



“Character” as described in the Comprehensive Plan

The term “Character” is used 106 times in the Comprehensive Plan. The term is used in regard to the natural environment or shoreline areas, but it is often used in regard to the built environment as well. When discussing the built environment it is often used in reference to historic character or neighborhood character. Those terms are not defined, with the exception of shoreline character and characterization, which have specific meanings under the Shoreline Management Act.

Part C of the 2021 Comprehensive Plan Amendments includes proposed language to expand upon the meaning of neighborhood character. The intention of Part C is to increase equity and inclusion in Olympia’s Comprehensive Plan. Most of the changes proposed are related to terminology – like replacing the word citizen with community member or resident; or using gender neutral pronouns.

One of the proposed changes in Part C is specific to neighborhood character. The proposed new language states:

Our community defines “neighborhood character” as accessible, sustainable, and culturally inclusive neighborhoods. These are defined as:

Accessible: Includes ADA compliancy, multi-mobility, and housing affordability.

Sustainable: Promotes a healthy environment, a diverse and resilient local economy, and historic preservation, including, reuse, and adaptability of existing buildings.

Culturally inclusive: Recognizes, supports and promotes diverse housing types, strong arts and historic preservation,; and the various contributions of diverse Olympians to the built environment and to our cultural heritage past and present.

In order to consider the proposed language, city staff looks to the review and evaluation criteria outlined in Chapter 18.59 of the Olympia Municipal Code, specific to Comprehensive Plan Amendments. Staff also reviewed use of the term “character” throughout the plan, in order to consider the applicability of the term and to develop staff’s recommendation to the Planning Commission.

While not exhaustive, the excerpts below provide examples of how the term character is used in the Comprehensive Plan, primarily in regard to residential neighborhoods. Because the focus of this review is on residential neighborhoods and the built environment, the chapters of the plan staff focused on are the Land Use & Urban Design and Transportation chapters.

Staff’s recommendation is provided at the end of the document.

Plan Excerpts (Emphasis added by underlining and **highlighting**)

LAND USE & URBAN DESIGN CHAPTER

Page 102

General Land Use and Design

To achieve our vision of Olympia while accommodating our share of the region's population, we need to plan for quantity at the same time as we pursue quality. Such a community is one in which pattern and mix of land uses supports healthy lifestyles, such as walking to nearby services instead of driving. We need to consider the implications of climate change, and how we can minimize our community's contribution. We must be prepared to adapt our built environment as resources change, while preserving key elements of Olympia's architectural and cultural heritage. At the same time, we need to consider the **character** of Olympians today, and those of the future. The needs and interests of a more diverse, more urban, and generally older population will differ from those of today.

Olympia was once a port-oriented community with a central business district and compact single-family neighborhoods. Now, its land-use pattern is more suburban, with commercial development taking place outside of downtown, and lower-density neighborhoods with fewer street connections. Over the next 20 years, as Olympia becomes a more urban place, the pattern of land use and design of urban areas will change as we accommodate an expanding population while retaining our community's **character** and heritage.

This Plan envisions gradually increasing densities in Olympia accompanied by attractive streets and buildings arranged for the convenience of pedestrians. The location, mix and relationship of land uses to each other and to our streets will be crucial as will be the **character** of commercial and residential areas, parks, and open spaces. The Plan envisions new development that will reinforce the community's identity, urban design preferences, and historic form. Selected major streets will gradually transform into attractive, higher density, mixed residential and commercial "urban corridors" with frequent transit service.

Pages 103-104

The purpose of the goals and policies below is to direct land use patterns, densities, and design standards which:

- 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
- Provide space for parks, open spaces, and other community facilities
- Protect views and features of the community's landscape valued by the public

Land Use Goals (e.g. GL1, GL2) and Policies (PL3.5, PL6.2) that mention "character"

GL1 Land use patterns, densities and site designs are sustainable and support decreasing automobile reliance.

GL2 Buildings, commercial and industrial processes, and site designs use energy efficiently.

