

# Density

by Richard H. Carson

**T**he word “density” has become the rallying cry of no-growth demagogues in Oregon’s neighborhoods and cities. It is an all-purpose scare tactic used to pass voter-annexation measures, stop light rail planning or recall elected officials. But why do people react so negatively to the word?

One answer is that our reaction to human density has more to do with our evolutionary genetic programming than with conscious analytical thought. Carl Sagan and Ann Druyan, in their book *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors*, make a

into the conflicting claims about density.

Jane Jacobs, in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, says that using persons-per-acre is a “statistical monstrosity” because it masks the real problem of overcrowding. She argues that higher density may or may not include overcrowding—or too many people per room—which is the real culprit destroying urban livability. Jacobs argues for increased density linked to increased livability. The theory being that if you give people more espresso bars and boutiques, then they will not care how dense their neighborhood is.

Ian McHarg, the guru of ecological planning, in his book *Design With Nature*, talks about a “pathological togetherness” where as “density increases, so do social pressures, which manifest themselves in stress disease ...” He basically agrees with Sagan and Druyan, and cites the same

ity. So the pathology of density has a threshold governed by more than spatial density. It is also governed by regionalized cultural norms.

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This should raise a concern. If there is any human population totally ill-suited to higher densities, it is people living in the American west. Our ancestors originally came west to be free of the overcrowding on the east coast and in some cases free of authority and society. These independent characteristics (and characters) are an inherent part of our cultural fabric.

The pragmatic bargain Oregonians made with nature was that we would plan our settlements as rationally as possible and not spill haphazardly across the natural landscape. Statewide planning goal 14 sums this up by saying we will maintain a compact urban growth form through the use of urban growth boundaries. There are no density targets. The point of the statewide planning goals, as originally adopted, was simply to plan development rationally and to mitigate

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compelling argument that humans are the result of 500 million years of DNA programming and the process of natural selection. They say that, “If population density becomes too high, then mechanisms are set into motion to reduce it.” These forces may include “street fighting and domestic violence, child abuse and neglect, soaring infant and maternal mortality, gang rape, psychosis ... gay bashing, alienation, social disorientation and rootlessness ...”

When increased density is challenged, then the Northwest Portland neighborhood is often trotted out. Northwest Portland is in reality several blocks of older apartment buildings inhabited by a unique population of people who need low cost housing—primarily senior citizens and young people. They are also people who cannot always afford to drive, insure and maintain automobiles. However, the area’s popularity provides some insight

studies. He says the evolutionary reason for this pathological behavior is that “stress inhibits population growth.” It is nature’s way of fighting increased density—but not overcrowding. McHarg disagrees with Jacobs and concludes that of all the urban stress factors “the single obvious one is not poverty, but density ...”

One of the most dense human populations on earth exists in Hong Kong. Everyone lives in concrete towers and the average density is 280,350 people per square mile. Compare this to the estimated 3,500 people per square mile living in the City of Portland. If high density carries with it such a negative pathology, then we must ask ourselves, “Why is crime so low there?” Part of the answer is cultural. Think of Hong Kong as the Northwest Portland of Asia. Hong Kong has a unique British-Chinese tradition that produces a high standard of living, an unusual civility and a respect for author-

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development impacts on farmland and natural resource land.

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# Why I Volunteer for... Oregon's Future

by Mary Vasse

As a volunteer editor and board member for *Oregon's Future*, I was asked to inaugurate a new feature for the magazine. The assignment was to write about why I volunteer my time. As an editor I felt obliged to take up the assignment. As a board member who asks others to take on tasks, I certainly could not refuse this one. Still, when faced with it, I really didn't have a direct answer.

The magazine is a hands-on lesson in democracy.

Instead of starting with high-minded reasons such as "to better my community," I had to be honest. Sure, I volunteer my time in order to benefit my community. To tell the truth, however, I do it for me.

Let me explain. To me, a complete life has always seemed like a three-legged stool. There is work, which we do to keep a roof over our heads, use our education if

possible, and make a contribution to the world around us. Then there are our friends and family who keep us happy and sane. And there is our community. If we spend any time at all beyond our paying jobs and our web of family and friends, it is for this elusive third leg: community.

When I was very young, my parents asked me what I was going to do for the church I attended. They let me think about this for a while, but quietly insisted that I participate in the community of the church beyond being present in the pew. Everyone has some talent to offer, they said, and it is our job in life to find where

our talents fit best. Was it helping in the day care? Lighting and extinguishing candles? Helping parishioners to their seats? As I understand it, at some point we all want to find where our talents lie, what it is we can give. We do it because it makes us feel connected to the world around us. Because it keeps us balanced on all three legs of a complete life.

stations. It would also make sense to focus high density at freeway interchanges. The latter would help reduce vehicle miles traveled through cities and neighborhoods. However, freeway interchanges are not considered in the current planning

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process. Indeed the only planning discussion we have had is about why we should not build them. However, maximizing infrastructure must be an imperative in a time when governments have less



Of course, I believe in *Oregon's Future*. The magazine is a hands-on lesson in democracy. And democracy, more than any other human enterprise, depends on people understanding and talking about the important issues of the day. There is a saying attributed to Jefferson that cuts straight to the heart of the social necessity for informed talk:

I know no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education.

I believe that, and *Oregon's Future* gives me a place where my particular skills can further our collective effort for a better Oregon.

revenues—and that infrastructure includes freeways and highways.

It is time that Metro and the Department of Land Conservation and Development walk away from dictating artificially high density targets to local governments. It makes more sense to let cities design and build neighborhoods in which their people actually want to live and expand the urban growth boundary when it is needed. This single policy decision will go a long way in reestablishing the local voter's faith in efforts like Region 2040 and in their local governments' desire to implement it.

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## Density

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Some environmentalists are taking a perfectly good idea to a political, social and economic extreme. They preach that compact urban areas must be achieved by increasing urban densities. Their strategy—which I would call the "Northwest Portland Strategy"—is to save the natural environment by packing people into dense human reservations and then to limit their mobility by convincing them that they do not need automobiles.

A more rational economic approach is to decide what the market demands for housing actually will be and to plan the future accordingly. If market requirements change over time, then so should the density mix. The only place that mandatory high density makes sense is around light rail stations and bus transfer