

Olympia Planning Commission

January 10, 2022

Olympia City Council
PO Box 1967
Olympia, WA 98507

RE: Olympia Planning Commission Recommendation – Proposed Urban Waterfront Code Amendments

Dear Mayor Selby and City Councilmembers:

On August 2, 2021 and again on December 6, 2021, the Olympia Planning Commission (OPC) unanimously voted to recommend denial of the proposed code amendments to permit Recreational Vehicle (RV) Parks in the Urban Waterfront Zoning District. This recommendation was made after several briefings and presentations from both Community Planning and Development staff, Port of Olympia (“the Port”) staff and consultants, and consideration of written and oral comments from the public. The OPC found the proposed code amendments:

- Restrict and/or discourage waterfront accessibility
- Appear to benefit a single property owner
- Are inconsistent with the goals and objectives of the Olympia Comprehensive Plan
- Are inconsistent with the goals and objectives of the Shoreline Master Program (SMP)
- Are inconsistent with intent of the Urban Waterfront (UW) District
- Are inconsistent with the City’s Greenhouse Gas (GHG) emission reduction goals
- Are inconsistent with City’s commitment to equity and inclusion
- Are inconsistent with the vision of the Downtown Strategy

The Port identified a 3-acre parcel immediately adjacent to the shoreline and between the south end of Swantown Marina and Swantown Boatworks for a future RV park. Under the existing UW zoning district code, an RV park is not permitted. The Port requested a change in the code to allow an RV park. The subject parcel is currently accessed from the Billy Frank Jr. waterfront trail and a sidewalk along Marine Dr. NE. Currently, the waterfront trail is unimproved in this location. The constricting presence of an RV park in this area would limit visual and physical access from the sidewalks, as well as discourage use of the waterfront trail. The Comprehensive Plan and the Downtown Strategy both stress the value of honoring the waterfront as a public amenity. An RV park in this location would diminish this value.

The proposed changes would modify the permitted uses in the UW District by allowing RV parks to locate in proximity to public marinas and require a minimum of 1 acre for such a use. The

only public marina that currently qualifies for this use is the Swantown Marina. With no other property owner able to meet these qualifications, the code amendments only benefit the Port instead of a wider public interest.

The Olympia Comprehensive Plan is the guiding document when considering future land use. The Plan expresses values of walkability, open-space, vibrancy, environmental stewardship, and recognition of the importance of land near water. An RV park in the UW District would not preserve these values. In deliberation, the OPC discussed ideas for future uses that are more compatible with the Comprehensive Plan, and currently permitted under the UW District, including a park, community gardens, open space, small craft launch site, and small retail/restaurant or mixed use. Several of these uses were also identified by the Port as potential uses (mixed used, small craft launch, and light industrial) of the site.

The recently approved update to the SMP identifies compatible uses within the shoreline jurisdiction that are low-intensity, non-motorized, and water-based. The OPC recognizes that an RV park is enhanced by the proximity to the shoreline but is in no way dependent on it. An RV relies less on the natural environment where it is parked than on the infrastructure required to service it, such as a level hard surface, electricity, and water and sewer hookups. This type of use cannot be considered low-intensity and non-motorized. As proposed, an RV park's advantages would be more urban-oriented with proximity to downtown and other Port amenities than water-oriented.

Additionally, the SMP states that preferred uses of the shoreline may not be allowed if they cannot demonstrate they *"will not have significant adverse impacts on other shoreline uses, resources and/or values such as navigation and public access"* (OMC 18.20.680(A)(2)). The OPC finds the proposed UW zoning code amendment would have adverse impact on shoreline values, in particular, but not limited to, public access, and view preservation.

The proposed UW code amendment would create a new permitted use within the UW District which the OPC found is inconsistent with the five-part purpose statement of the district as defined in Olympia Municipal Code (OMC) 18.06.020(4). The OPC finds the proposed code amendment would encourage low amenity development, which does not enhance the appeal and identity of our Capital City. The proposal would not preserve a sense of openness in the water. During their briefing to the Planning Commission, Port staff provided examples of other RV parks, including one in Port Townsend. However, Port Townsend has found the RV park along their waterfront impacts visual access to the waterfront¹. The proposed code amendment would encourage development which is neither water-related nor water-dependent. Furthermore, the proposed code amendment would create a camping opportunity which is limited to a small subset of the population with the financial means to purchase an RV therefore not providing shoreline access to a significant portion of the public.

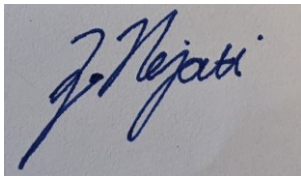
¹ [Port Townsend SMP - Sect. 5.13](#)

The proposed UW zoning code amendment is inconsistent with City of Olympia’s commitment to decrease GHGs emissions² and vehicle miles traveled. RV parks by definition must be accessed by vehicle and there are presently no electric RVs available in the United States. Additionally, as mentioned previously, the proposed UW zoning code amendment limits camping opportunities to only those with the financial means to purchase or rent an RV. This is inconsistent with the City of Olympia’s commitment to equity and inclusion. A commitment so strong, the Olympia City Council chose to update the Comprehensive Plan in 2021 through Ordinance 7301 to enshrine those values.

The Port is proximal and integral to Downtown Olympia. As reflected in the vision of the Downtown Strategy, it is important that downtown and the Port by inference, be a “vibrant, attractive regional destination.” The shoreline is a natural attribute with great potential for enhancement. It is an amenity, if adjacent uses are well designed, that could be a desirable asset to downtown and community residents as well as out of town visitors. It is the OPC’s opinion that an RV Park does not lend itself to public interaction necessary for a socially vibrant and attractive space.

Based on these findings, the OPC is forwarding a recommendation of denial to permit RV parks in the UW zoning district. We appreciate the opportunity to provide this recommendation and look forward to further opportunities to serve this Committee, the City Council, and the City of Olympia.

Sincerely,



**Zainab Nejati, Chair
Olympia Planning Commission**



**Tracey Carlos, Vice Chair (she/her)
Olympia Planning Commission**

² The Olympia City Council has committed to reducing GHG emission 85% by 2050 from its 2015 baseline.