GL3 Historic resources are a key element in the overall design and establishment of a sense of place in Olympia.

PL3.5 Encourage development that is compatible with historic buildings and neighborhood **character**, and that includes complementary design elements such as mass, scale, materials, setting, and setbacks.

GL4 Neighborhoods take pride in their historic identity.

GL5 Historic preservation is achieved in cooperation with all members of the community and is integrated into City decision-making processes.

GL6 Community beauty is combined with unique neighborhood identities.

PL6.2 The design review process should recognize differences in the city with the objective of maintaining or improving the **character** and livability of each area or neighborhood.

GL7 Urban green space is available to the public and located throughout the community and incorporates natural environments into the urban setting, which are easily accessible and viewable so that people can experience nature daily and nearby.

GL8 Community views are protected, preserved, and enhanced.

GL9 Built and natural environmental designs discourage criminal behavior.

GL10 Industry and related development with low environmental impact is well-located to help diversify the local economy.

GL11 Adequate commercial land conveniently serves local and regional trade areas.

GL12 Commercial areas are attractive, functional and appealing.

PL12.10 Ensure that business signs identify the business but do not create visual clutter or dominate the **character** of the area; require the use of low or façade-mounted signs where possible.

GL13 Attractive urban corridors of mixed uses are established near specified major streets.

PL13.7 Designate different categories of corridors generally as follows:

- Areas nearest downtown along Harrison Avenue east of Division Street and the upper portions of the State Street/Fourth Avenue corridor to the intersection of Fourth Avenue and Pacific Avenue should blend travel modes with priority for pedestrian, bicycle and transit systems. These areas should provide for a mix of low intensity professional offices, commercial uses and multifamily buildings forming a continuous and pedestrian-oriented edge along the arterial streets. There will be a 35 feet height limit if any portion of the building is within 100' from a single-family residential zone, provided that the City may establish an additional height bonus for residential development except in areas adjacent to a designated historic district.
- The area along Harrison Avenue west from the vicinity of Division Street to Cooper Point Road - and the portions of Martin Way and Pacific Avenues from Lilly Road to the intersection of Fourth Avenue and Pacific Avenue - will transition away from cars being the primary transportation mode to a more walkable environment, where bicycling and transit are also encouraged. Redevelopment of the area will create more density and new buildings that gradually create a continuous street edge and more pedestrian-friendly streetscape.
- The outer portions of the urban corridors west of the vicinity of the Capital Mall and east of Lilly Road will primarily be accessed by motor vehicles with provisions for pedestrian and bicycle travel; gradual transition from existing suburban **character** is to form continuous pedestrian-friendly streetscapes, but more regulatory flexibility

will be provided to acknowledge the existing suburban nature of these areas. (See Capital Mall special area below.)

GL14 Olympia’s neighborhoods provide housing choices that fit the diversity of local income levels and lifestyles. They are shaped by thorough public planning processes that involve citizens, neighborhoods, and city officials.

PL14.3 Preserve and enhance the **character** of existing established Low density Neighborhoods. Disallow medium or high-density development in existing Low-density Neighborhood areas except for Neighborhood Centers.

Housing Section of Land Use & Urban Design Chapter

Adequate and affordable housing is critical to a healthy community. The Growth Management Act directs each community to plan for it by:

- Encouraging affordable housing for all economic segments of the population
- Promoting a variety of residential densities and housing types
- Encouraging preservation of existing housing stock
- Identifying sufficient land for housing, including government assisted housing, housing for low-income families, manufactured housing, multi-family housing, group homes, and foster-care facilities

The strategies of this chapter depend on well-formulated design standards to promote flexibility and stimulate innovation while preserving and enhancing the **character** of neighborhoods. We seek to establish and encourage diversity in housing opportunities and link diverse neighborhoods. With a strong foundation in preserving our heritage, our community can incorporate new housing and other developments in a manner that continues our legacy of well-planned neighborhoods. The housing goals and policies below provide a framework for residential land uses in Olympia’s area. See the City’s related programs for supporting affordable housing in the Public Services chapter.

