



## High Density Corridors Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

Supplement to [10/15/12 Memo on Urban Corridors](#). (Revised October 15, 2013)

### 1. What are Urban Corridors?

Urban Corridors are the major arterials in our street system, and they correspond with areas planned for the highest density land uses. More than just the arterial itself, an Urban Corridor includes the quarter mile area on either side of the street. Urban Corridors are envisioned to gradually redevelop into areas with:

- Excellent, frequent transit service;
- Housing and employment densities sufficient to support frequent transit service;
- Buildings fronting on wide sidewalks which are furnished with street trees, attractive landscaping, benches, and frequent transit stops;
- On-street bicycle facilities and safe pedestrian crossing at regular intervals;
- Multi-story buildings oriented toward the street rather than to parking lots;
- Parking spaces located behind the buildings or in structures;
- A compatible mix of residential building types, such as apartments, townhouses, and perhaps small cottages integrated with or in close proximity to commercial uses; and
- People – lots of people, all day long, engaged in different kinds of activities.

Urban Corridors are identified on the proposed [Future Land Use Map](#) and [Transportation Corridors Map](#) in the draft Comprehensive Plan Update. Along these corridors, the regional plan is for land uses to be supported by a multimodal transportation system. Increased density along the corridors is needed to support the type of urban transportation system envisioned for our region. At the same time, transportation investments for walking, biking and transit will allow the densities in the corridors to increase with minimal new car trips.

### 2. What is the basis for the Urban Corridors concept?

The Urban Corridors concept first appeared in the 1993 Thurston Regional Transportation Plan, where it was then incorporated into Olympia's 1994 Comprehensive Plan. The concept originated as a regional strategy to redevelop the old highways dominated by low-density, strip commercial development, and move toward less auto-oriented land use patterns.

Today, major arterial streets in our region are lined with low-density residential and office uses with typical strip commercial development. Individual, randomly spaced driveways into each business interrupt the flow of vehicular and pedestrian traffic, and the typical pattern of buildings set back behind parking lots makes pedestrian access difficult and uninviting. The disjointed signage, landscaping, and building designs are also often unattractive. As a result, these areas have limited appeal as places to live, work, and shop.

The Urban Corridors concept is a strategy to make more efficient use of this existing infrastructure, to reduce environmental impacts associated with auto use and sprawl, and transition unattractive and underused land uses to maintain and create a more livable community. The concept is not unique to Olympia; it is a key part of the [Thurston Regional Transportation Plan](#) (RTP).

*Note:* Both the 1993 RTP and 1994 Comp Plan used the term “High Density Corridors.” For the Comp Plan Update, staff changed the term to “Urban Corridors” to be consistent with the term now used for regional planning purposes. For Olympia, this change also helps to distinguish the Urban Corridor planning concept from the zoning designations High Density Corridor 1, 2, 3, and 4. Although related to Urban Corridors - just as any designation on the Future Land Use map relates to zoning - HDC zones have a different geography than Urban Corridors.

The basics of the regional strategy are captured in the 1994 Comprehensive Plan, as well as Olympia’s draft Comprehensive Plan Update. The general policy direction to support the Urban Corridors concept includes:

- Reducing dependence on motor vehicle use. Reduced vehicle use has social, environmental and economic benefits.
- Well-planned density leads to efficient provision of public services – water, sewer, emergency services, waste collection and transportation.
- Targeting density allows the preservation of rural and natural areas.
- Transit can absorb a great share of future trips that would otherwise be made by car. The best quality transit in this community already exists on our urban corridors. There is potential for these corridors to absorb more residents and employees if they are well designed and people can take the bus, walk, bike, as well as drive.
- Urban Corridors integrate transportation and land use planning goals: an efficient way to locate new growth and create land use patterns that support walking, biking and transit. Well-designed, dense, mixed land uses provide an opportunity to create social interaction, community identity and a healthy economy.
- Good urban form and multi modal streets are needed to make dense areas pleasant and function efficiently.

