people take their medicine." Density must be a desirable choice, and more people will be willing to accept it if they consider it a fair tradeoff which gives them convenience, accessibility, safety, walkability, comfort, and beauty.

In conclusion, Mr. Zack suggested some strategies to overcome challenges to getting density built. Reducing parking requirements and encouraging shared parking can reduce the amount of space devoted to cars, creating more walkable and enjoyable environments. Focusing on the shared open spaces of streets, squares, playgrounds, and parks—instead of consumptive and inefficient private yards—can not only make high density neighborhoods more livable but also easier to build. Lastly, we should promote the benefits of smaller units in dense neighborhoods—which are more affordable to rent, purchase, and heat as well as less consumptive of natural resources—and use simple form-based codes to make regulations more easily understood and implemented by developers.