

Missing Middle Housing Project and the Preservation of Neighborhood Character in Olympia

Abstract: The city's new effort in land use planning (Missing Middle Housing) is an attempt to increase housing choices in existing neighborhoods. However, maintaining and improving neighborhood character, and preserving the historic features of Olympia are also goals in the Comprehensive Plan. Also, the Comprehensive Plan indicates that individual neighborhoods are "unique" and that how neighborhoods "shape and develop" will be conducted through a subarea planning process.

The Missing Middle Housing project is a separate citywide effort that affects all neighborhoods (subareas) simultaneously. As such, Missing Middle land use policies adopted without separate subarea plans appear to be contrary to the language and intent of the Comprehensive Plan. Subarea planning must be completed in accordance with the Public Participation process outlined in the Comprehensive Plan.

Should the city decide that Missing Middle Housing effort will proceed anyway, there are a number of issues related to how the phrase "neighborhood character" should be interpreted. This paper will explore how the term "neighbor character" should be interpreted so that Missing Middle housing does not violate the Comprehensive Plan. Also, a model method for assessing the suitability of individual neighborhoods for increasing density will be proposed.

I. How Neighborhoods Should Be Involved in the Evolution of Olympia's Neighborhoods

A. Roles of Subarea Planning in Neighborhood Development and Evolution

In the Introduction Section and other sections of the Land Use and Urban Design chapter of the Comprehensive Plan (CP) and several parts of the Public Participation chapter of the CP (see Goal GP 5 Subarea Planning), the city intends to give community members a chance to get involved early in the planning process for a relatively small area called a subarea that includes their own neighborhood. This process is called sub-area planning (see the Land Use and Public Participation sections of the Comprehensive Plan) and there are 11 subareas identified by the city. The approved process for subarea planning is outlined below:

"Through sub-area planning, the City and Coalition of Neighborhood Associations work with stakeholders to identify neighborhood assets, challenges and priorities for development. Activities are geared toward learning; for the City to learn about neighborhood needs and desires, and for these groups to learn about the plans and regulations that guide development in their area; and how land use decisions also must comply with federal, state and local laws. Although this process does not guarantee a neighborhood will get everything it wants, sub-area planning can help it get organized for future projects that will influence the direction of community decisions."

Neighborhoods in Olympia range from historic district neighborhoods, early suburb neighborhoods, and later planned unit developments. One size does not fit all and attempting to do so will only cause those neighborhoods bounded by arterial roads to shoulder a disproportionate share of the development. Subarea planning is a more precise instrument to take into account the many differences and considerations noted below.

B. What Must Be Part of the Subarea Planning Process?

The city has identified neighborhood assets, challenges and priorities for development as the key subarea plan focus areas. The phrase "priorities for development" should include the types of housing, including Missing Middle Housing which will be permitted in existing neighborhoods. Otherwise, the impact of Comprehensive Plan Goal GP 5 which states that subarea planning will "shape how neighborhoods grow and

develop” would be largely meaningless if the city can initiate separate residential (Missing Middle) or commercial (Neighborhood Center) growth and development policies outside of the individual subarea plans for groups of neighborhoods.

C. Role of the Coalition of Neighborhood Associations and Subarea Planning

The city renewed an existing a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Coalition of Neighborhood Associations (CNA) in 2015. The Fourth area of city and neighborhood collaboration is subarea planning and under this agreement, the city and neighborhoods should devise development frameworks for future growth. These development frameworks include housing types, densities and designs as neighborhoods evolve over the next 20 years.

CNA neighborhoods have already participated in the creation of a subarea plan for the Northeast subarea and a second planning effort is beginning for the Eastside subarea. The city has an opportunity to use this model which includes public outreach to owners and residents to engender public discussion about housing types and neighborhood density regulations.

II. How Increased Density (Missing Middle Housing) is to be Integrated into Neighborhoods

Should the City decide not to follow the sub-area planning process outlined above, there are a number of important issues related to increasing housing density. Missing Middle Housing is a generic term for increasing the number of residents on existing parcels of land in neighborhoods. This is one of those policy issues where the implementation challenges and the outcomes need to be carefully weighed before allowing Missing Middle Housing in predominately single family detached home neighborhoods.