A difference between the original notion of HDC’s and the evolved concept of urban corridors is the intent of regional policymakers to identify select districts along the urban corridor where jurisdictions will work extra hard to attract growth (the Planning Commission identifies such nodes in their Urban Neighborhoods proposal.) The old HDC concept seemed to imply a rather homogenous distribution of growth throughout each corridor.

### 3. Are all areas identified as Urban Corridors expected to develop in the same way?

No, the proposal in the Comprehensive Plan Update is for the Urban Corridor areas to look and feel different as they extend from the arterials into the neighborhoods, as well as along the corridors themselves. [PL13.5](#) in the draft plan describes a transition from high intensity land uses along the arterials to less intense land uses as you move one quarter mile from either side of the arterial. Generally, the most intensive uses will be within 400 feet of the arterials, although this is not expected in all areas.

The draft plan also outlines 5 different categories for the corridors, as described in [PL13.7](#):

1. Areas nearest downtown should blend travel modes with priority for pedestrian, bicycle and transit systems; these areas should provide for a mix of low-intensity professional offices, small commercial uses and multi-family buildings (not exceeding three stories) forming a continuous and pedestrian-oriented edge along the arterial streets.
2. The Harrison Avenue corridor nearer Division Street and upper portions of the State Street/Fourth Avenue corridor will provide for a greater range and intensity of commercial uses but with the same three-story height limit; in other respects it will not differ substantially from the corridor sections nearer downtown.
3. The area along Harrison and Fourth Avenues west from the vicinity of Division Street to Kenyon Street—and the western portions of Martin Way and Pacific Avenues—form the third corridor category where the primary transportation mode is by car, but pedestrian and bicycle, as well as transit use, is encouraged; redevelopment of this area is expected with more density and new buildings gradually creating a continuous street edge and more pedestrian-friendly streetscape.
4. The outer portions of the urban corridors in the vicinity of the Capital Mall and easterly of Phoenix Street will primarily be accessed by motor vehicles with provisions for pedestrian and bicycle travel; gradual transition from existing suburban character is to form continuous pedestrian-friendly streetscapes, but more regulatory flexibility will be provided to acknowledge the existing suburban nature of these areas (see Capital Mall special area below.)
5. The area south of Interstate-5 in the vicinity of Capitol Boulevard is an existing lower density residential area with a neighborhood center. The goal in this area is to enhance that center and reach an average density of at least seven housing units per acre, including accessory dwelling units.

[PL13.1](#) establishes that over 15 housing units per acre should be achieved along much of the Corridor, however “where existing single-family housing abuts the main road, [the City will] seek to increase the density to at least 7 units per acre.”

#### **4. Is Olympia required to have Urban Corridors?**

Urban Corridors are not specifically required under the Growth Management Act as a means to accommodate our population growth. However, the Act does require Olympia's Comprehensive Plan to be consistent with [County-Wide Planning Policies](#) (CWPP.) The CWPP state the transportation element of each jurisdiction's plan will be consistent with the Thurston Regional Transportation Plan. Thus, if Olympia desires to change course away from the Urban Corridors concept, this conversation would need to occur at the regional level.

#### **5. What is the Urban Corridors Task Force?**

For several years, regional policy makers have been pursuing strategies to achieve the Urban Corridors vision. Little redevelopment has occurred as envisioned in the plans from the early 1990's and they sought to understand why. Thus, the Urban Corridors Task Force (UCTF) was formed, and composed of policy makers from Thurston Regional Planning Council (TRPC) and the Transportation Policy Board, citizens and business representatives.

From 2009 through 2011, the UCTF worked to establish an understanding of conditions along the region's key urban corridors, to identify and understand barriers to achieving adopted land use visions, and identify potential opportunities for addressing those barriers. Members looked at the relationship between transportation and land use in these corridors, and the market factors that influence the viability of infill and redevelopment projects in this region. As a result, the UCTF produced a [list of measures](#) for cities to pursue to achieve the urban corridor vision.

