

# Normal Avenue Neighborhood Plan (NNP) Position Paper Prepared by the NNP Citizen Action Group – August 2015

## Purpose

This position paper is addressed to the Ashland mayor and members of the City Council. Its purpose is to provide information in support of tabling the Normal Avenue Neighborhood Plan (NNP) by the City Council until major revisions are made and Ashland citizens have had greater opportunity to become informed on both policy and cost ramifications of the NNP.

The paper presents a brief introduction and background and raises six major areas of concern to the NNP Citizen Action Group.

## Introduction

Why is this issue important to the City? The City's goal is "to maintain a compact urban form and to ensure the orderly and sequential development of land in the City Limits." The city does not want the Normal Avenue Neighborhood or other property within Ashland's Urban Growth Boundary (UGB) to be developed as County property in a haphazard manner. *Ergo, there is a need for a city plan for the property.*

What is the City's position? The City intends to implement the NNP now, despite an estimated 1,883 vacant or partially vacant (i.e., undeveloped) parcels that currently exist within the city limits. Developers and a few landowners intend to sell and urbanize property located in this area. City staff first met with out-of-area consultants. Then a preliminary plan was studied by the Transportation and Planning Commissions and debated by the Council, which was unable to reach a decision. It was then sent to a working committee and returned to the Planning Commission for its approval. Now, reading of the modified plan will occur at the September 1, 2015 Council meeting. The existence, however, of the estimated 1,883 parcels of buildable land has yet to be addressed either by staff or the *ad hoc* Council study committee.

Who are the stakeholders? All the citizens of Ashland, the developers, the residents of Normal Avenue and adjoining neighborhoods, and the City staff.

## What are the stakeholders' positions?

- *Citizens of Ashland.* With the exception of Normal Avenue area and some Clay St. residents, few Ashlanders have been made aware of the imminent approval of the Normal Avenue Neighborhood Plan (NNP). The few who have learned of it are concerned about the implications for Ashland's natural resources and costs and question who will have to shoulder the sizable financial costs.
- *Developers.* Developers want to return a profit of at least 10% on their investment.
- *The Normal Avenue residents.* Most of these residents are very concerned about implementation of the Plan that will: (1) add congestion to streets, (2) impair key natural resources, (3) commit City resources without sufficient citizen education, and (4) build-up one of the UGB areas, allowing high density development rather than abiding by City infill strategies.
- *City Staff.* Staff supports the annexation of this parcel with high density development, supporting an adequate housing inventory for the next several decades.

## **Background**

The Normal Avenue Neighborhood is one of the last sizeable tracts of largely vacant (undeveloped) land designated for residential purposes in Ashland's UGB. The future development of the area is expected to accommodate long-range population growth consistent with the City's Comprehensive Plan and Ashland's position in the Greater Bear Creek Valley Regional Problem Solving Plan (RPS).

The city has received a request to develop a nine-acre parcel within NNP. Approximately 30 of the 94 acres will not be built out at this time or in the near future because these property owners have shown no interest in selling or subdividing, nor have they any interest in developing on acreage with natural features needing protection.

City planners have been studying some of the issues that must be taken into consideration in a Master Plan for the Normal Avenue Neighborhood. After extensive deliberations including public hearings, the City Planning Commission approved a Plan on August 11, 2015. The City Council will consider the first reading of the Proposed NNP on September 1, 2015. This Plan will be the guiding document for urbanization of the Normal Avenue Neighborhood.

## Six Concerns

There are six critical reasons why decision on this plan by the City Council should be tabled for more discussion:

### 1. Cost of Infrastructure

*Specific explanation about who pays for the infrastructure, both outlying and internal, must be included in the adopted plan.* The costs of advance financing for NNP's infrastructure are enormous. Ashland citizens should not to be expected to carry this burden in a loan, in fees, or in indirect taxing. There must be city-wide discussion on the options for funding these costs before the Plan is approved. The City needs to give citizens the truth regarding probable costs including water, sewer, electrical, street improvements, etc.

The Public Works staff projects the total cost for offsite improvements to be between \$8 and \$10 million, of which \$1.5 million is earmarked for the railroad crossing, and \$8.5 million for improvement of East Main Street. City planners have informally estimated in meetings that the City might be responsible for approximately 18% of the East Main improvements, or about \$1.5 million. About 40% of the total length of East Main designated for improvement, however, consists of the Ashland Middle School frontage, the cost of which will be difficult or impossible to shift to any developer. Thus, the City may actually be responsible for nearly \$3.5 million of the East Main Street improvements, in addition to the \$1.5 million for the railroad crossing.

These costs, totalling approximately \$5.3 million, have fluctuated from meeting to meeting. The Plan's approval must specify implementation ordinances to include the revenue streams that will pay for this infrastructure. *Failure to provide this critical detail as part of the Plan ignores the Council's fiduciary responsibility.*

### 2. Density/Number of Units

*Density of units in the NNP is too high.* The proposed density of 450 units within the 94 acres is too high and could compromise the integrity of wetlands, conservation easements, and hydrology management. It would negate the principle of matching densities within the NNP with densities of contiguous neighborhoods.

The impact on East Main and Normal Street of the projected population growth of 914 (2.03 persons per household) would require expensive improvements to those streets. Financing these improvements is not addressed in the NNP; some of these costs are likely to be borne by all Ashland taxpayers.

### 3. Sustainability of Resources and Livability

*City growth versus sustainability is an issue of great consequence.* “The 2011 Buildable Land Report” (BLI) estimates there to be 1,883 buildable parcels of varying sizes available within Ashland’s city limits. While both the NNP and “The 2012 Ashland Housing Needs Report” estimate growth within Ashland in coming decades, minimal consideration is given to the effects of this growth on Ashland’s sustainability and its reasonable standards of livability for all its citizens. Any discussion of Ashland’s growth must give primary consideration to the effects of climate change on all resources, especially our finite water resources (see Item #4 below).