A. Purpose and Goals of the Comprehensive Plan

The Missing Middle effort must be consistent with the overall Comprehensive Plan for growth in Olympia over the next 20 years. The policies and goals set out in the Land Use section of the Comprehensive Plan are designed to accomplish the following objectives:

- **Reflect the community’s urban design vision**
- **Maintain or improve the character of established neighborhoods**
- **Preserve the historic features of Olympia**
- **Provide for a variety of transportation alternatives**
- **Provide people with opportunities to live close to work**
- **Create desirable neighborhoods with a variety of housing opportunities, different lifestyles and income levels, and a sense of community**
- **Provide for a compact growth pattern**
- **Promote energy efficiency**
- **Reflect the land’s physical and environmental capability**

Therefore, land use plans, including the Missing Middle effort must accommodate purposes which can at times conflict including maintaining historical features, neighborhood character while at the same time providing a variety of housing opportunities.

B. Aesthetical Considerations in the Land Use Section of the Comprehensive Plan

In addition to a broad objectives outlined above, there are other also references to aesthetical considerations in the Comprehensive Plan. For example, Goal GL 6 covers maintaining “Community Beauty” which includes the preservation of the character and livability of a neighborhood. There are other references to the “existing fabric” or “sense of place” and finally “neighborhood character” itself. All of these references can be subsumed under the phrase “neighborhood character”.

This document will analyze and develop a model for evaluating neighborhood character which is crucial to maintaining the desired aesthetic qualities. Historical features, transportation and characteristics of the natural environment can be considered along with neighborhood character.

C. Housing Choices in Olympia’s Neighborhoods

Neighborhood Goal GL 14 includes the concept of housing choices in neighborhoods but also the preservation of low-density neighborhoods (.2 to 12 units per acre). PL 14.3 provides that medium (13 to 24 units per acre) and high density (more than 24 units per acre) development be disallowed in low density neighborhoods with the exception of neighborhood center areas. Around neighborhood centers, medium density housing would be allowed along with civic and commercial uses (PL 14.4).

D. Range of Housing Types

The Comprehensive Plan also supports increasing density through the effective use of buildable land, and to allow in residential areas the following types of structures:

- Cottages, which would presumably include Tiny Houses
- Townhouses
- One ADU per home
- Multi-family buildings near collector or arterial streets or neighborhood centers. Multi-family structures must be designed for compatibility with adjacent lower density housing and designed in accordance with local topography.

E. Building Types and Placement

Different types of housing may be permissible for single family detached low-density neighborhoods but these different housing types must be consistent with existing neighborhood character and blend into the fabric of the neighborhood. Secondly, multi-family housing is to be placed only near neighborhood centers and near transportation collectors or arterials.

The US government (Census Bureau) defines multi-family housing as buildings containing at least two housing units which are adjacent vertically or horizontally. If multi-family structures are built side to side, they do not have a wall separating units that extends from ground to roof, share heating systems or contain inter-structural utilities. Using this interpretation would mean that duplexes, triplexes and apartment buildings would be permissible only near neighborhood centers or transportation arteries.

F. Pace of Neighborhood Change

Missing Middle type changes to the Comprehensive Plan and local ordinances should be implemented incrementally and represent a balance of the interests of existing residents and the community as a whole. As

noted in the Comprehensive Plan, many Olympia neighborhoods are more than 50 years old and “These established neighborhoods provide the 'sense of place' and character of Olympia”.

As long as the new denser housing is implemented gradually, it could be a part of the evolution of a neighborhood rather than be perceived as an imposition by city planners. Therefore, the need to increase the stock of housing for population growth must be balanced with maintaining existing residential neighborhoods and neighborhood livability.

III. Neighborhood Character and Carrying Capacity

A. Neighborhood Character

While the ADU and housing type decision papers outline the possible alternatives for permissible structures, there is little if any discussion of the impact of these decisions on the nature or character of the neighborhood and how these new types of housing will fit into the existing character of a neighborhood. Furthermore, Missing Middle housing varies widely from a 100 square foot Tiny House that is smaller than many existing garages in neighborhoods to a 15,000 square foot 3 story walk-up apartment with 12 housing units.

While determining a neighborhood’s character may appear to be a subjective determination, there are key elements of neighborhood character which set a neighborhood apart from other parts of the city and which will determine the impact of expansion of permissible structures on neighborhoods. Also, neighborhoods differ greatly in the presence or absence of these features and land use decisions need to take these differences into account before approving changes. One size does not fit all or even most existing neighborhoods or situations.

B. Determining a Neighborhood’s Maximum Carrying Capacity

The “carrying capacity” is the maximum number of housing units that can be accommodated as compared to the existing built environment. The carrying capacity includes the capacity of the existing water, sewer and stormwater systems, transportation and intersection capacity, school enrollment to foster neighborhood schools, and emergency services, including sufficient street access for fire, police and ambulance service. Increased density that causes overly congested streets resulting in access delays, accidents or denial of rapid emergency services would degrade, rather than increase the livability of Olympia’s neighborhoods.