#### **6. What are "nodes"?**

Referred to as "Corridor Districts" in TRPC's [Revitalizing Urban Transit Corridors report](#), nodes are specific, strategic locations guided by detailed plans and a focus on innovative development strategies. Vibrant and full of activity, nodes would offer a full range of services and activities to support nearby neighborhoods. The idea is that over time, nodes develop their own strong sense of place and local identity; residents within a ½ mile radius would travel to these nodes without ever having to get in a car.

While the entire corridor may take decades to redevelop, quicker results may be realized by focusing on one or more nodes which would then serve as examples of what is possible. Nodes are not necessarily large; although, according to the report, in order to support neighborhood-scale retail and services, a minimum of 3,500 households with a half mile radius would be needed.

The Planning Commission's Urban Neighborhoods proposal identifies three high-density areas, which could be considered "nodes" or areas to contain a "node."

## 7. What are focus areas? How do they relate to the concept of nodes?

The Comprehensive Plan draft outlines “focus areas,” which are select areas of Olympia identified for further study, both in and out of the Urban Corridors. Three “focus areas” fall within the Urban Corridors, while the *West Bay Drive* and *Auto Mall* focus areas do not. Focus areas are places where multiple planning issues and opportunities exist, and further study will help to guide land use development and public services.

Staff did not propose these areas as “nodes” with the idea although a node could be located within a larger focus area, a node would be a more specific location where development is guided by detailed plans and partnerships; and efforts related to a specified node would include developing incentives and strategies to spur a specific type of development.

## 8. What are the Urban Corridor Focus Areas identified in the Comprehensive Plan draft, and why?

Three focus areas within Urban Corridors are identified in the Comprehensive Plan draft. These focus areas, which are identified on the [Transportation Corridors Map](#) and described in the [Land Use & Urban Design Chapter](#), are:

- **Lilly-Martin Area:** This area contains much of the last remaining “greenfield” in Olympia – undeveloped land - where infill can occur somewhat easier than redevelopment. The area holds potential because of its proximity to one of our region’s major employment sectors, health and medical services, and the related opportunity to increase housing and services in the area. This area is the subject of a grant described in # 17 below.
- **Pacific-Lilly Area:** This area between Martin Way and Pacific Avenue is the only focus area identified in the 1994 plan, where it is referred to as the “Stoll Road Area.” This area has frequent transit service, and a large amount of commercial uses, with low amounts of housing. The potential to shape the commercial areas as redevelopment occurs can lead to a greater mix of uses. The criteria described in policy [PL15.4](#) arose out of the public process associated with previous comprehensive planning efforts.
- **Capital Mall Area:** This area has been identified as having one of the best resident-job matches in Thurston County: in this area, a large number of people live close to where they work. It has ideal conditions for achieving a vision for bustling, mixed-use urban centers. Actions are needed to improve the density and mix, and enhance the street system for more modes.

These areas correspond to high density neighborhoods identified by the Planning Commission on their Urban Neighborhoods map.

## 9. What is the density needed to support transit along the corridors?

This is not a simple answer; efficient transit service depends not only on population and employment per acre, but also other factors such as design, mix of uses and street connectivity. Industry experience suggests that residential densities in the range of 4.5 to 7 units per acre represent a minimum threshold for high performing transit. This also represents a point at which an overall mode shift away from driving begins to increase exponentially.

Transit demand tends to increase most dramatically between 10 and 40 households per residential acre. Today, the densities in most Olympia neighborhoods outside of downtown fall well below this range (see ). However, areas designated for transit-supportive growth could reach this threshold quickly with new infill development. Efforts to promote infill development, even at modest densities, could have exponential impact increasing transit and non-motorized travel.

The current approach in the existing comprehensive plan is to set transit-compatible urban densities so that new development fills in already-developed areas. The plan recommends setting a minimum density of approximately 7 units per acre (equivalent to roughly 14 to 20 persons per acre,) and a minimum of 15 units per acre in other areas along the Corridor.

