

# Editorial counterpoint: So, let's talk about what 'density' really is

It can be focused and functional, or it can be a mess that pushes up already high prices. The Minneapolis 2040 Plan will allow the latter.

By Carol Becker | SEPTEMBER 17, 2019 — 5:27PM

I was talking with a City Council member from one of the southern suburbs about transit. At the time, I worked at the Metropolitan Council doing transportation planning. He said to me, “We need more transit out here.” I replied, “You don’t have enough density to support transit.” He responded, “Yes we do. Look at that multifamily development over there. It has 150 units. And that one [about a mile down the road] has about 250 units. And another mile down the road, there is another one with 200 units. That’s density.”

I had to explain to him that, yes, that was density, at least compared to single-family homes. But it wasn’t functional density — density that makes transit work or lets people walk to grocery stores or restaurants.

The Star Tribune Editorial Board, in “A new challenge to Mpls. density push” (Sept. 3), makes the same mistake as the suburban council member. The board [writes](http://www.startribune.com/the-minneapolis-density-debate-and-a-perfect-slice-of-america/558862272/) (<http://www.startribune.com/the-minneapolis-density-debate-and-a-perfect-slice-of-america/558862272/>): “The new plan called for beefing up density along transit corridors and, most notably, ending single-family zoning citywide.”

But, again, that density won’t be functional. Minneapolis is projected to grow 10% over the next 20 years. The city’s plan is to accommodate growth by allowing developers to put 10-story buildings along any transit corridor in which the developer can find land. When the founding fathers created Minneapolis on a streetcar grid, at maximum, every eighth street was a streetcar line, and in many places, every fourth street was. With the 2040 Plan, developers can put 10-story buildings all over the city.

And most transit routes are not commercial corridors like Lake Street or University Avenue. Most transit routes are lined with single-family homes, such as Lyndale Avenue (North and South) or 42nd or 2nd Street or Thomas. That means developers can put new development pretty much anywhere they want, squandering our ability to create real, functional density.

Another thing the 2040 Plan does is allow any single-family home to be demolished and replaced by a triplex. Triplexes also do not create functional density, either. They just create a land rush and push up already sky-high prices.

Seattle rejected the Minneapolis approach and chose one part of the city to focus development to create real, functional density. We did this also under the old zoning code and created a walkable downtown and a North Loop that have the kind of density that the Minneapolis City Council and the Editorial Board purport to support but do not.

The Editorial Board also writes that we need to allow 10-story buildings into currently residential areas within a five-minute walk of the Southwest light-rail line. Not just adjacent to the light rail or a block away, but five blocks away. Will market demand for housing be so great that we need to upzone blocks away from the light rail? Luckily, we already have an experiment to look to — the Blue Line along Hiawatha Avenue. It began operating 15 years ago, and we can say unequivocally that high-density development will not spread blocks from a light rail station.

How can we say that? By looking at what is along Hiawatha now, 15 years later. At 38th, there is the Cardinal Bar, a beautiful dive bar adjacent to the station. Across the street is the ADM grain elevator. At 46th Street, we have a strip mall. At Lake Street, we have the



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Nancy Przymus, from right, holds a sign against the 2040 Comprehensive Plan, as her neighbor Blue Delliquanti holds a sign

Hi-Lake Shopping Center and the Minnehaha Center (both strip malls). If putting in a light-rail stop automatically created demand for high density, we would have seen it in the last 15 years. But it hasn't happened. Upzoning five blocks away is absurd. Not to mention that if the city wants development around Southwest light-rail stations, it has to not allow haphazard development haphazardly everywhere else.

"Density" is a word that rouses people's emotions. They imagine walking to their favorite restaurant or to a bus or train that will whisk them within a block of their destination. But real density, functional density, doesn't just happen when we let developers build wherever they want. It happens only when we focus development to create density. The Minneapolis 2040 Plan doesn't make real density. But then again, the plan was never about making density. It was about reducing regulations on developers so they could make more money. This gift was wrapped in words like "density" and "walkable" and "transit" to make it go down better.

We deserve real density, where people can walk to stores and restaurants. We deserve density that supports transit and other modes of travel. But under the 2040 Plan, we won't get it.

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