IV. Elements of Neighborhood Character (Buildings, Environment, Subdivision of land, Topography, Impacts on Residents and Roads/Transportation Network)

The word “Bestir” means to rouse oneself and take action, based on some external event or idea. Missing Middle land uses are an important change in the character of low-density neighborhoods and the community should carefully evaluate these changes while they are in the development stages. The acronym BESTIR is being used to designate the individual components of neighborhood character and livability analysis and how to assess the impact of new housing impact on the “existing fabric” of a neighborhood.

A. Buildings/The Existing Built Environment in a Neighborhood

1. Building Form and Style

In many neighborhoods, the character of the buildings and other structures is one of the most important determinants of the character of the neighborhood. In examining how Missing Middle housing would fit in a

neighborhood, the nature and consistency of the predominant architecture of the residential dwellings, their scale and their connection with the transportation network (sidewalks, streets and bike lanes) are all important considerations. For example, a three story walk-up apartment might appear to be an anomaly next to a modern group of row houses or craftsman style houses. Neighborhoods with particular memorable character may object to designs and building forms that appear alien to their neighborhood.

2. Constraints on Development

Besides the look and feel of the built environment, the existence of building restrictions, such as those present in historical preservation zones and the value of open spaces must be considered. Also, the predominant condition of buildings, such as the existence of functionally obsolescent or blighted structures would be important considerations in assessing the impact of new types of Missing Middle housing.

3: Heights and Scale

Multiple story structures, such as three story walk-up apartments, in an area of single story structures would look out of place and similarly, a group of tiny houses next to 4,000 square foot structures would appear ridiculous. Contrastingly, smaller homes and ADUs might fit well into a neighborhood where 700-900 square foot pre -WWII cottages or small modern structures predominate.

4. Impact of Buildings on access to light and Air

Excessive clustering of buildings can damage resident's access to natural night which is especially a problem in the Northwest. The impact of high buildings through shadowing of existing structures, inadequate setbacks or small lot dimensions can result in excessive crowding, diminished air circulation, and thus be undesirable for residents in neighborhoods.

5. Different Types of Apartment Buildings

Apartment types vary widely from narrow in-fill apartments, such as railroad or shotgun style apartments to row houses, mixed use structures with apartments on upper stories, courtyard or garden style apartments or any combination of the above. In some communities, we are seeing "stacked townhouses" which are four story townhouse structures consisting of one townhouse on the first two stories and another townhouse on the 3rd and 4th stories. Depending on the predominant type of housing (one story ramblers, two story single family dwellings, townhouses), the proposed types of apartment can be a good or bad fit into the existing building architecture.

6. Predominant sizes of Buildings

ADUs and Tiny Houses may fall below the established range of minimum sizes for single family housing. Depending upon the number of occupants in a small or tiny structure, health can be compromised due to excessive overcrowding. Also, the preservation of property values and thereby, the tax base of the community is another non-aesthetic consideration which has led jurisdictions to propose minimum building sizes.

B. Environment (Tree Canopy and Plantings in a Neighborhood)

The second element of neighborhood character is the natural setting, including the degree of planting and tree coverage. . A heavily wooded subdivision where the man-made structures are covered by extensive tree

cover or with a predominate form of landscaping can impact how a particular type of land use fits into a neighborhood. Such a neighborhood would be more likely to accommodate smaller structures within the treed area but removal of most of the trees to construct a series of three story walk-up apartments would severely disrupt the appearance of the neighborhood.

Also, topography can result in special features that are prized in a neighborhood such as views of a city, mountains or bodies of water. Tree cover has other impacts besides aesthetics providing living space for animals and thereby promoting biodiversity, absorbing stormwater and preventing run-off while absorbing carbon dioxide from the air. Some neighborhoods already include critical areas ordinances or other land restrictions to protect the environment which could restrict Missing Middle housing types.

C. Subdivision of the Land in a Neighborhood

1. Size and Range of Land Parcel Size

Many Olympia neighborhoods were divided and the buildings constructed parcel by parcel over the course of decades. This is even true of some planned unit developments, such as the Goldcrest Neighborhood in West Olympia where the neighborhood fully developed in stages over a 25 year period. Like many small communities, Olympia and its neighborhoods change slowly especially given the costs and constraints of major land use changes.

When evaluating the existing built environment, the predominance and range of lot/parcel sizes, lot orientations etc. can have a significant impact on how Missing Middle housing fits into the community. For example, the presence of undeveloped larger parcels in a neighborhood of similar size lots might present an opportunity to create a mini-village of town houses. On the other hand, a neighborhood where there is a more orderly spacing of buildings, setbacks and the repetition of building forms might be less suitable.

