
MEMORANDUM

TO: City Planning Commission, Committee of the Whole
FROM: [Haila Maze](#), Principal Planner, (612) 673-2098
DATE: December 10, 2015
SUBJECT: Very high density comprehensive plan amendment

Overview

The purpose of this comprehensive plan amendment is to address a current inconsistency in the comprehensive plan, and to provide additional guidance for our core areas in terms of the highest density projects.

Council Member Frey introduced subject matter for this amendment on May 15, 2015, with a motion to “to direct Community Planning & Economic Development staff to pursue a comprehensive plan amendment to resolve the existing inconsistency in residential density ranges for the very high density category of land use, and to more accurately reflect the City’s goals for growth and achievable density limits for that category.”

CPED staff has conducted research to help inform the proposed ordinance changes. Staff also consulted extensively with the Metropolitan Council regarding their expectations and requirements for a comprehensive plan amendment related to density.

The proposed amendment would allow for densities up to 800 units per acre in and around Growth Centers, dependent on context and on overall consistency with the comprehensive plan. As Growth Areas do not have defined boundaries in the comprehensive plan, additional adopted policy will be used to determine precisely within this area the highest densities are allowed. Additionally, this is further clarified by calling out Activity Centers in and around Growth Centers. These Activity Centers include: Cedar Riverside, Dinkytown, East Hennepin, Mill District, Stadium Village, and Warehouse District. The guidance includes areas within Growth Centers that are not identified as Activity Centers as well, particularly in the Downtown core.

Background

The Minneapolis Plan for Sustainable Growth, Minneapolis’ comprehensive plan, contains recommended ranges for housing unit density for development in and/or along each of its designated land use features. This approach provides guidance for areas with similar characteristics, with allowance for variation based on specific context.

The housing density categories in the plan are generally described as follows:

- Low-density residential – Primarily single family and two family residential, with less than 20 dwelling units/acre
- Medium-density residential – Primarily smaller scale multi-family residential, with 20-50 units/acre
- High-density residential – Primarily higher intensity multi-family housing, with 50-120 units/acre
- Very-high density residential – Primarily very high intensity multi-family, with more than 120 units/acre

The densest category is called “very high density” and is defined as densities that exceed 120 units per acre. At present, this category is identified as potentially allowed in Growth Centers or Activity Centers, “dependent on context.”

This amendment addresses some concerns that have been raised during the development review process about an inconsistency in the plan regarding the very high density category, described below. The main concern is that this inconsistency could lead to ambiguity regarding the consistency of very high density development projects with the comprehensive plan.

Purpose

The current comprehensive plan contains some inconsistencies in the estimated unit density ranges for the very high density category. In one place in the plan text, there is no upper limit given for this category. However, in a table of densities by land use feature, the upper limit for the very high density category is set at 200 units per acre.

This inconsistency was not originally anticipated to be an issue, as projects which approached that exceeded 200 unit per acre were fairly rare in Minneapolis. Additionally, since the comprehensive plan is a policy document rather than a regulatory document, this cap is not enforced as a firm upper limit – but rather as a general guideline for what is acceptable in a given area.

However, experience with a number of recent development projects has shown that densities of up to 800 units per acre are both achievable and generally consistent with other goals and policies for growing the city. This reflects both a strengthening market for urban living, and efficiencies and innovations in the private market. Particularly in the core areas of Minneapolis, these projects are generally consistent with the comprehensive plan, since they grow the city’s population, support the development of vital and livable communities, are accommodated by existing infrastructure, and otherwise meet City regulatory requirements.

This amendment is not an attempt to revisit the full scope of guidance for densities and land use features that will be undertaken as part of the full comprehensive plan update, which will be underway soon. The intent is to have a fairly minor amendment at present to address current issues in the near term, with a more comprehensive review to come.

As a result of this, it has been determined that the inconsistency in the comprehensive plan needs to be addressed. If this is not remedied, it could create an administrative burden for development projects that the City would otherwise support.

