

Gentle Density - An Overview

As the city-wide call for more affordable housing continues, there is concern that adding higher density housing will undermine the character of Columbia's historic neighborhoods.

One common approach is to focus on gentle density. Gentle density is a way to increase the number of housing units in a manner that is sensitive to the existing look of a neighborhood. Rather than building a multi-story apartment or an 8-plex mismatched to the surrounding homes, gentle density focuses on projects that match the character of the street.

Gentle density building options include:

- ADUs
- Additions (transforming a single family home into a duplex)
- Duplexes
- Triplex/Fourplex
- Courtyard Apartments
- Bungalow Courts
- Pocket Neighborhoods
- Townhouses
- Multiplex
- Live/Work (Mixed Use)



Another common option is to update zoning districts to better allow for these gentle density options. In fact, many historic neighborhoods cannot be recreated now due to zoning prohibitions on building to lot lines, using shared garages, and building without garages.

Some zoning changes include:

- Allowing smaller lots (more lots means more houses, and less yard).
- Allowing ADU or additions that are closer to the side lot lines.
- Rethinking parking and garage requirements.
- Allowing for shared common areas.

For example, the recently built Ash Court (on Ash St. just east of West Blvd.) is an example of a pocket neighborhood using the principles of gentle density. All the homes are single family but they have a square footage matching the surrounding small homes, the lot sizes are smaller, and they have limited yards and instead have a shared yard and garden space.

A few things to note:

- This approach requires either a willing developer or new zoning guidelines that preserve key design elements of the existing neighborhood such as common setbacks, less prominent garages, sidewalk-facing front doors, etc.
- Often, historic neighborhoods are already protected by landmark designations or overlay districts. For example, Chapel Hill, NC is adding more middle housing and their historic neighborhoods have overlays that manage setbacks, design, etc. to ensure the new development is sensitive to the surroundings.
- In many cities, density increases around transit nodes or small neighborhood commercial areas. One example is the area surrounding the library and the small office park on Broadway. Multi-story apartments are immediately adjacent to the offices but density decreases as one moves west into the fully residential neighborhood.
- Gentle density focuses on managing the form of the housing, not restrictions on who will live in the housing. Strong neighborhoods have a mix of owner-occupied, renters, college students, retirees, and more.

Possible Historic Preservation Commission actions:

- Assemble examples of gentle density in older neighborhoods, using both historic photos and contemporary examples.
- Prepare a position statement regarding gentle density, particularly in historic neighborhoods.
- Actively include gentle density options in future HPC planning efforts.
- Advocate for including gentle density options in the city's Urban Conservation Overlay District and Design Guideline Project.
- Advocate for zoning changes or a city study on zoning changes that encourage middle housing using gentle density.
- Educate the public/city representatives through the speaker series, a tour of Ash Court, or other methods.
- Partner with other organizations interested in middle housing, such as the Chamber or Board of Realtors.