2. Current Average Density

Besides the subdivision of land itself, the nature of the built environment (dense urban, suburban) is an important consideration in this analysis. A neighborhood with row or homes placed on small lots would be a good fit for ADUs and other smaller structures which would blend in.

D. Topography

1. Land Slopes and Features

Neighborhoods vary greatly in the presence of physical features such as ridges, terraces, plains or slopes. A neighborhood with steeper slopes might allow housing with high floor area ratios which do not dominate or overshadow adjoining lower height structures. Contrastingly, a neighborhood with flat terrain needs to consider the line of sight impact, changes in viewsheds etc.

E. Impacts of Missing Middle Housing on Existing Residents

Increased housing density will almost unavoidably result in an increase in automobile traffic, increased noise and automobile related issues, such as street parking and congestion. When considering in-fill or higher density housing, there are other factors to consider such as the impact of infill on existing owner's privacy or other detriments to the existing community.

F. Transportation and Infrastructure

1. Parcel and Neighborhood Transportation Access

The condition of the existing street network, whether it is operating at capacity or has the ability to handle additional traffic is another key feature of a neighborhood character calculus. Some street patterns, such as those with high connectivity to other neighborhoods can accommodate more traffic while neighborhoods with cul de sacs, private roads and low connectivity might be challenged by increased growth in the number of structures. Roads and road networks are also important dividing lines or in some cases, how the neighborhood identifies itself (e.g., Cain Road Neighborhood Association).

2. City Infrastructure

There are neighborhoods in the city where central sewerage systems have not been fully extended and the use of septic tanks has environmental impacts, especially where septic tanks are near bodies of water. Significant growth in such areas would exacerbate the existing situation and for health reasons, the city might not want to allow build new structures on lots of insufficient size for individual water and sewerage systems.

V. Method for Quantifying Neighborhood Character in a Particular Context

1. Evaluating the Qualitative Neighborhood Character Elements

Exhibit A contains a framework to assess the elements of neighborhood character in a standard analytical manner. A simplified Likert scale has been used to assign values to these qualitative elements of neighborhood character. Equal weight was given to all of the six elements of neighborhood character but the various elements can be assigned different weights. Also, new components under each element can be added. The current model has 15 sample components under the six elements and each component is assigned a score from 1-3.

2. Applying the Neighborhood Character Scores to Neighborhoods

Neighborhoods with high character scores would be less suitable for the insertion of the wide range of missing middle housing than those with lesser scores. Also, land use officials should look at the proposed type of development in relation to the existing built environment. A series of townhouses on a side road not visible from an existing collector street would be less intrusive than if placed on the main collector street. Olympia's neighborhoods differ substantially from one another so judgement will have to be exercised to decide if Missing Middle housing is appropriate.

VI. Conclusions

The Missing Middle effort to increase housing choice in Olympia's neighborhoods must be implemented in such a way that neighborhood character and livability is maintained for existing residents. Neighborhood character can be defined and analyzed so that land use approvals are made using a process that considers buildings, the environment, the subdivision of land, topography, impacts on existing residents and transportation. Since each Olympia neighborhood is unique, subarea planning would be a far better method rather than imposing uniform density standards for Olympia's neighborhoods.

Exhibit A Sample Model for Assessing Neighborhood Character

Table One: Neighborhood Character Elements and Components

Neighborhood Character Analysis	High 3	Medium 2	Low 1
Buildings			
Presence of Architectural Features	>75%	>50% and <75%	<50%
Standard Building Rhythm and Order	>75%	>50% and <75%	<50%
Historic Preservation Zone	>75%	>50% and <75%	<50%
Existing Missing Middle Housing types of Housing	<25%	>50% and <75%	>75%
Potential For Excessive Crowding	>75%	>50% and <75%	<50%
Environment			
Tree Cover; landscaping	>75%	>50% and <75%	<50%
Views	Multiple	Single	None
Subdivision of Land			
Uniformity of Parcel Sizes	>75%	>50% and <75%	<50%
Cohesive Block Configuration (CBC)	>75%	>50% and <75%	<50%
Parcel Accessibility (PA)	>75%	>50% and <75%	<50%
Topography			
Presence of Land Slopes or Ridges	>75%	>50% and <75%	<50%
Impact on Existing Residents			
Potential For Increased Noise and Loss of Privacy	>75%	>50% and <75%	<50%
Potential for Insufficient Street Parking	>75%	>50% and <75%	<50%
Roads			
Number of Connections	Multiple	Single	None
Cohesive Street Presence (CSP)	Multiple	Single	None
Scores			
Range of 35-45	Low Missing Middle Potential		
Range of 25-35	Medium Missing Middle Potential		
Less Than 25	High Missing Middle Potential		