How much growth should come from infill versus annexation from the UGB? The Ashland Comprehensive Plan projects an approximate Ashland population growth rate at .75% per year accommodating approximately 187 new residents per year. At 2.03 persons per household, that amounts to only 92 dwelling units needed per year. Various projections indicate that between 1,474 and 1,604 dwelling units will be needed by 2031.

To approve construction of 450 homes in the NNP represents approximately 30% of projected dwelling unit needs by 2031. These estimates beg the question: Why does the NNP call for such density on UGB land?

### 4. Water

*Finite water resources must be addressed prior to the Council’s approval of the NNP.* Sources of water for Ashland include Reeder Reservoir, Talent Irrigation District (TID), and the Talent Ashland Phoenix (TAP) tie in to Medford’s water supply. Under normal conditions, untreated TID water is designated for irrigation and TAP for emergencies only. All sources are subject to threats: water rights to TID that can be reclaimed and TID can be too polluted to use; TAP is subject to availability from Medford; the Reeder Reservoir and Fork Creeks are dependent on snow pack.

Oregon's ongoing four-year drought and water shortages are described as the "new normal," both by Governor Kate Brown and numerous climatologists. For the second year, TID water for one-half of the City's TID users has been diverted for citywide needs. Ashlanders cooperate during drought conditions with voluntary conservation, but there are limits!

When NNP planning began, the City's water supply was not a major issue. In 2015 and beyond, implementing the NNP Master Plan with the potential of 450 residential units and a projected population increase of 914 would further diminish Ashland's finite water supply. Relatedly, minimal plans exist to handle water needs for Ashland's projected growth rates.

## 5. Wetlands Protection

*Will the beauty and the protection of the floodplains within NNP be maintained?*

Development density would also compromise the integrity of wetlands, conservation easements, and hydrology management. Within the 94 acres are three State Designated Wetlands, with two creeks which are integral to health and functionality of a floodplain that keeps seasonal storm waters from damaging downstream properties. These exceptional natural features enhance the livability of the area for wildlife and humans. Given the proximity of Ashland Middle School to NNP, the NNP wetlands offer an educational resource in the School's backyard. The NNP's density bonuses allowed for developments next to open space/water resource lands threaten the viability of these lands.

## 6. Street Improvements

*Projected street improvements will affect many residents:* East Main Street, Ashland Street, and Normal Avenue are the two outside feeder streets for NNP, and increased traffic from the projected population of 914 (2.03 people per household) would require expensive improvements. Based on an estimated two vehicles per household, the 2013 NNP traffic analysis projected between 1,500 and 5,000 vehicle trips per day due to the NNP development. This amount of traffic will not only impact the road frontage along the NNP development, but will also continue its impact on traffic, congestion, and pollution all the way down East Main Street into downtown. Extended East Main Street improvement costs would further impact all Ashland taxpayers, but they are *not* stated in the infrastructure estimates.

Improvements for the RR crossing on Normal Street could be delayed until a later phase of development. However, East Main is currently a rural road, already often inadequate for existing traffic and entirely unsuitable for cyclists and pedestrians, let alone for the increased use which would follow development.

The NNP calls for development of East Main in phases, “dependent upon the impacts of proposed developments within the plan area.” This contradicts the recommendation of the Transportation and Planning Commissions that East Main be improved from Walker to Clay Streets *prior* to development. Improvements should include a center lane for left turns and provisions for bicyclists and pedestrians.

Finally, no consideration in the NNP has been given to inevitable upgrades needed to Clay Street to accommodate additional traffic, nor to the need for a light at Ashland Street and Normal Avenue to manage increased traffic.

## **Recommendations**

- The NNP density should be reduced from 450 to 225 dwelling units, reducing the projected resident population from 914 to 457.
- The City should institute a systematic educational outreach effort in each City district to inform citizens and gather feedback from them on the consequences of the NNP.
- Ashland citizens need reassurance that the zoning requirement of 25% open space will be strictly adhered to, including wetlands, thus assuring preservation of this critically sensitive habitat. The practice of “mitigation of wetlands” within the NNP should be strictly disallowed.

Given the six areas of concern outlined above, and in particular the financial consequences to the City of Ashland as well as the impact of the NNP on Ashland’s quality of life, the NNP Citizen Action Group asks that the City Council table the NNP as currently written.

We believe the Plan needs to be revised to address these concerns and that the citizens of Ashland must be given greater opportunity to become informed and offer input on this Plan. Simultaneously, implementation ordinances specifying revenue streams to pay for large infrastructure changes must be forthcoming before a vote on any version of the NNP is taken.

*Failure to allow further consideration of these concerns and recommendations ignores fiduciary responsibilities and duties which City officials owe to all Ashland citizens.*

Respectfully,

The Undersigned Ashland Residents:

Bryce Anderson /s/  
2092 Creek Dr. and  
representing Meadowbrook  
Park Estates, East Village,  
Ashland Meadows, and  
Chataqua Trace HOA's

Carol Block /s/  
355 Normal Ave.

Nancy Boyer/s/  
425 Normal Ave.

Tod Brannan/s/  
367 Normal Ave.

Beth Coye /s/  
1609 Peachey Rd.

Sue DeMarinis /s/  
145 Normal Ave.

Paula Fox /s/  
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456 Euclid St.

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For more information, refer to the link below and read the proposed Normal Avenue Neighborhood Plan and related documents including City reports, proposed ordinances, and minutes of relevant meetings as well as letters by citizens.  
<http://www.ashland.or.us/Page.asp?NavID=14769>