

Density By Jim Winkle

This past year's neighborhood debate over the height of McGrath's development at the Coliseum Bar on Olin Avenue has brought out good arguments on both sides about density. I understand and share many concerns neighbors have raised: we worry that the (often unappealing) modern architecture of a tall building would be too different from – and cast a shadow over – the neighborhood's relatively small single-family houses; we worry about bird strikes, traffic, congestion, and changed views from Olin-Turville woods.

I'll detail here what I have heard and learned about the benefits of density, which can help protect the environment, build a tax base, support affordability, and make neighborhoods walkable.

Environment: Dense development is better for the global environment compared with single-family houses or five story apartments because it saves energy, land, and even birds.

- Taller buildings contribute less to climate change: shared apartment walls reduce energy consumption; downtown workers have shorter commutes, and can bike or walk if able.
- Taller buildings save land: Using 4 story buildings instead of a single 18 story building requires at least 4 times the land for the same number of apartments. If we don't build up, we have to build out, which ultimately means paving Dane County's spectacular farmland and increasing runoff into our lakes (remember the 2019 floods?)
- Taller buildings save birds: Madison's Audubon Society says tall buildings actually have *fewer* bird crashes because most collisions occur on lower floors. Following the American Bird Conservancy recommendations, Madison's bird-safe glass ordinance covers lower floors (first 60 feet). In fact, because [cats kill four times as many birds as windows do](#), tall buildings save even more birds: cat owners in tall buildings keep their cats inside more than those in single-family houses.

Tax base: Dense development increases our tax base better than single-family homes. Bay Creeker Jim Kreft [created a map](#) showing how much properties generate in tax revenue. The Peloton annually generates ten times that of a single-family home per acre (\$371k vs. about \$36k per acre); it alone generates a total of \$591k per year. Dense development generates higher taxes that fund city services, including our schools, parks, transit, and libraries.

Affordability: Dense Bay Creek development can slow [gentrification](#) in Madison, which happens when more affluent people move into an area and inadvertently displace lower-income residents. We all care about affordability – we raise the issue with every development. Todd Litman, city planner and author, [writes](#) "infill development increases affordability... benefiting lower-income residents." Providing housing in Bay Creek can reduce the neighborhood-changing market pressures on affordable housing to the south of us.

Walkability: Increased density builds a market for local services, including Madison Metro, grocery stores, and new retail options, which in turn make Bay Creek even more walkable.

Madison is adding [2780 people per year](#). McGrath's new Coliseum Bar proposal means we have the opportunity to again consider how density's pros and cons align with our values: will a 12 story, 200 apartment complex leave Madison and the world better off than the equivalent development of single-family houses and/or smaller apartment buildings? I made a Google spreadsheet to help me reach a decision that might help you too: tinyurl.com/density2022 .