Beyond population and employment density, other factors include:

- **Design** is especially important as it relates to pedestrian access and safety. Street design, security, lighting, building design and orientation to the street affect whether transit stops are inviting to use and safe to get to. Even at high densities, people will not use transit if it is difficult or dangerous to access a bus stop.
- **The mixture of uses** in an area can influence the attractiveness of transit. If transit brings people to locations where more than one function is possible, transit is all the more attractive for that trip.
- **Street connectivity** is important to transit access and operations. Street connectivity provides customers direct routes to bus stops, and transit operators have efficient routing options for high-frequency service.

The City does not operate the bus service in Olympia, but influences the success of transit. City land use policies and ability to attract infill development ultimately drive the demand for transit service and shape a transit-supportive environment. Better transit will require dense, mixed-use corridors with pedestrian-friendly access to transit stations.

## 10. Can we have nodes without density in between?

It is not essential that the entire corridor be fully developed in order for the nodes concept to work. However, the function and efficiency of the corridors will increasingly improve as the mix and density of land uses increases between these nodes. Overall, the corridor will benefit from the increased services and amenities that come with the intended land use.

## **12. What would be an alternative land use planning approach to corridors?**

Some people consider abandoning the concept of corridors, and instead focusing only on nodes. The risk of doing so would be that the low density strip commercial land uses would persist. This continued land use pattern would result in under-utilized public infrastructure, and likely would not result in the reductions in auto use that we envision.

Another alternative that has been discussed would be to funnel all or most of the anticipated corridor growth into downtown, with similar implications as above. If the focus shifted away from corridors with nodes to just nodes or just downtown, this would represent a shift in policy, and would best be explored at the regional policy level.

## **13. Why were neighborhoods south of I-5 identified by regional transportation planners as part of the urban corridor?**

Capitol Way is the primary transportation link between Olympia and Tumwater. It is also a major transit corridor with 15 minute frequency, the most frequent type of service found in this community.

## **14. Does the Urban Corridors concept assume the neighborhoods south of I-5 on Capitol Way be up-zoned, and, if so, when?**

It is not possible to predict if and when these neighborhoods would be up-zoned. An up-zone would depend on whether or not a future City Council feels it is in the best interest of the community.

As expressed in PL13.7, the goal for this area is an average density of 7 units per acre, including accessory dwelling units. The reason for this is to support transit and provide a good customer base for businesses in the neighborhood center. In turn, these businesses could provide goods and services to meet day-to-day needs within walking distance, ultimately minimizing auto use for local trips.

Given the quality of these neighborhoods and their close proximity to more intense commercial uses immediately to the south, there is no indication these neighborhoods would become a priority for redevelopment. Given the current land values in this area relative to the financial benefit of intense redevelopment, it is not likely the market could not support an expansion of intensive uses within the entire 400' area inward from Capitol Way, as may be possible in other Corridor areas.

Recent TRPC forecasting shows the number of new dwelling units expected to be added to this area between 2010 and 2035 is 23 units. This estimate is based on current conditions and development patterns, which could change unpredictably over the next 20 years. However,

when compared to expected residential growth in other areas of the City, this area is clearly not expected to be a priority for significant redevelopment.

The 7 unit per acre density target for the neighborhoods south of I-5 might become achievable without adding significant residential density when combined with the residential growth anticipated in Tumwater Square. One alternative to removing this area from the Urban Corridor would be to add text to the draft plan stating the density target for this area should account for densification of Tumwater Square.

### **15. How do Urban Corridors relate to Strategy Corridors?**

All of Olympia's Urban Corridors are "Strategy Corridors." The Strategy Corridor concept is identified in the [Thurston Regional Transportation Plan](#) .

Strategy Corridors are places where road widening is not a preferred option to address congestion problems. This may be because the street is already at the maximum five-lane width, or that adjacent land uses are either fully built out or are environmentally sensitive.

