

Answers to Questions from “Housing Boulder 101”

The following questions were submitted by public participants during the [Housing Boulder 101](#) webinar on from 12 to 1 p.m. on Nov. 20, 2014. City of Boulder staff has written a response to each question.

1. Since "change" is going to happen, is the city willing to change current barriers to increased housing, such as height limits, releasing open space to housing, etc?

In 2013, the Boulder City Council discussed having all the options on the table for discussion. The [Toolkit of Housing Options](#) currently identifies increased height limits and an expanded service area as two potential tools to facilitate the expansion of housing choices beyond what is possible under current regulations. Converting open space to housing was discussed by City Council in 2013, but council expressed concern that this option is contrary to Boulder’s community values. Any of these options would require either approval by Boulder voters and/or all four city and county bodies that approve the [Boulder Valley Comprehensive Plan](#).

In addition to changing demographics and changing market conditions, the “change” discussed in the webinar was in relation to the growth that can occur under current zoning; buildings will continue to be redeveloped without any changes to height limits, zoning, or the city service area. Any “change” not consistent with the current Boulder Valley Comprehensive Plan would require a dedicated planning process with significant community input, analysis, and approval by the Planning Board and City Council, as well as the Boulder County Planning Commission and Board of Commissioners.

2. Will RTD be brought into the discussions?

As the regional transit provider, RTD is an important part of planning for Boulder’s future. Any strategic directions that relate directly to transit service (for example, changes to the Boulder Valley Comprehensive Plan, rezoning, etc.) will certainly include RTD. The city is also working closely with RTD on related planning efforts aimed at improving regional and local connectivity, most notably in the implementation of the Transportation Master Plan and Northwest Area Mobility Study.

3. The plight of seniors is concerning but if we build more senior housing won't it be scooped up by retirees from all over the country?

The city can’t control who chooses to move to Boulder or to whom private market-rate housing units are sold or rented. However, for deed-restricted units that are a part of the city’s affordable housing program, a preference can be (and is) given to current Boulder residents (in addition to other preferences and the requirement of being income-qualified). Boulder Housing Partners’ experience at the new High Mar senior apartments was that 85 percent of tenants were residents of the city or county of Boulder before moving in. Three of the five seniors that did relocate to Boulder did so to be closer to family.

4. Please say something about the character of Boulder. Is there such a thing? What is staff’s definition of Boulder’s character?

While each individual will certainly have their own unique definition of Boulder’s character, depending on the context of the discussion, staff’s reference to the city’s character usually reflects back to the policies and principles laid out in the [Boulder Valley Comprehensive Plan](#), in particular the text and graphics in the section on [The Built Environment](#), which describe the importance of the city’s natural setting, individual character areas, activity centers, mobility grid, and public realm.

5. Is there a plan in place for population growth in the city, and is that part of this effort?

Population growth is guided by the [Boulder Valley Comprehensive Plan](#) (BVCP). BVCP policies and the [BVCP Land Use Designation Map](#) form the basis for current zoning, which in turn determines the development potential of land throughout the city. The city projects population growth based on the adopted zoning, and plans public services and facilities based on that projected population growth, as well as on projected commercial and industrial growth. Based on the city's current zoning, there is capacity to add about 5,900 housing units in the city, which would result in an estimated 2035 population (based on demographic trends, occupancy assumptions, and growth of less than 1 percent per year) of approximately 114,000. [Housing Boulder](#) is an effort focused on housing that will inform the next update of the BVCP, which is scheduled to begin in 2015. If additional population growth is enabled through the 2015 BVCP update process, then this will be reflected in the growth projections that are used to plan future city services and facilities.

6. Following up on the question about transportation cost and affordability, doesn't a comprehensive analysis of the city's relationship with RTD need to be part of the housing plan? Shouldn't new housing grow around transit development and don't we run the risk of getting that backwards?

New housing is primarily being built along current transit lines and near transit stations, where the current zoning allows additional housing units. Any proposed changes to zoning will need to be examined as part of the [2015 Boulder Valley Comprehensive Plan Update](#) or through an area planning process, each of which would examine transit service. A "comprehensive analysis of the city's relationship with RTD" is not specifically a part of the [Housing Boulder](#) effort.

7. Have you done a price elasticity study so you know what price effect building more housing will have, and what the effect of the City's implicit and explicit efforts to add more jobs on any ability you have to maintain any affordability gains you get from your toolkit?

A price elasticity study is not part of the current [Housing Boulder](#) effort. The number of factors that influence housing prices is lengthy and challenging to measure, requiring numerous assumptions from which it may be difficult to draw meaningful conclusions. This is particularly true given the complexities associated with being a university community (with high student housing demand) in a high growth region (where local development decisions are one of many that will drive housing demand, supply, and price), compounded by being a high-value housing market that attracts homebuyers and retirees for reasons unrelated to employment or housing affordability. A price elasticity study might be instructive for a particular location or submarket (housing type), as the number of variables becomes more manageable with a narrower focus, but as the focus narrows, it also becomes more difficult to draw relevant conclusions for larger policy questions.

8. Who will pay for the public facilities needed by all the housing you intend to create, including schools, parks, fire stations, transportation services?

