



# Minimum Densities

Maximum densities are a key feature of zoning, but development may occur at intensities much lower than the intent of the zone (e.g., development occurs at four dwelling units/acre when maximum zoning allows for 10 DU/acre). Supplemental minimum densities can be used by jurisdictions to require more efficient use of available residential-zoned land and to ensure sufficient residential capacity to accommodate growth. Adopting minimum densities can also support other community goals such as maximizing transit investments, expanding housing choices, protecting open space, and reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

## BACKGROUND

Development at a very low density can result in land use patterns that are difficult or more costly to serve with infrastructure and utilities, reducing affordability. Untapped development potential may be lost as it can be difficult for these areas to redevelop when there is more demand for housing, forcing development to sprawl. Enacting a minimum density ordinance can help ensure that housing is built at sufficient densities to support transit or provide a variety of housing choices.

Setting a “floor” for density within zones can ensure that development is consistent with comprehensive plan density goals. The minimum density may vary by zone or be a specified percentage of the maximum density. When calculating the minimum density allowed, jurisdictions should consider whether to calculate the density based on the net buildable area of a parcel or the gross land area.

## TOOL PROFILE

### Objectives

[Housing in Centers and Near Transit](#)

[Housing Options in Expensive Markets](#)

[Missing Middle Density](#)

### Type of Tool

**Other Regulatory Tools**

### Project Type

**Multifamily**

**Ownership**

**Rental**

### Affordability Level

**Market-rate incentives and tools**



Minimum density ordinances can be most effective when applied to areas planned to accommodate a significant share of local population growth, such as regional and local centers. These areas are often already served by transit and other public facilities. Minimum density requirements ensure development in these places occurs in a compact, walkable form. Incorporating affordable housing provisions into minimum density ordinances can ensure housing options for all levels of incomes are provided.

## RESOURCES

City of Seattle: [Minimum Density](#) (2020)

City of Portland: [Density and Lot Dimensions in Multi-Dwelling Zones](#) (2018)

City of Renton: [Residential Development Standards](#) (2020)

