

Shape Our Fremont

Where Fremont residents can learn about shaping proposed housing developments...

Issues: What Does Housing Density Mean?

When people say a housing development is too dense, what does that mean? Does it mean there are too many houses or that the buildings are too tall or too close together?

Everyone probably has their own list of factors that make a project too dense. When the City of Fremont reviews density, some of those may apply, and others may not.

Determining Density

In general terms, the residential density specifies the number of houses, condos, apartments, or other dwelling units that can be built on a piece of land. This is determined by the land use designation in the Fremont General Plan. Residential areas are designated as hillside, low, low-medium, medium, and urban density.

For each designation, there is a range of allowable density. For example, low density allows 2.3 to 8.7 dwelling units per net acre (du/ac) and medium density allows 14.6 to 29.9 du/ac. Certain special areas are assigned an urban density, which allows 30.0 to 70.0 du/ac.

To calculate the actual density for a specific development, the acreage of non-buildable areas such as streets and utility easements is subtracted from the total acreage of the property to determine the net acreage. The total number of dwelling units is then divided by the net acreage to get the net density.

Planned Districts Allow Flexibility

Most residential developments are planned districts. A planned district allows the developer to vary the lot sizes and locations of the dwellings in return for adding certain amenities that would not be possible with a more rigid layout. Sometimes this can affect the way the development looks.

One example is adding a common open space, such as a tot lot or a landscaped area, by reducing the lot sizes for some of the dwellings. This can make one area of dwellings more dense than another. The city will usually allow this as long as the overall net density for the property does not exceed the maximum allowable.

Another example is when affordable housing units are incorporated into the planned district. In those cases, the city may allow the developer to increase the overall net density of the development under certain conditions.

Some Things Do Not Apply

Some factors do not apply to density. The number of stories in a dwelling is one of them. Within each land use designation there are various zoning factors that may limit the building height. As long as the dwellings are below that height, a development of one-story houses and another one with the same number of three-story houses on the same size lot are considered to have the same density, despite the fact that three-story houses look more dense.

Architecture is another factor that does not apply directly, but has generated a lot of concern. Long rows of three-story townhouses with full upper floors can produce a top-heavy look that makes the entire development appear too massive, even though the calculations indicate the density is acceptable. In some cases, changing the building configuration or placement may be desirable.

And finally, the impact on school attendance and water supply are not factors as long as the proposed density is consistent with the General Plan. However, if a project is very large, or the developer asks for a General Plan Amendment to increase the density, that may require further review and approval.

Dealing With Density

As Fremont moves towards its stated goal of becoming more urbanized, the issue of density will become more important. The shape of our city in the future depends on decisions being made today. Fremont will be a better place to live if everyone gets involved now.

Anyone concerned with the general trend to urbanization and higher density developments should let the city know, before more developments are approved. You should send a letter or email directly to the planning department, the planning commission, and the city council.

Anyone concerned with the number of dwelling units, height, massing, building placement, or other factors associated with a specific development should express those concerns directly to the developer at a community outreach meeting. You should also ask that the city planner assigned to the project work with the developer to make changes. You may not get everything you ask for, but you won't get anything unless you ask.

Other issues regarding architecture, massing, and the impact of new housing on traffic, schools, and water supplies will be discussed in future articles.

**For information about proposed residential developments,
and City of Fremont contacts, go to:
www.ShapeOurFremont.com**