Population growth and the provision of city facilities and services (such as parks, fire stations, and transportation infrastructure) are guided by the [Boulder Valley Comprehensive Plan](#) (BVCP). The strategic directions developed through the [Housing Boulder](#) effort will inform the next update of the BVCP, scheduled to begin in 2015. Any housing strategies not consistent with the current BVCP will need to be evaluated through the [2015 BVCP Update](#) to identify needed city facilities and services, with resulting facility master plans used to establish appropriate "plant investment fees" and other development fees used to help fund the development of new public facilities. The Boulder Valley School District uses the city's population projections to plan funding for new and expanded schools, and the city works closely with RTD to plan for (and partially fund) public transit service needs. Importantly, new development is not the only factor that drives facility needs and demands. Changing demographics and lifestyle trends (for example,

changes in car ownership levels, household size, per-capita energy use, etc.) typically have a bigger impact on facility and service needs in slow-growth communities like Boulder.

9. Is adding a comprehensive jobs-housing linkage fee under consideration, so that business growth would pay for housing so as to maintain the current level of affordability, given the extra demand it will create?

Yes, the current draft of the [Toolkit of Housing Options](#) has an option to expand the current linkage fee program for non-residential development.

10. Have you considered simply buying down existing housing so as to achieve your goals?

The [Toolkit of Housing Options](#) identifies several strategies and the city does have some experience with adding existing housing into the affordable housing inventory, including homebuyer assistance grant programs, deed-restricting existing homes to meet the [Inclusionary Housing](#) requirement, and preservation of rental affordability.

11. You made a point about the "rental market being short..." Isn't that simply demand exceeding supply, which will always be the case given that Boulder's job numbers far exceed the housing supply, and is projected to keep growing at the same rate as housing?

The point that Housing Boulder staff was trying to make is that people are paying a higher percentage of their income for housing in Boulder than elsewhere in the region. Also, staff recognizes that housing is a regional issue and that Boulder cannot provide housing for everyone that wants live in Boulder (and, conversely, that there will continue to be many people who choose to live in Boulder who work in other communities or are not a part of the workforce). The crux of Boulder's housing challenge is that, as market-rate housing prices continue to rise, the community's income diversity decreases. Unless we successfully develop an effective set of strategies, our community will become increasingly wealthy, with the exception of those who can income-qualify for a permanently affordable unit.

12. You are discussing energy costs. Why hasn't the City already required all new buildings to be "net zero" re energy use, since it is already technically and economically feasible? And also with respect to transportation impacts?

Boulder recently adopted one of the most stringent energy codes for new commercial construction and existing building renovations of any community in the country (the energy requirements also apply to multi-family residential developments, which are considered commercial buildings under the code). In addition, all rental housing units are subject to additional efficiency requirements as part of the [SmartRegs](#) program, making Boulder one of only handful of communities in the country to require energy efficiency actions for existing buildings.

City staff analyzed implementing a net zero code now, but determined that doing so would be infeasible at this time. However, the city has set out a "path to net zero" for its building code, to be achieved by 2031. In 2015, the city will also be updating its [Green Building and Green Points](#) (GBGP) program for residential development, incorporating the latest technology advancements and analyses as part of that program to ensure that it remains at the forefront of energy code requirements. The GBGP update will also define a path to net zero buildings, similar to the commercial energy code.

With regard to the second part of this question, there is not currently any effort underway to develop requirements for "net zero transportation" (related to either trips generated or emissions created), although the coming year includes work to develop an "energy systems transformation blueprint" that will evaluate how to decarbonize transportation-related emissions by 2050. That said, most of Boulder's residential land use decisions over the past 10-plus years have been guided by the goal of reducing single-occupant vehicle use. For example, rezoning properties along the 28th Street Frontage Road and investing in bike/pedestrian connections to the University of Colorado (CU)

campus has made it possible for CU students to live in close proximity to campus and “commute” without ever getting in a vehicle. Similarly, [Boulder Junction](#) is creating new housing opportunities in close proximity to a major new regional transit hub, in a district where each housing unit is provided only one parking space, every resident receives a RTD Eco Pass, and comprehensive bike/pedestrian connectivity is being built in conjunction with the new development.

13. Will neighborhoods have a chance to vote about any upzoning to allow higher density units within their neighborhood?

[Housing Boulder](#) will not upzone single-family neighborhoods. Any tools prioritized through the Housing Boulder process that include changes to occupancy limits, accessory dwelling units, or any other type of additional housing will need to be addressed through a subsequent planning process. Adoption of the housing strategy is intended to identify community priorities for specific changes.

There is no precedent in Boulder for specific neighborhoods to “vote” (in the traditional sense) on land use changes, with the exception of changes to the height limit, which is subject to a citywide vote. Engagement in decision making has, however, included statistically valid surveys for highly contentious issues; other forms of surveys and focus groups; workshops and neighborhood meetings; and public hearings. Zoning changes are always subject to a public hearing before both the Planning Board and City Council, and a vote by both bodies. Changes to the [Boulder Valley Comprehensive Plan](#) require approval by both of those bodies, plus the Boulder County Planning Commission and Board of Commissioners.

Earlier this year, based on council direction to achieve “early wins” on items that were considered (at the time) to be non-controversial, a proposal was brought forward to change occupancy limits for seniors living in “shared housing” in single-family neighborhoods. That proposal engendered considerable public input and differences of opinion, and was shelved as a result, with the intent that it should be considered as part of the larger set of potential tools being considered in the Housing Boulder process, with community input and engagement to determine its feasibility and desirability.

As stated in the webinar, Housing Boulder staff acknowledges that what makes sense in one neighborhood may not make sense in another. There are no “one size fits all” approaches for housing. That is why neighborhood-specific outreach is planned as part of the community engagement work in 2015. We want neighborhoods to evaluate the various tools that might be applicable to their area and weigh in on which tools they think are most appropriate, if any. That input, along with input from the working groups and the broader community, will be carried forward to Planning Board and City Council when they consider the strategic priorities for Housing Boulder in 2015 and beyond.