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Investigating the Societal Benefit of Urban Infilling

Modern cities such as Denver, CO, face many challenges when it comes to building new urban residential and commercial structures within government-regulated zones. These challenges often involve finding ways for a city to save money, protect the environment, and reduce resource use, all while revitalizing existing communities or creating new ones.

One solution that has been gaining popularity in Denver over the years is infill development.

What Is Urban Infilling?

The term "urban" refers to a city or area that is neither rural nor suburban. Urban infill development is becoming increasingly more common as professionals seek to live closer to Denver's business centers. It serves as an alternative to greenfield development, which focuses on building on undeveloped land.

Instead, infill development involves building new infrastructure to "fill in" vacant land within fully developed urban zones, creating easy-to-navigate, compact, mixed-use urban centers with built-in residential and commercial systems.

The main advantage of urban infilling is that vacant land is already served by existing infrastructure. New buildings can connect to roads, water, sewer, electricity, and other city services without requiring additional construction.

Denver has many vacant parcels within various regulatory zones that can benefit from infill development. However, the process of urban infilling depends on zoning regulations.

Zoning Districts in Denver

Zoning refers to the regulatory system that dictates how parcels of land can be used. For example, what structures can be built on vacant land, how tall buildings may be, and how dense they can be. Most cities have similar zoning districts, although they do differ slightly from one city to the next. These are the [zoning districts in Denver](#):

- **Residential Zone Districts:** These zones are designated for residential buildings, from suburban homes to high-density multi-unit housing and mixed residential–office developments.
- **Business Zone Districts:** These zones permit a range of commercial, office, retail, and mixed-use activities.

- **Hospital Zone Districts:** These zones are designated areas intended to support and concentrate healthcare institutions and facilities.
- **Industrial Zone Districts:** These zones are designated employment areas that accommodate light, general, and heavy industrial uses.
- **Main Street Zone Districts:** These zones are designated for pedestrian-oriented, mixed-use corridors near transit. These districts allow commercial, retail, office, and limited residential uses
- **Mixed Use Zone Districts:** These zones allow a combination of residential, commercial, office, and limited industrial uses within the same area.
- **Open Space Zone Districts:** These zones preserve land for parks, recreation, agriculture, natural habitats, airports, and other public or semi-public uses.

Developers in Denver must understand the city's zoning regulations and districts before planning new construction, as this knowledge is crucial both for obtaining necessary permits and for maximizing the benefits of infill development.

6 Key Benefits of Urban Infill Development

There are many options for real estate development. As previously mentioned, greenfield development focuses on building on undeveloped land. Developers can also invest in suburban expansion by building outside the city's core, or brownfield redevelopment, which involves rebuilding on previously developed land that may be contaminated or underutilized.

All types of development offer benefits; however, certain societal and community benefits are specific to urban infill development. They include the following:

1. Revitalize a Struggling Neighborhood

The principal purpose of infill development is to breathe new life into an existing community and generate new interest, investment, and economic activity by making the neighborhood more attractive. Revitalizing a neighborhood through infill development often attracts new residents, making the area more livable and productive while also increasing property values.

2. Provide a Boost to the Local Economy

Urban areas tend to be more compact than rural and suburban areas. As a result, commercial areas are often close to residential areas — and in some cases, they are integrated. This is one reason why population growth in urban areas tends to attract new businesses. It also allows the local economy to benefit from infill development.

Constructing residential buildings near businesses increases their customer base. Not to mention, vacant lots often negatively affect the property values of nearby homeowners. Infill development can help increase these property values by utilizing vacant land.

Communities and businesses also benefit from brownfield infill development, which involves cleaning up and repurposing previously contaminated or underused land. These projects improve environmental safety and living conditions, making the land suitable for new commercial or residential development. Brownfield cleanup can also boost property values, attract investment, and sometimes qualify developers for government incentives.

3. Contribute to City's Finances

Local businesses benefit from infill development when new residential buildings bring in more residents who become active local customers. Since urban infill development encourages more spending within city limits, it directly improves the city's finances. Compact city centers also help reduce urban sprawl and promote land conservation, while reinvesting in and improving neighborhoods.

Additionally, the cost of maintaining abandoned or underused properties is substantial. The city is responsible for any costs associated with general maintenance, sidewalk upkeep, and increased policing due to vandalism, arson, and other crimes. Such properties also reduce property values in the surrounding area and shrink the local tax base.

Investing in infill development can help mitigate these issues, thereby saving the city millions of dollars in maintenance and enforcement costs while generating new tax revenue and improving community safety.

4. Promote Better Infrastructure

Infill development within urban zones can directly support improvements to existing infrastructure, whether through increased tax revenue that drives more city investment or through private business contributions.

When a neighborhood's infrastructure is improved, it attracts more business, increases property values, and strengthens the local economy for everyone.

The following infrastructure improvements are often funded by increased tax revenue from infill development or prompted by the practical needs of higher-density construction and population growth:

- **Repairs to Damaged Properties:** Infill projects often replace or renovate neglected buildings on vacant lots, improving neighborhood safety and making the area attractive for new residents and businesses.

- **Upgraded Streets:** Roads are repaired or upgraded to accommodate the increased traffic from new residents and commercial activity resulting from infill development.
- **Additional Roadways:** New roads may be constructed to connect recently developed parcels, improving access and circulation for growing neighborhoods.
- **Upgraded Sewage Systems:** Due to the influx of residents and businesses, the city is more likely to upgrade sewage and drainage systems to address the higher demand.
- **Improved Public Transportation Systems:** Population growth can lead to the improvement of public transit systems, reducing traffic congestion and supporting sustainable mobility.
- **Remediated Buildings:** Contaminated or unsafe structures are cleaned and redeveloped as part of infill projects. This leads to safer, more usable spaces for residential, commercial, or mixed-use purposes.

5. Create More Jobs Within the Community

Building commercial structures generates more jobs for the community. Building residential structures increases the population and improves nearby property values, thereby attracting more businesses that provide more jobs.

Essentially, infill development supports job creation within the community, regardless of the type of structure built. Not to mention, infill development projects will create jobs, as workers will be required to demolish, develop, and build in underdeveloped areas.

6. Have a Positive Environmental Impact

Construction is rarely associated with positive environmental outcomes, but infill development is an exception. Concentrating growth within existing urban areas can deliver the following environmental benefits:

- **Reduce Commute Distances:** By placing housing closer to local businesses and jobs, infill development reduces commute distances. This decreases car and bus travel, lowering greenhouse gas emissions.
- **Encourage Compact Urban Growth:** Development occurs within established city limits, preserving rural areas, such as farmland and natural areas, as well as historic sites.
- **Minimize Resource Waste:** Infill development makes full use of existing water, electricity, and septic systems, thereby reducing waste.

Urban Infilling Can Have a Positive Impact on the Community

Urban infill development optimizes and revitalizes existing neighborhoods without creating an entirely new metropolitan area. It attracts more residents closer to local businesses in urban centers, helping to preserve rural and agricultural spaces.

Although these projects require up-front investment, urban infilling provides long-term benefits and growth opportunities for both residents and businesses.