

**To:** Chief Administrative Officer **Date:** August 16, 2021  
**From:** Hardeep Kaur Atwal, Planner  
**Subject:** **Consideration of Gross Density (Cluster Development) Process**

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### **Recommendation(s)**

That Council direct staff to consider the gross density process (cluster development) as an option for residential development applications within Urban Residential, Suburban Residential and Rural Residential designations, on a case-by-case basis.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this report is to present Council with information regarding the gross density process to allow for cluster development as an option for residential development applications that qualify on a case-by-case basis.

### **Background**

In recognition of the unique landscape of Mission, and that much of the City landscape is encumbered by watercourses, ravines, wetlands, or other such constraints making practical access to all developable portions of land challenging from an environmental protection perspective, the option to consider gross density is a method to help balance development yield while limiting impacts on environmental features and preserving additional green space.

The City has objectives to protect these environmental landscapes to their fullest potential. Currently, the City follows the provincial Riparian Area Protection Regulations (RAPR) and requires a qualified environmental professional (QEP) to assess all watercourses under development for the Stream Protection and Enhancement Area (SPEA). Once the QEP's report is accepted by the provincial authorities, the City's practice is to require a reference plan and a restrictive covenant to be registered on the property title to protect the SPEA from development.

While the RAPR process protects the SPEA, there are situations when the development community may choose to cross the watercourse when there are additional lands with development potential beyond the watercourse by utilizing a process under the Water Sustainability Act (WSA), as noted below.

When the development community is faced with a parcel that is bisected by a watercourse or similar environmental feature that cuts off large developable pockets of land, there is a provincial process under the WSA that allows changes in and about a stream. Such changes may include the installation of a culvert or other such infrastructure to cross the watercourse and access the developable pocket(s) of land beyond for further development. While this process is a recognized and provincially authorized method of crossing a watercourse and is monitored by a QEP, it cannot be denied that crossing a watercourse will have some degree of impact on the environmentally sensitive land.

To mitigate such situations, staff are provided guidance from the Official Community Plan (OCP) to consider cluster development, also referred to as the gross density process, where possible. Further, the Development Permit Area E for Natural Environment also encourages staff to minimize negative impacts to the environment, where possible.

The OCP provides encouragement for staff to consider the gross density process (cluster development) for development applications under certain residential designations where an appropriate level of environmental preservation can be achieved:

- OCP Policy 8.1.11 encourages cluster housing development within Urban Residential, Suburban Residential and Rural Residential designations areas where clustering preserves mature vegetation, environmentally sensitive areas, and open spaces.

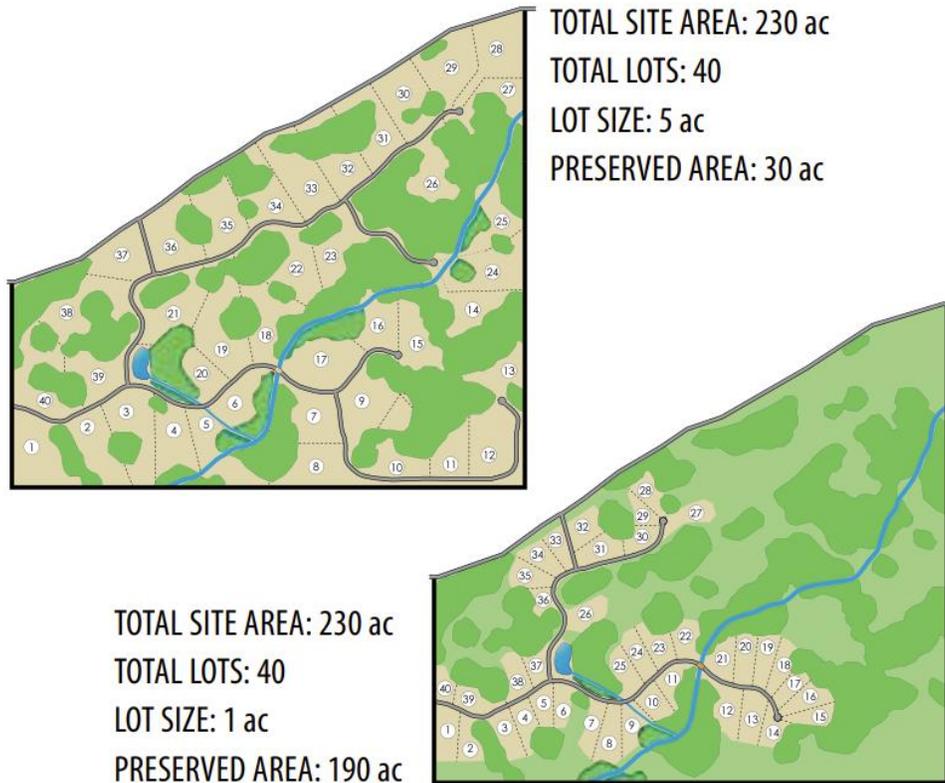
The intent of the DP Area E is to guide development to minimize the negative effects on environmentally sensitive and significant areas, habitat, water quality, biodiversity, air quality, greenhouse gas emissions, watercourse maintenance and dredging costs, outdoor recreation opportunities, food production, and many other tangible and intangible benefits of natural areas. The gross density process is another tool that would allow staff to achieve the intent of the DP Area E and OCP to preserve Mission's ecosystem and natural lands, where appropriate.

