

Submission to the Wellington City Council on the Medium-density Housing and Town Centre Plans

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on behalf of the New Zealand Centre for Sustainable Cities²

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The NZ Centre for Sustainable Cities would be happy to make an oral presentation to the City Council, as well as participate in a greater length discussion of medium-density housing.

About NZ CSC

The New Zealand Centre for Sustainable Cities is an inter-disciplinary research centre dedicated to providing the research base for innovative solutions to the economic, social, environmental and cultural development of our urban centres. As well as undertaking research, we make submissions from time to time to central government and councils on a range of issues relevant to cities, from climate change policy to the design and reconstruction of Christchurch. The Centre is currently running a 4- year Resilient Urban Futures Programme, funded by the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment, which began in October 2012.

Introduction

The proposed goal of intensifying residential development is supported by research conducted by the NZ Centre for Sustainable Cities which suggests that there is a substantial unmet demand for medium and high density housing in Wellington City. Moreover, a considerable literature supports the provision of medium density housing as an urban planning strategy to reduce emissions of carbon dioxide from cities; in general, denser urban areas have lower carbon emissions than suburban areas, in countries such as the USA and New Zealand.³

Question 1:

Where should medium-density housing development happen in your suburb?

NZ Centre for Sustainable Cities research suggests that medium and high density areas are most appealing to residents when they are highly accessible and also affordable. Highly accessible would mean that dwellings are within a 5 minute walk to local destinations, such as shops, and also within a 15 minute bus ride to the central business district. The Centre would especially encourage medium and high density housing in areas that meet these accessibility criteria.

Question 2:

What standards should we have to manage the design of medium-density housing?

Housing standards have two main aims: to ensure the well-being of the occupants and to ensure vibrancy and health of the wider community. With regard to the well-being of the occupants, NZ CSC research suggests that the most important dwelling attributes for residents are affordability, warmth/dryness, and outdoor space. Lack of outdoor space is a key barrier for many households to choosing medium to high density housing: only 6% of city residents would always prefer medium/high density housing, but another 60% of residents would prefer medium/high density housing if it had private outdoor space and was either closer to town or cheaper than an equivalent standalone option⁴.

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² <http://sustainablecities.org.nz/> and <http://resilienturbanfutures.org.nz>

³ 'Cities generally have significantly lower emissions than suburban areas': Glaeser, E., & Kahn, M. (2008). The greenness of cities: carbon dioxide emissions and urban development. National Bureau of Economic Research.

⁴ Note: For the background to this research, contact Nadine Dodge at the Centre for Sustainable Cities.

With this in mind, the limited outdoor space available in medium density housing would be much better used as real outdoor space than for off street parking. We strongly advocate removing the minimum parking requirement in medium density areas which are transit oriented. This view is also supported by analysis of census data which shows that residents residing in medium density housing across Wellington City have much lower than average rates of car ownership.

With regard to the well-being of the wider community, it is key that new developments support an urban form which is walkable and people-oriented. In our view, this would include interconnected streets with ample footpaths, as well as street frontages that are vibrant and pedestrian oriented (buildings are street oriented and lively, with few blank walls/garage doors and driveways bisecting footpaths). We disagree with the notion that medium density is at odds with lively, appealing neighbourhoods. Two-to-three storey multiple unit dwellings can effectively be integrated with existing communities with thoughtful design.

Question 3: **What do you like most about your town centre?**

Town centres are a valuable component of the urban fabric; they reduce excess travel by allowing many tasks to be completed locally, they provide a social networking and community building function, and are a key component of the public transport network. This is strongly supported by research which has demonstrated that having grocery stores and other consumer services within 100 metres of one's residence encourages commuting by public transit, walking and bicycling, controlling for such factors as residential densities and vehicle ownership levels⁵.

Town centres are most successful when a variety of retail uses, including grocery stores, are within 100 meters of a significant number of residences, an outcome that is made easier with higher neighbourhood densities. Particularly successful thriving town centres, which benefit from surrounding medium density neighborhoods, are Newtown, Aro Valley, and Thorndon town centres. The success of many town centres could be increased by encouraging mixed-use buildings, with apartments above local shops.

Question 4: **What are the most important issues for your town centre?**

A common issue in many town centres in Wellington is a lack of pedestrian orientation; town centres benefit when pedestrians can easily move from shop to shop and the area is amenable to outdoor cafés and socialisation, rather than being oriented towards automobiles. In Aro Valley town Centre for example, pedestrians on the town Centre pedestrian crossing are not easily visible to turning traffic, which can lead to near misses and dissuades pedestrians from walking from one side of Aro Street to the other within the town Centre. Also, the reduced speed limit is rarely enforced, so that traffic speeds on Aro Street at the town Centre are frequently over the limit, creating a hazard.

In Newtown town Centre, lack of a pedestrian crossing on the block between Emmet St and Constable St leads to frequent jaywalking and conflicts with motorists. The Johnsonville town Centre is so car oriented that it is likely to dissuade pedestrians from walking between stores at opposite ends of the town Centre. The issue of walkability should be a central component of assessing the success of all town centres in Wellington.

⁵ Cervero, A. (1995). Mixed land-uses and commuting: Evidence from the American Housing Survey. Transportation Research Part A: Policy and Practice