In Strategy Corridors, a different approach is needed to maintain mobility into the future. Actions to reduce auto trips, such as building sidewalks, streetscape improvements and bicycle facilities, and improving the bus services, will relieve traffic congestion and increase capacity on these corridors.

Efforts to increase the density and mix of land uses will also be important to the success of Strategy Corridors. It is easier to get people out of their cars when housing is closer to jobs and services. Trips are shorter and more easily made by walking and biking. Transit is frequent and inviting for longer trips outside the immediate neighborhood.

### **16. How do Urban Corridors relate to Bus Corridors?**

All Urban Corridors are Bus Corridors. The Bus Corridor concept was introduced in the [Olympia Transportation Mobility Strategy](#) and builds on the region's Urban Corridor and Strategy Corridor policy approach.

Bus Corridors are major streets with high-quality, frequent transit service. The system of bus corridors would allow people more spontaneous use of transit. The first priority for Bus Corridor development will be along Strategy Corridors, where transit is expected to help resolve traffic and capacity issues.

Building Bus Corridors is a major new commitment to direct more trips to transit. The City and Intercity Transit will jointly invest in these corridors. Intercity Transit will provide fast, frequent and reliable bus service along these corridors.



Along these corridors, the City will provide operational improvements, such as longer green time at traffic signals so that buses are not stuck in congestion. The Smart Corridors project underway in Lacey, Olympia and Tumwater is beginning to make these signal improvements.

Attractive streetscapes, pedestrian crossings and sidewalks will enhance people's access to transit. The mix of land uses and increased densities along Urban Corridors will be crucial to the success of these bus corridors.

#### **17. Of the Urban Corridor Task Force recommendations, what has been done so far?**

- In November 2012, the Cities of Olympia, Tumwater and Lacey passed a joint Resolution accepting the recommendations of the Urban Corridors task force and committing to take a leadership role in implementing the recommendations and integrating the recommendations into local comprehensive plans.
- The Cities of Olympia, Tumwater and Lacey are participating in a [HUD Sustainable Communities Challenge grant](#) being administered by TRPC. The grant explores tools to encourage infill and redevelopment in three districts along urban corridors. The district Olympia is addressing - referred to as the "Headwaters District" - is Martin Way, west of Lilly Road. Tumwater is addressing the Brewery area, while Lacey will look at its Woodland District. The project began in 2012, and Olympia's portion is currently underway.
- [Smart Corridors](#) is a regional project to install transit priority equipment at traffic signals along 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue, State Avenue, Martin Way, Pacific Avenue, Capitol Way and Downtown. Equipment will be installed in 2013. In 2014 or 2015, Intercity Transit will begin to benefit from these operational changes; buses approaching a signal will trigger the signal to extend the green time. Olympia's share of the cost of this project is nearly \$1 million, the majority of which is paid for with Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality Funds.

#### **Attachments:**

A: 10/15 Memo to Planning Commission

#### **Additional Information:**

- Enger, Sue. December 4, 2012. *The Density Transportation Connection*, MRSC Insight. Online: <http://insight.mrsc.org/2012/12/04/the-densitytransportation-connection/>.
- Owen, John & Easton, Greg. June 2009. *Creating Walkable Business Districts*. Online: [http://www.trpc.org/regionalplanning/landuse/Documents/UCTF/Creating\\_Walkable\\_Neighborhood\\_Districts.pdf](http://www.trpc.org/regionalplanning/landuse/Documents/UCTF/Creating_Walkable_Neighborhood_Districts.pdf).

- Thurston Regional Planning Council. August 31, 2011. Notes and materials from the August 31, 2011 Urban Corridors Task Force Work Session. Online: <http://www.trpc.org/regionalplanning/landuse/Pages/UCTF-Aug30,2011PresentationMaterials.aspx>.
- Urban Corridors Task Force. Additional Resources. Online: <http://www.trpc.org/regionalplanning/landuse/Pages/UCTFAdditionalResources.aspx>.