PL16.9 In all residential areas, allow small cottages and townhouses, and one accessory housing unit per home -- all subject to siting, design and parking requirements that ensure neighborhood **character** is maintained.

GL19 Downtown’s historic character and significant historic buildings, structures, and sites are preserved and enhanced.

PL19.2 Minimize damage to significant historic features or **character** during rehabilitation projects.

Neighborhoods

This section contains the goals and policies that will protect and improve the **character** and livability of our established neighborhoods and shape our new neighborhoods. All of the city's neighborhoods are envisioned as places where many features are available within a ten-minute walk. A variety of housing types located along pleasant, pedestrian-oriented streets will provide quality living opportunities. Most housing will be single family detached homes, but higher-density housing will be available near major streets and commercial areas to take advantage of transit, other services, and employment opportunities. Housing types and densities will be dispersed throughout the city to minimize social problems sometimes associated with isolating people of similar means and lifestyles.

Each neighborhood should have:

- Narrow, tree-lined streets that are easy and interesting to use for walking, bicycling, and travel by transit
- A system of open space and trails with a neighborhood park
- A readily-accessible elementary school or other place of public assembly
- Diverse housing types that accommodate varying income levels, household sizes, and lifestyles
- Sufficient housing densities to support frequent transit service and sustain neighborhood businesses
- A 'neighborhood center' with businesses serving area residents

A large portion of Olympia's residents are to live within a quarter-mile of a neighborhood center. These centers will be focal points of neighborhoods. Although they will vary by location, they generally should contain small scale convenience and service businesses, a transit stop and a neighborhood park and be bounded by moderate or high-density housing. These neighborhood centers will serve as activity hubs or small-scale town squares that foster social interaction and a sense of community and accommodate nearby residents' routine shopping needs.

Where possible, a network of walking and biking routes that provide both recreational and commuting opportunities will connect these neighborhood centers to parks, schools, and downtown. To minimize traffic impacts and provide for transit service, these centers will be near major streets. Approximate locations for these centers are shown on the [Future Land Use Map](#).

Although neighborhoods will have some common features, each is unique. Recognizing this, the City envisions a public process where the needs of specific neighborhoods can be individually addressed. This process is described in the Public Participation Chapter and will focus on twelve planning areas. And, as described below, site-specific plans will be prepared for a few select other areas of the community. Managing these areas well will be critical to the success of this Comprehensive Plan and deserves extraordinary attention.

GL20 Development maintains and improves neighborhood character and livability.

PL20.1 Require development in established neighborhoods to be of a type, scale, orientation, and design that maintains or improves the **character**, aesthetic quality, and livability of the neighborhood.

GL21 Neighborhood centers are the focal point of neighborhoods and villages.

PL21.4 Allow neighborhood center designs that are innovative and provide variety, but that ensure compatibility with adjoining uses. Consider appropriate phasing, scale, design and exterior materials, as well as glare, noise and traffic impacts when evaluating compatibility. Require that buildings primary access directly from street sidewalks and be oriented toward the neighborhood and any adjacent park or green. Require that signage be consistent with neighborhood **character**.

Appendix A - Future Land Use Map Designations

The land use designations of the Future Land Use Map are described below and summarized in the Future Land Use Designations Table. Note that those indicated as symbols on the Future Land Use Map generally are not to exceed ten acres each.

Low-Density Neighborhoods. This designation provides for low-density residential development, primarily single-family detached housing and lowrise multi-family housing, in densities ranging from twelve units per acre to one unit per five acres depending on environmental sensitivity of the area. Where environmental constraints are significant, to achieve minimum densities extraordinary clustering may be allowed when combined with environmental protection. Barring environmental constraints, densities of at least four units per acre should be achieved. Supportive land uses and other types of housing, including accessory dwelling units, townhomes and small apartment buildings, may be permitted. Specific zoning and densities are to be based on the unique **characteristics** of each area with special attention to stormwater drainage and aquatic habitat. Medium Density Neighborhood Centers are allowed within Low Density Neighborhoods. Clustered development to provide future urbanization opportunities will be required where urban utilities are not readily available.