Additionally, the City has started to move away from regulating density based on number of units per acre, focusing instead on floor area ratio. This has already been the case in Downtown, and is being expanded elsewhere.

While a more thorough review and update of comprehensive plan density policy will be conducted with the upcoming comprehensive plan update, changing this limit now is necessary to resolve the existing inconsistency, and to ensure the City is able to accommodate very high density projects in appropriate places.

Accommodating very high density projects will strengthen the limited number of areas where this level of density is appropriate, including the Downtown area, and areas in and around other Growth Centers where policy and context support it.

Growth Centers are described in the comprehensive plan as “busy, interesting and attractive places characterized by a concentration of business and employment activity and a wide range of complementary activities taking place throughout the day and into the evening. These activities include residential, office, retail, entertainment and recreational uses.” The comprehensive plan designates four Growth Centers, all of which are located near the core of the city:

- Downtown Minneapolis
- University of Minnesota
- Bassett Creek Valley
- Wells Fargo/Hospitals

Along with Activity Centers, they are called out as the only places in the city that are suitable for very high densities. This amendment makes a further distinction, saying that only areas in and around Growth Centers are potentially suitable for densities over 200 units/acre.

This amendment will support the overall public purpose of growing the city in a sustainable way. Increasing densities in core areas, which are best served by infrastructure and urban amenities, will support the development of vital mixed use communities.

Additionally, allowing for flexibility in density may create opportunities for more innovation in architecture and design, contributing to the area’s appearance. Larger scale projects, such as those typically classified as very high density, are typically steel rather than wood frame construction. The scale may also allow them to be able to afford higher quality architecture and amenities, for both residents and the community to benefit.

These densities also will help support ridership on the regional transit network. This is especially critical as the Growth Centers are typically hubs of transit routes with many converging lines. Very high densities in these locations support transit ridership and other non-automobile travel, such as bicycling and walking.

A concern has been expressed that not all areas in and around Growth Centers are appropriate for the highest of densities. This is certainly correct. However, this guidance is only part of a larger policy and regulatory framework. Areas in and around the core of Minneapolis are largely guided through adopted small area plans, which typically provide more detailed guidance for land use and density than the comprehensive plan does overall.

These Council-adopted plans provide more detail as to where the highest densities are appropriate. Below is a list of plans which guide areas in and around designated Growth Centers, and which all provide additional guidance regarding growth and density. This is not meant to be inclusive of all the plans and documents that provide development guidance for this area, but to demonstrate the scope and depth of development policy already in place. It is not the intent of this amendment to override these adopted plans, but to enable them to be fully implemented in terms of growth and density.

- Downtown Minneapolis Growth Center area:
 - Nicollet Island East Bank Neighborhood Small Area Plan (2014)
 - Loring Park Neighborhood Master Plan (2013)
 - North Loop Small Area Plan (2010)
 - Downtown East/North Loop Master Plan (2003)
 - Elliot Park Neighborhood Master Plan (2003)
 - Historic Mills District Master Plan and Update (2001)

- University of Minnesota Growth Center area:
 - Marcy-Holmes Neighborhood Master Plan (2014)
 - Stadium Village University Avenue Station Area Plan (2012)
 - Cedar Riverside Small Area Plan (2008)

- Bassett Creek Valley Growth Center area:
 - Bassett Creek Valley Master Plan (2007)

- Wells Fargo/Hospitals Growth Center:
 - Phillips West Master Land Use Plan (2009)
 - Midtown Minneapolis Land Use and Development Plan (2005)

One specific question regarded whether capacity in the local and regional sewer systems will be adequate to accommodate this growth. Particularly in the core areas where the Growth Centers are located, there generally aren't major regional sewer capacity problems at present. But regardless, this amendment as seen as just reallocation of existing projected growth – not raising the overall amount. Given that a number of buildings already have been built at densities significantly lower than the maximum allowed, it is very unlikely than the limited number of very high density projects likely to be approved would have densities high enough to change the overall anticipated buildout of the area.

