

# Orange- Chatham Group

[www.sierraclub-nc.org/ocg](http://www.sierraclub-nc.org/ocg)

# Density & Growth

Density and Smart Growth are frequently heard terms in our communities today. Chapel Hill and Carrboro have both approved controversial new developments claiming to foster both of these concepts. Read [The Virtue of Density](#) for an interesting perspective on dense development.

AUG-SEP 2003



## The Virtue of Density

By David Dixon, 7/7/2003, president of the Boston Society of Architects.

"DENSITY" IS a tough word. It conjures up contradictory, equally disagreeable, images of crowded tenements and isolated towers. Yet freed of poverty and poor design, density means chatting with neighbors on a South End stoop, walking to a movie in the Fenway and to work in the Financial District, and riding the new Silver Line to Chinatown.

In fact, our fear and loathing of density is ironic, counter-productive, dangerous and based largely on myths. Why ironic? Boston's most expensive neighborhoods are its densest, a pattern repeated in many cities. Which places do Bostonians speak of with real affection? — areas with the density required to support active street life. This pattern repeats itself across the United States - from Greenwich Village in New York to newer developments like Santana Row in San Jose.

Why counter-productive? Density is essential to achieving the very qualities that make communities more livable - and cohesive. Neighborhoods in cities like Boston have lost as much as 50 percent of their pre-1950 population, which in turn supported the lively commercial districts with a sense of community that people seek to recapture. Worse, in an era of big-box retail and Internet shopping, it takes more people living within walking distance to support lively streets in 2003 than it did in 1950. A recent study our office conducted for eastern Cambridge revealed that 1,500 to 2,000 units of new housing, within a 10-15 minute walk, were required to support creation of one block of Main Street.

Why dangerous? Avoiding density creates sprawl and in the process generates congestion; encourages social fragmentation by income, race, and age; and depletes Main Street. Because average household size has shrunk by roughly one-quarter since 1970 it takes more housing to return neighborhoods to their earlier population levels.

The Boston region pays an increasingly steep price for escalating sprawl; as we have scattered new jobs, housing, and shopping during the past 30 years rather than focusing growth where we already live, total miles driven have increased 15 times faster than population growth and the income gap between outer suburbs and core cities has steadily widened.

We need to reclaim density as a solution to, not the cause of, problems facing our cities and sub-

See Density — next column

## OCG Meetings

Thursday, August 14th at 7:30 p.m. General Meeting at the Church of Reconciliation.

### Why be an Activist

Rod Hunter, Chair of the NC Sierra Club, will give a personal account of his journey starting as a professional photographer and now as an activist and advocate for the environment.

Thursday, Sept 11th at 7:30 p.m. General Meeting at the Church of Reconciliation. See web site for details.

Wednesday, August 6th, 7:30 p.m. ExCom meeting. At the Oriental Garden Restaurant on Rosemary Street. Submit agenda items to Robert Porter at [robertporter@mindspring.com](mailto:robertporter@mindspring.com) or 933-7613. All OCG members are welcome and encouraged to join us.

Wednesday, September 3rd, 7:30 p.m. ExCom meeting. - see above

Density— continued; also on next page

urbs. So why do people fear, if not loathe, density? Blame some enduring myths:

Density depletes open space. Parks and development shouldn't and don't compete. I have never seen a park redeveloped as housing. In fact, development pays for parks that the public sector can no longer afford and ongoing sprawl consumes large amounts of open space.

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*Density — continued*

Density is ugly. There are many examples of large, insensitively designed buildings that mar charming neighborhoods. The problem is poor design, not density.

Density hurts property values. Density doesn't hurt property values. New investment in a neighborhood almost always raises them witness higher density housing along Washington Street.

Density causes gentrification. Just the opposite. The failure to produce enough housing is pushing up prices and forcing dislocation. The solution is to build more housing and incorporate affordability, not avoid building.

Density causes traffic congestion. Dispersed development - at densities too low to support transit - requires multiple car trips as part of daily life and causes congestion. Blame the 35 million square feet of office space built in the suburbs, not the 9 million built in the regional core over the 1990s for increased congestion. The answer is building transit - projects like the Urban Ring - and managing traffic.

