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Industry Outlook: Getting Density Right

By [Ron Nyren](#)

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CONTRIBUTING THEIR INSIGHTS:



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Members of several of ULI's product councils discuss the challenges that developers and municipalities face when densifying urban and suburban areas, working with public concerns, enhancing livability, and keeping cities attractive to members of the millennial generation once they start having families of their own.

What are the biggest challenges to increasing density in urban settings?

Jodie W. McLean: The biggest challenge is land availability in dense urban areas. Another challenge is infrastructure costs. In less dense areas, where there are opportunities for development, many cities don't have enough infrastructure in place—such as roads, public transit, and water and sewer infrastructure—to handle new density. In addition, in some cities, making sure we have enough workforce housing is something we, as retail developers, look at a lot—can the workforce dwell within a reasonable commute range? In other cities, parking is a concern. If mass transit isn't available, or the community still relies heavily on driving, where does parking belong?

A.J. Jackson: There are two big challenges. One is existing residents' concerns about what negative impacts increased density might bring for them: stretching public services too thin, leading to overcrowding in parks or schools, increasing traffic, and changing demographics in the neighborhood. The other big challenge is the infrastructure one—having the physical structure in place to support increased density.

Christopher Leinberger: We need to get the infrastructure in place that will drive the kind of walkable, mixed-use urban development that the market is demanding, and we have been woefully behind in this country in our investment in infrastructure. It's a major economic threat to our future. We have to invest in rail transit, biking, and walking infrastructure

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residential areas next to great walkable urban environments have the highest quality of life and therefore are the most highly valued places in the region. And it reflects in the increased valuation of those single-family homes.

Jenna Hornstock: Challenges exist on two levels. First is the planning and outreach required by municipalities to adopt a new plan that would allow for denser uses and provide guidance in terms of open space, parking, and amenities. California has an added challenge, with the California Environmental Quality Act [CEQA], which requires more funding and staff time to adopt plans and leaves them very susceptible to litigation. The second challenge is the response of community stakeholders to the idea of increased density—fear of the unknown and changes to what they know.



Traffic congestion is an increasing concern in San Francisco, one of the most densely settled large cities in the United States. In addition to efficient transit options, enhancing the walkability of neighborhoods can alleviate these concerns. (Shutterstock)

What are strategies for addressing the public's concerns about increasing density?

Hornstock: It's important to address this fear of the unknown head-on. It involves educating communities about density and why it's important to change how our neighborhoods are structured so we can provide for more affordable housing, reduce traffic and congestion, and group uses together to make the quality of life better for everybody. I have found that [it helps to share] anecdotes and find ways to help people understand what it means to them and their families: this is housing for their children and grandchildren. In Los Angeles, this could be done through the neighborhood council system and other community-based organizations that organize around land use issues.

Jackson: There's more fear when you're talking about increasing numbers than when you're showing the public an actual plan or building form. For example, a development with stacked apartments in a townhouse typology, rather than an apartment building, offers the same sort of streetscape and feel as single-family attached houses or townhouses. So people are more comfortable that there won't be as big a physical and visual change as they were perhaps fearing. Another strategy is to talk about the benefits that density can bring—for example, increasing retail opportunities in the neighborhood or increasing tax revenues—and describe the types of tenants who would be there.

Leinberger: The number-one strategy is to use crowdsourced planning to plan a downtown, or a suburban town center, or the redevelopment of a regional mall. Anybody who has a computer can participate in the planning. This has been the

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invented suburbia and is famously NIMBY in character.

What strategies for densifying cities while enhancing livability do you think are too often overlooked?

Jackson: The benefit of density is the richness of what we call 'life within walking distance,' but people do still want private spaces. Accommodating those in a dense environment is a challenge. We try to create outdoor spaces that require little or no maintenance: rooftop terraces, small courtyard areas. People who want the urban lifestyle are not particularly interested in landscape maintenance, so relying on hardscape or planters is better than providing large expanses of grass. Also, access to mass transit is important, but transit is certainly not the be-all, end-all. A lot of people would prefer to have other kinds of urban amenities and walkability, even if they didn't have direct proximity to transit.

McLean: As retail developers, we think a lot about the design of the first 20 feet [6 m] of the building, how it will inspire people to want to spend more time there. Urban dwellers want to spend time on the street. It is people, more than anything else, who make these places interesting, and they want spaces that inspire them to come together. Therefore, having outdoor areas is extremely important for livability, whether that means wider sidewalks with space for intimate gatherings, or parks, or public plazas. And providing safe ways for bicyclists, pedestrians, and vehicular traffic to move through the city should not be overlooked.