Timeliness

The current development market is bringing forward multiple proposals for projects which exceed 200 units per acre and approach 800 units per acre. This amendment is very timely, to ensure that the City is able to be responsive to these development proposals.

A number of Minneapolis' suburbs have no upper limit to their very high density (or high density) category in their comprehensive plan. They use other policy and regulations to provide more specific guidance for individual projects. This amendment is largely consistent with what is already in place elsewhere.

The level of density in the very high density category in Minneapolis is higher than in the surrounding suburbs. However, this is appropriate given the fact that Minneapolis is one of the central cities in the region, and the largest city.

There is the potential that an otherwise desirable project might be determined to be inconsistent with the comprehensive plan, unless the density is decreased. As described above, this could result in a project that is otherwise consistent with the comprehensive plan being turned down or modified.

More generally, denying this amendment could stifle developer interest in large scale, creative development projects. While not appropriate everywhere, these signature projects could become visible and valuable assets for the city, and defining elements of its skyline.

Attachment

- Revised text for comprehensive plan
- Map of Growth Centers and Activity Centers from current comprehensive plan

with 50-120 units/acre

- Very-high density residential – Primarily very high intensity multi-family, with more than 120 units/acre, with upper limit determined as described in the chart below

The future land use map also includes land use features that guide and direct future growth and density. These are described below.

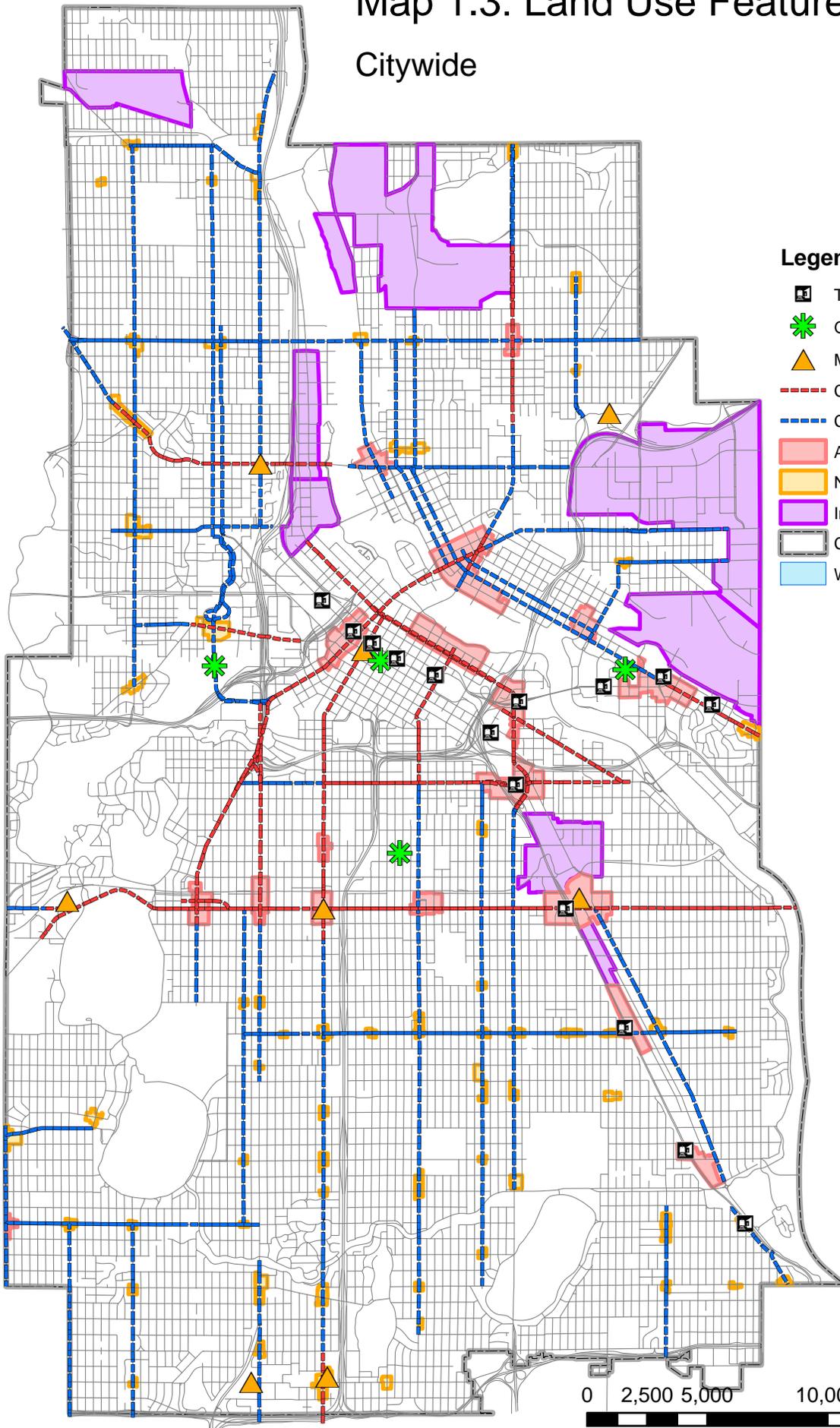
In Appendix B, there are maps and tables which further illustrate the plan for future land use and where density and growth will be accommodated throughout the city. While these are not intended to specifically guide parcel-level land use decisions, they demonstrate that the city is able to accommodate planned development consistent with stated goals and policies. The chart below shows the general relationship between the land use features and the density levels. Actual densities within these features may vary depending on a variety of conditions, including site size and orientation, surrounding neighborhood character, unit mix, and other factors.