Density doesn't work in a car-dominated world. National surveys report that Americans resent lengthening daily commutes. Highly desirable neighborhoods in Boston and Cambridge boast some of America's highest walk-to-work ratios. Ask national retailers which store locations perform best these days; the answer is Main Streets, not malls. Residents in Boston's densest new housing can park downstairs from where they live.

Recently the *Globe's* architecture critic, Robert Campbell, informed us that Paris is four times as dense as Boston - and few people are complaining. The next day the *Globe* reported that "developed" land in Massachusetts has increased by 50 percent over the 1980s and '90s, and other newspapers reported that tree cover in the Washington, D. C., region had decreased by more than a quarter in the past 20 years. Which of these futures do we want?

We can no longer afford to ignore this question. We need a new American dream, and density needs to be part of it.

## Outings

**3rd Saturday - Bolin Creek Trail.** Work is continuing on the Bolin Creek habitat restoration project. After a fairly small amount of work, a significant improvement is now visible along the Greenway. This is a long-term project, and we need many more volunteers. It's hard work, but very rewarding.

We meet the third Saturday of each month at the Greenway entrance on Bolinwood Drive, just off Hillsborough Street in Chapel Hill. Please contact Bill Bracey at [arbornet@mindspring.com](mailto:arbornet@mindspring.com), or 942-9937 if you are interested in participating.

**1st and 3rd Saturdays of each Month - American Tobacco Trail Service Outing.** Generally, the group meets on the first and third Saturdays of every month starting at 9:00 AM. The workgroup meets at the Scott King Rd. crossing of the ATT. For more info contact Thad Howard (HWG) at 919-544-9126 or e-mail [thad.howard@duke.edu](mailto:thad.howard@duke.edu).

**AUG 16-17 COASTAL RIVER PADDLING.** Location to be determined, but possibly Town or Rice Creek near Wilmington. Details to be determined & announced in future newsletters. Leader reserves to change paddling location if weather and/or water level dictates. Contact Chandler Stewart (CG): [cstewart4@mindspring.com](mailto:cstewart4@mindspring.com) or by phone between 8:30 & 10:30 P.M.—910-739-4879 or 910-536-4416.

**AUG 23-24 Mt. Rogers** Mt Rogers Blueberry Pancake Breakfast Backpack. Sign-up deadline August 11. Our trek will take us to the cool balds of the roof top of Virginia. Learn the history of these high balds and why they now offer some of the best wild blueberries you can find. Moderate backpack. Contact Steve Lund (CG) at 919-481-1300.

**SEP 5-7 Rough Butt Bald, Nantahala National Forest.** Moderate backpack to camping area below the "bald" with day hiking along the Mountains to the Sea trail through some of the most verdant forest in the region. A great opportunity to learn about the Mountains-to-Sea project first-hand. Meet at the trail head Friday afternoon and hike out Sunday around lunch time. Contact Eric Smith (CG) 919-481-4277 or email at [eric@spooles.net](mailto:eric@spooles.net).

**SEP 13 (Sat): Local Hikes.** Walking and driving tour of northern Orange and Durham Counties. We'll visit some of the most scenic and historic spots in the area and learn a little more of the history that exists in our own backyard. Contact Annette Jurgelski (OCG) at 919-644-0280.

**SEP 27 (Sat) Haw River Canoe.** All Day Canoe Trip on the Haw River. Canoe rental/shuttle is available. Enjoy a moderate paddle on a section of the river with little development. There will be class I and II rapids. Some instruction will be provided for those who have not canoed in whitewater. Contact Larry Henson (CG) at 919-661-8371 or e-mail [lwh@nc.rr.com](mailto:lwh@nc.rr.com).

**SEP 27-28: Lumber River.** Paddle on this moderate section of southeastern N.C.'s prettiest black water river, located just south of Lumberton. Total paddling distance is approximately 22 miles; with overnight on Sat. beside the river (a remote canoe-in site.) No pets or children under age 13. Leader reserves the right to change paddling location if weather and/or water level dictates. Contact Chandler Stewart (CG) at [cstewart4@mindspring.com](mailto:cstewart4@mindspring.com) or by phone between 8:30--10:30 P.M. @ 910-739-4879 or 910-536-4416.

**More outings information is available on-line at <http://www.sierraclub-nc.org/ocg>**



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