Staff have engaged in preliminary discussions regarding the gross density process with the development community for an active development application. Staff believe that gross density would be an appropriate tool to use on the site. Should Council provide staff direction to move forward with the OCP Policy 8.1.11, then an application utilizing the gross density process will be forthcoming.

## **Discussion and Analysis**

As development applications continue to increase, the number of applications with properties challenged by environmental constraints are also increasing and requiring creative solutions, such as that proposed by the gross density process. The gross density process, also known as "cluster development", is the concentration of new lots, buildings, and site disturbance on one area of the parent property in exchange for leaving otherwise developable lands undisturbed and reducing or eliminating watercourse crossings or other such impacts.

While the OCP provides staff direction to consider the gross density process approach for residential development, for further guidance and best practices, staff consulted "A Guide to Green Choices: Ideas & Practical Advice for Land Use Decisions in British Columbia Communities", by the Ministry of Community Development, now known as the Ministry of Municipal Affairs. The Guide to Green Choices promotes the efficient use of developable land by utilizing the gross density process (referred to as cluster development in the document) to achieve unique lot layouts without compromising the environment or the achievable density. Diagram 1 is from the Guide to Green Choices and it demonstrates how the same amount of lots (density) can be reconfigured to preserve the environmentally sensitive lands on a large scale development.



**Diagram 1:** Comparison of a conventional lot layout (top) and a lot layout inspired by the gross density process to preserve environmentally sensitive lands. Both layouts have the same amount of lots but the lot sizes are reduced to allow for increased area of preserved lands.  
 Source: Guide to Green Choices

The gross density process development strategy is ideal for residential development applications in Mission with watercourses/wetlands/ESA, mature tree vegetation, and/or other such topographic qualities that disconnect developable pockets of land from one another, and where protection of the specific topographic quality will enhance the community’s green space, and sensitive ecosystems.

Gross Density Process Incentives

The gross density process of clustering the development is an additional tool that allows staff to meet the objective of the OCP Policy 8.1.11 and the intent of the DP area E, as it guides development away from environmentally sensitive lands. Staff is better equipped to balance development objectives with those of environmental protection by allowing development to be clustered.

The gross density process also gives the development community an incentive to balance their development objectives with the City's objectives to maintain and protect environmentally sensitive lands, as the development potential of the parcel is not compromised. The development community is further incentivized to protect the environmentally sensitive lands as cost savings can be obtained through a simplified RAPR report, a simplified reference plan requiring less surveying and the avoidance of a WSA approval process while still achieving the density potential of the site. These incentives may allow for both saving of costs and of time for the development community.

### Gross Density Process Concerns for Consideration

While the gross density process lends itself to many incentives for the environment, the City, and the development community, the form and character of the clustered development does not necessarily reflect the typical form and character associated with the given designation. This is due to the concentration of the development to a smaller footprint of the parcel in comparison to spreading the development out on the entire site. The development will typically have a denser feeling on the ground due to the nature of the clustering, however, as Diagram 1 demonstrates, the gross density process does not increase density but rather concentrates it to a smaller footprint to balance the objectives of both the environment protection and the development community.

### Tools to Implement Gross Density Process

Several tools and approaches are available to staff to achieve gross density for clustered development. One option is to utilize comprehensive development (CD) zoning for projects that are assessed for and meet the criteria of the gross density process. As each development will be unique to the constraints on the site, CD Zoning will allow staff to work with the development community and prepare a zone that is appropriate for that development.

Another tool is a restrictive covenant (RC) to protect the environmentally sensitive lands and the fragmented portion(s) of developable land. The RC provides an additional layer of protection for not only the SPEA but also would need to include the non-SPEA portion that is being protected in exchange for clustered development. The RC would need to be registered on the property titles with a reference plan.

While the above-mentioned tools are available to staff for implementing the gross density process, not all residential applications would be suitable for the gross density process. Staff will need to create a list of criteria to assess each application for the gross density process. Development applications that fall under the Urban Residential, Suburban Residential, or Rural Residential designation and have significant environmental constraints separating large developable areas that can support development under the target zone may be considered for the gross density process. A development application that has significant environmental constraints creating pockets of developable areas that are too small to support subdivision under the target zone would not qualify for the gross density transfer process. The overall benefit of protecting otherwise developable land for ecological purposes should also be a key and significant component of any gross density-based application.

### **Council Goals/Objectives**

This report supports the Council Goals/Objectives of the 2018-2022 Strategic Plan to create Livable Complete Community by considering new opportunities to balance continued residential development with environmental preservation and protecting additional green space.

### **Financial Implications**

There are no financial implications with this report.

### **Communication**

There is no communication required as part of this report.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

This report provides an introduction to the use of the gross density process for allowing clustered development within the Urban Residential, Suburban Residential, or Rural Residential, designated areas. The report focuses, at a high-level, on the possible use and impacts that the gross density process may have on the environment and development applications and touches on the assessment process for qualifying a development application for the gross density process.

It is noted that OCP Objective 8.1.11 encourages staff to consider cluster development where appropriate.

Staff seek Council direction on whether or not to consider the gross density process to allow cluster development where appropriate.

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