What could municipal governments be doing to more effectively accommodate and encourage densification?

Leinberger: The most effective thing a local jurisdiction can do is to change to a form-based code that supports the development of walkable urban places, with much higher density and a lot of flexibility as to what kind of products are built.

Jackson: Often, the planning and zoning process doesn't do a good job of setting the community's expectations about the building types, the amounts of density, and the types of uses that are likely to be required in order to support the broader community and the quality of life that people want. If we don't build enough housing near where the jobs are, then we'll have traffic problems and congestion. If there isn't adequate retail within a community, then it won't attract people to stay there. Sometimes, municipalities are so concerned about opposition that they're not really setting the community's expectations for the types of growth that areas need to accommodate and where to locate growth. Also, city planners should work more closely with developers during the planning process to ensure they understand the key issues for the developers and the end users. For example, it doesn't work to set a maximum building height that's just above what's required for wood-frame construction but not tall enough to justify the cost of building a steel or concrete structure. Instead of setting a six-story maximum building height, make it either five or eight.

Hornstock: They need to look at their existing land use plans and update them. The challenge is the time and funding—many grant programs fund 'visioning' exercises but not the land use plans and the CEQA process needed to adopt them. Redevelopment/tax increment has historically been a great source of funding for longer-term land use planning, but, in California, we eliminated redevelopment agencies in 2011. Metro is rapidly building out our transit system—we have \$5 billion in construction happening right now—and we need to help cities catch up with transit-supportive land uses. We created the Transit-Oriented Development Planning Grant program to provide funding to municipalities with local land use control and to support creation and adoption of land use plans that remove regulatory barriers to transit-oriented development. The grants also pay for getting projects through the CEQA process.

What factors are important to consider when increasing density in the suburbs?

McLean: In the near-in suburbs, people still want to live close to the amenities of their lives, whether that is their gym, restaurants, or retail. When people get home, they want access to mass transit, so I expect to see expansion of mass transit into the near-in suburbs. What's really driving people to the suburbs is the schools more than lifestyle. So even if they're living in the suburbs, they want an urban-feeling lifestyle and walkable environments.

Leinberger: Residents in suburban areas are often concerned that adding high-density residential development will burden their school systems. Well, Arlington County, Virginia, is the model of an urbanizing suburb. Twenty-five years ago, 11 percent of Arlington County's land was walkable urban, most of it around Metro stations. This land used to represent 20 percent of the county's tax base, and it was falling as the strip retail, big-box stores, and car lots moved out to the freeway.

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they paid their school taxes, and then they forgot to have children. And Arlington schools are among the best in the nation.

What should cities and private developers be doing to keep millennials in the city as they become parents?

Hornstock: Everyone talks about how millennials don't like to drive and own fewer cars. And my question is, 'What are they going to do when they have kids?' If we assume that the millennials' preference to live a simpler, less car-dependent life is a core value, then we can support that value with thoughtful densification of our cities and suburbs, making sure there is a range of community-serving amenities, services, and good public transit complemented by other mobility options.

Leinberger: One answer is you don't keep them, and it's a major driver of the urbanization of the suburbs. It all comes down to schools. That's why Arlington is the finest urbanized suburb in the country. The walkable urban development has funded [Arlington's] schools, which are among the best in the country, in spite of there being 80 different languages spoken in the schools. Bethesda [Maryland], Evanston [Illinois], Bellevue [Washington]—these are urbanizing suburban places that are attracting millennials as they age because the [communities] have great schools. The other answer is to improve city schools. A public school system improves when the parents demand that it improves, and it takes time. In New Orleans, after Hurricane Katrina, the government shut down the schools and created a 100 percent charter school system. That's extreme, but it's working out pretty well. Here in D.C., the school district is now 50 percent charter schools, and the public schools that are not charter are improving tremendously.

McLean: The millennials are forming families and having children a little later than previous generations [did], but they still very much want families, and they want their children to be well educated, so schools are extremely important. Having parks and space for families to spend time together will be vital to retaining families. Multifamily developers are moving toward providing slightly larger units or mixing in more large units to accommodate families. Also, right now, there seems to be an increase in crime in several cities in which we are investing. As millennials have kids, whether they feel the city is safe or not will have a big influence on their decisions about where to live.

Ron Nyren is a freelance architecture and urban planning writer based in the San Francisco Bay area.

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