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My View: Infill project will not benefit ordinary folks

John Liu Tuesday, February 12, 2019

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The report commissioned by the city makes it clear. The Residential Infill Project will not produce affordable housing, average-priced housing, or family-size housing.

(<http://pamplinmedia.com/images/artimg/00003632732454-0644.jpg>)Portland city planners want to redevelop Portland's single-family home neighborhoods by rezoning them for multifamily quadplex construction. They call this citywide rezoning plan the Residential Infill Project. The City Council will vote on the RIP later this year.

The project will allow 96 percent of Portland's houses on neighborhood streets to be replaced with three-story, 4,000-square-foot quadplexes. The new quadplexes may be as close as 5 feet from neighboring lots and 10 feet from the sidewalk. There are no requirements for affordability, retaining trees, compatibility with the neighborhood, or off-street parking.



In November, the city commissioned an analysis of the RIP. CONTRIBUTED - John Liu

The report, by Johnson Economics, concluded that most redevelopment will be at the maximum permitted size and height: "We would expect new development to largely

develop close to the new limits."

City data shows the typical house in most Portland neighborhoods is 1,500 square feet and one to two stories: RIP quadplexes will be two to three times larger than neighboring houses and twice as tall.

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The Johnson report also concluded that most redevelopment will be investor-owned rental quadplex apartments: in the report's words, "largely rental product." There will be little room for home buyers: "Ownership residential solutions under the proposed new codes would be expected to be limited."

Johnson's analysis also shows RIP redevelopment will produce rental apartments that are both small and expensive. According to this city-commissioned report, these rental quadplex units will be around 730 square feet at a typical rent of \$1,823 per month.

City planners claim RIP will lead to "lower" rents. Their own report makes it clear this is only true if you compare rent for a small apartment to the rent for a house that is twice as large. Johnson describes this as "average rents dropping by 56 percent ... which reflects a change in unit size as opposed to reduced rents per square foot."

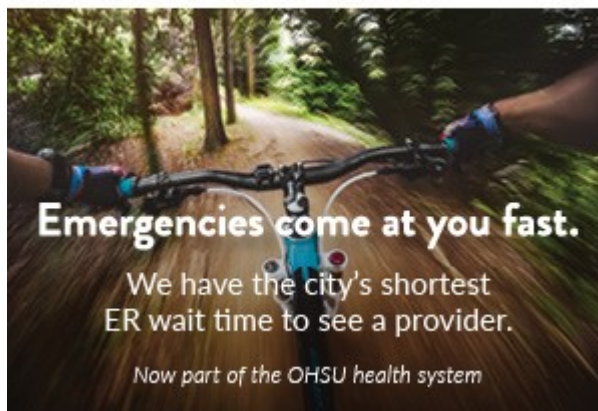
Comparing apples to apples, to similar apartments, RIP will lead to much higher rents. According to the city of Portland Housing Bureau, the average rent for existing one-bedroom apartments in Portland is \$1,379 per month. RIP quadplex apartments, which will cost \$1,823 per month, will be 35 percent more expensive than current average rents.

RIP won't do anything for Portland's affordable housing problem. According to the Housing Bureau, the affordable rent level for a one-bedroom apartment in Portland, for a family making 60 percent of the median family income, is \$840 per month. For a family making 80 percent of median family income, affordable rent is \$1,120 per month.

RIP will worsen the demolition problem in Portland. Johnson concludes that under RIP, in the coming decades, up to 38,000 new units could be built. That's 9,500 new three-story, high-priced, quadplex apartment buildings that planners want to see built in our neighborhoods. Thousands of Portland houses will have to be demolished.

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Here's something the city and its Johnson report don't mention: gentrification and displacement. When neighborhoods are rezoned and redeveloped, the less-expensive houses are the first to be bought and demolished. The families who rent these houses are the first to be evicted and "priced out."

We already have seen this in many parts of North and East Portland, with new-construction "luxury" duplexes replacing older and less expensive houses, and lower-income families pushed out. RIP rezoning will accelerate this displacement, all over the city, by replacing existing housing with expensive quadplex apartments.

The city's own commissioned report makes it clear. RIP won't produce affordable housing, average-priced housing, or family-size housing. It won't create more homeownership. It will only create opportunities for developers and investors to build small, expensive apartments. It will lead to more demolitions and displacement.

Who is RIP for? Not for ordinary Portlanders.

John Liu is a Portland investment manager and financial analyst, active in the Portland Coalition for Historic Resources, a group dedicated to the preservation and adaptive reuse of Portland's built environment. He can be reached at publicjohnliu@gmail.com (<mailto:publicjohnliu@gmail.com>)

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