Land Use Feature	Description	Density Range (est.)
Urban neighborhood	Predominantly residential area with a range of densities. May include other small-scale uses, including neighborhood-serving commercial, and institutional and semi-public uses (for example, schools, community centers, religious institutions, public safety facilities, etc.) scattered throughout. More intensive non-residential uses may be located in neighborhoods closer to Downtown and around Growth Centers.	Varies, but predominantly low density (8-20 du/acre); not intended to accommodate significant new growth or density
Community corridor	Primarily residential with intermittent commercial uses clustered at intersections in nodes. Commercial uses, generally small-scale retail sales and services, serving the immediate	Medium density (20-50 du/acre), transitioning to low density in surrounding areas

	neighborhood	
Neighborhood commercial node	Generally provide retail or service uses on at least three corners of an intersection. Serve the surrounding neighborhood, with a limited number of businesses serving a larger area. Mix of uses occurs within and among structures	High density (50-120 du/acre), transitioning down to medium density in surrounding areas
Commercial corridor	Historically have been prominent destinations. Mix of uses, with commercial uses dominating	High density (50-120 du/acre), transitioning down to medium density in surrounding areas
Activity centers and growth centers	Mix of uses with citywide and regional draw. High intensity of uses, including employment, commercial, office, and residential uses.	High density (50-120 du/acre) and very high density (120-200 du/acre), dependent on context. <u>Densities up to 800 du/acre may be allowed in or near all designated Growth Centers, and the following designated Activity Centers in or near the Growth Centers: Cedar Riverside, Dinkytown, East Hennepin, Mill District, Stadium Village, and Warehouse District.</u>
General commercial	Includes a broad range of commercial uses. This designation is reserved for areas that are less suited for mixed use development that includes residential. Typically located within other land	Residential generally not appropriate for these areas.

Map 1.3: Land Use Features

Citywide



Legend

- Transit Station
- Growth Center
- Major Retail Center
- Commercial Corridor
- Community Corridor
- Activity Center
- Neighborhood Commercial Node
- Industrial Employment District
- City Boundary
- Water



Source:
City of
Minneapolis

Created by:
Minneapolis Community
Planning and Economic
Development Department
Planning Division
Adopted by City Council
October 2, 2009
Amended March 22, 2011
Amended August 16, 2011

0 2,500 5,000 10,000 15,000 Feet 1-45