TRANSPORTATION CHAPTER EXCERPTS

There can be challenges with making street connections. Topography and environmentally sensitive areas can make certain street connections infeasible. Some street connections and the resulting changes to traffic patterns have the potential to affect neighborhood **character** or disproportionately impact some residents. The City will balance decisions about the value of a street connection with potential impacts to the unique geography, **character** or historical context of a residential neighborhood. In these cases, policies help guide the analysis of a street

connection. When street connections are not made for motor vehicle access, priority will be given to making a connection for bicyclists, pedestrians, emergency vehicles and transit.

GT5 Street connections to existing residential areas and in environmentally sensitive areas will be carefully examined before a decision is made to create a connection for motor vehicle traffic.

PT5.2 Carefully examine proposed street connections to existing residential neighborhoods. The developer, City, or County will analyze the street connection with the involvement of affected neighborhoods and stakeholders. Consideration will be given to the unique neighborhood **character** and context, particularly any direct impacts of a street connection on established neighborhoods. This analysis will determine whether or not to construct the street connection for motor vehicle traffic. Affected neighborhoods and other stakeholders will be consulted before a final decision is made and be involved in identification of any potential mitigation measures. As appropriate, this evaluation will include:

- Effects on the overall city transportation system
- Effects on reduced vehicle miles travelled and associated greenhouse gases
- Opportunities for making additional connections that would reduce neighborhood impacts of the connection being evaluated
- Impacts on directness of travel for pedestrians, bicyclists, transit users, and motorists
- Impacts on directness of travel for emergency-, public-, and commercial service vehicles
- An assessment of travel patterns of the larger neighborhood area and volumes at nearby major intersections
- An assessment of traffic volumes at the connection and whether projected volumes are expected to exceed the typical range for that classification of street
- Bicycle and pedestrian safety
- Noise impacts and air pollution
- Social justice issues and any impacts on the unique **character** of a neighborhood or effects on affordability of housing
- Likelihood of diverting significant cross-town arterial traffic on to local neighborhood streets
- Effectiveness of proposed traffic-calming measures
- The cost of a street connection and the cost of any alternative approach to meeting transportation needs if a street connection is not made
- Consideration of the information in Appendix A of this chapter

System Capacity Section

One of the ways we gauge the quality of a community is how easily we get around. No one likes getting stuck in traffic. In Olympia, we are looking for new ways to address congestion - ways that retain the human-scale **character** of our streets - instead of adding more lanes.

GT8 Impacts of new development on the transportation system are addressed by establishing level of service standards that indicate when improvements are needed.

PT8.2 Determine the need for, and feasibility of, motor vehicle capacity improvements, particularly widening the street. Consider the types of streets and connectivity of the street network in the area, environmental impacts, the impacts on the walkability and **character** of the area, cost, and physical constraints.

The term character is used in more places throughout the Plan. The uses above are thought to be the ones likely to be most related to defining neighborhood character in regard to the Comprehensive Plan Amendment application under consideration in 2021.

Staff reviewed places where certain physical attributes are noted when used to refer to neighborhood character. Potential identification of what is included in defining “character” (emphasis is added by underlining and **highlighting**):

PL3.5 Encourage development that is compatible with historic buildings and neighborhood **character**, and that includes complementary design elements such as mass, scale, materials, setting, and setbacks.

The strategies of this chapter depend on well-formulated design standards to promote flexibility and stimulate innovation while preserving and enhancing the **character** of neighborhoods. We seek to establish and encourage diversity in housing opportunities and link diverse neighborhoods. With a strong foundation in preserving our heritage, our community can incorporate new housing and other developments in a manner that continues our legacy of well-planned neighborhoods.

