On June 18th, ULI Chicago members convened for the Front Stoop Series to discuss “Density & Healthy Cities.” The discussion was led by Jacques Sandberg, Vice President, Affordable Housing, Related Midwest and Dr. Rachel Weber, Professor, Department of Urban Planning & Policy, University of Illinois at Chicago.

Three key takeaways jumped out during the conversation and were further elaborated on as listed below.

1. The concept of density is very nuanced.
   a. People interact with density in different ways.
   b. Density is measured at a variety of scales (e.g., building-level, localized, regional).
   c. The concept is dynamic/fluid and changes with time.
   d. Density and crowding are two very different concepts.

2. There is currently no empirical evidence linking density alone with health outcomes and virus transmission.
   a. There are several positive characteristics of density that may counteract virus transmission – improved communication, access to shopping and healthcare, walkability, etc.
   b. Other factors that interact with density are better indicators of health outcomes and virus transmission (e.g., poverty, race, and housing insecurity).
   c. Lower density neighborhoods in the City have some of the highest infection and mortality rates from COVID-19, while extremely dense places like Hong Kong have low rates of transmission.
   d. More data is needed regarding the link between density and virus transmission.

3. Cities are adaptive to density.
   a. Architecture and planning innovations have impacted how people interact with density (mixed-use zoning, setbacks, etc.).
   b. Zoning is tied to density - zoning changes can be made to address housing choice (and hopefully housing affordability over the long term).
   c. COVID-19 has resulted in evolving concepts of personal space and response to health hazards (at least in urban environments).
   d. It is currently unclear how views on density will change over the long-term due to COVID-19.
      i. How will people continue to interact with density?
      ii. How will building and neighborhood design evolve?
   e. More work needs to be done to address the relationship between density and poverty, race and housing insecurity.

Summary written by Lance Dorn, Vice President, SB Friedman Development Advisors