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Communities Dense About High-Density Development

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By: Broderick Perkins

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By Broderick Perkins, DeadlineNews.Com

If communities remain dense about high density housing -- the foundation upon which smart growth is built -- it doesn't matter that recent studies have quantified the value of smart growth.

Virtually anywhere high-density housing is proposed -- in urban centers, on the fringe of cities or in older sprawling suburbs -- it gets an initial knee-jerk thumbs down because of those who believe the housing contributes to traffic congestion, crime, lower property values and other social ills.

It's a lingering throwback to the housing projects and tenements of an era gone by.

Today's studies of high-density housing constructed as part of well-planned, smart growth policies, however, reveal quite the opposite.

Nevertheless, neighborhood NIMBYs (Not In My Back Yard) rally the troops by preying upon ignorance-generated fear to lobby against high-density development.

A minority of outspoken residents in a given community can sway an entire neighborhood and hold smart growth hostage when the majority doesn't bother to research the facts.

Stagnant or stupid growth is the result.

Earlier this year the Urban Land Institute (ULI), in cooperation with the National Multi-Housing Council (NMHC) and the American Institute of Architects (AIA), convened a [ULI/ NMHC/AIA Joint Forum on Housing Density](#) to help dispel some myths and change perspectives about high-density development.

Studies on both sides of the argument have revealed strong public support for limiting the excesses of infrastructure-taxing suburban sprawl which also robs communities of open space. Yet, proposals for the kinds of housing developments that could address those problems meet with stiff community opposition.

To dispel misbeliefs, Susan Ingraham Bell, director of the Arlington County, VA Department of Community Planning, Housing, and Development, and Andrew A. Viola, regional vice president of Bush Construction Corp., presented experiences revealing successful implementation of high-density housing in Arlington County.

The two said, as has been the case in other areas, high-density housing can be a success when it is transit-oriented, coupled with neighborhood preservation, includes retail and other mixed-uses and is laden with features important to those likely to live in such communities -- singles, empty nesters and students among others.

Certain elements are critical to a successful high-density development process.

- Communities need a continuity and affirmation of public policy as it relates to high-density development, even through elected leadership changes and market cycles. In other words, communities shouldn't treat high-density development as a passing fad, but rather as a time-tested successful trend that's here to stay.
- Communities should develop tools necessary to implement high-density policy when high-density policy is enacted to avoid developmental delays.
- Communities should include extensive citizen participation, education and public debate about both the impact and benefits of high density development.

The forum also suggested using less high-density speak and more active descriptions of the process including "efficient, walkable communities" and "compact development" rather than "high density" which provokes automatic negative reactions.

The forum concluded communities must do their home work and bring to the planning process quantifiable proof "compact development" can work.

Forum members agreed compact residential development can help:

- Reduce automobile trips, encourage biking and walking, and support public transit.
- Bring the health benefits of walking and biking.
- Add support for local retail and further reduce the need for car-driven errands.
- Foster a sense of community the old-fashioned it-takes-a-village way. Higher density living can create more secure neighborhoods because people living at higher densities are more likely to walk, shop locally, and get to know their neighbors.

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- Leave more open space open for parks, trails, woods and other pedestrian-friendly avenues.
- Provide greater opportunity for mixed-income housing affordable to households at more income levels.

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