PL16.9 In all residential areas, allow small cottages and townhouses, and one accessory housing unit per home -- all subject to siting, design and parking requirements that ensure neighborhood **character** is maintained.

Neighborhoods

This section contains the goals and policies that will protect and improve the **character** and livability of our established neighborhoods and shape our new neighborhoods. All of the city’s neighborhoods are envisioned as places where many features are available within a ten-minute walk. A variety of housing types located along pleasant, pedestrian-oriented streets will provide

quality living opportunities. Most housing will be single family detached homes, but higher-density housing will be available near major streets and commercial areas to take advantage of transit, other services, and employment opportunities. Housing types and densities will be dispersed throughout the city to minimize social problems sometimes associated with isolating people of similar means and lifestyles.

(Note: Housing types and density are not the same thing. Duplexes, triplexes, and other housing units can occur at low and medium densities. Olympia defines low-density as twelve units or less per acre).

Although neighborhoods will have some common features, each is unique. Recognizing this, the City envisions a public process where the needs of specific neighborhoods can be individually addressed.

GL20 Development maintains and improves neighborhood character and livability.

PL20.1 Require development in established neighborhoods to be of a type, scale, orientation, and design that maintains or improves the **character**, aesthetic quality, and livability of the neighborhood.

Low-Density Neighborhoods. This designation provides for low-density residential development, primarily single-family detached housing and lowrise multi-family housing, in densities ranging from twelve units per acre to one unit per five acres depending on environmental sensitivity of the area. Where environmental constraints are significant, to achieve minimum densities extraordinary clustering may be allowed when combined with environmental protection. Barring environmental constraints, densities of at least four units per acre should be achieved. Supportive land uses and other types of housing, including accessory dwelling units, townhomes and small apartment buildings, may be permitted. Specific zoning and densities are to be based on the unique **characteristics** of each area with special attention to stormwater drainage and aquatic habitat. Medium Density Neighborhood Centers are allowed within Low Density Neighborhoods. Clustered development to provide future urbanization opportunities will be required where urban utilities are not readily available.

Excerpts where attributes for neighborhood character are described:

- complementary design elements such as mass, scale, materials, setting, and setbacks
- well-formulated design standards
- siting, design and parking requirements
- A variety of housing types located along pleasant, pedestrian-oriented streets will provide quality living opportunities.
- type, scale, orientation, and design

How does the code address these neighborhood attributes:

Attribute	OMC Code Section(s)	Notes
Complementary design elements such as mass, scale, materials, setting, and setbacks	18.100-18.180	Primary design review standards for residential neighborhoods - OMC 18.175
Well-formulated design standards	18.100-18.180	Primarily through OMC 18.175
Siting, design and parking requirements	18.04, 18.05, 18.06, 18.38.100, 18.100-18.180	Primarily through OMC 18.04, 18.38, and 18.175
Variety of housing types located along pleasant, pedestrian-oriented streets will provide quality living opportunities	18.04 and Chapter 4 of the EDDS	EDDS stands for Engineering Design and Development Standards
Type, scale, orientation, and design	18.04, 18.05, 18.06, 18.100-18.180	Primarily through OMC 18.04 and 18.175 for most neighborhoods

Staff believes the context proposed in Part C of the proposed amendments shows the intent that Olympia welcomes people of all “walks of life” to its neighborhoods, and the text does help to promote more equity and inclusion in all neighborhoods.

However, staff believes an additional bullet point should be added to the list of what neighborhood character includes, at least regarding the physical attributes that are identified in other places throughout the plan.

Proposed bullet point to be added:

Physical characteristics of neighborhoods are not stagnant and will change over time. Consideration of neighborhood character will be made for attributes such as design elements of buildings (mass, scale, materials, setting, and setbacks), parking, parks and open space, provision of City utilities, street grids and connections, and street trees. These will be balanced with other plan goals and policies, such as increasing the variety of housing types and providing pedestrian oriented streets, and implemented through the City’s development regulations.
