



August 9, 2021

Dear Olympia Planning Commissioners,

Thank you for the opportunity to answer your questions about the proposed amendments to the Comprehensive Plan. We value your dedication to this community and your contributions to shape the place we live and love.

The question brought to our attention is regarding the impetus for this action. Why are these changes being brought forward at this time? We have been receiving a strong call for equity in Olympia. We recognize the need to look broadly across our policies to create change that will bring about justice and inclusivity. While we could have waited until the next periodic update of the Comprehensive Plan in four years, we felt compelled to listen to our community and act. As some on the Planning Commission have named, the undefined term of “neighborhood character” has been used to resist changes that seek to undo the harm caused by exclusionary housing policies. While these policies have specifically excluded people of color, they have broadly impacted all people of lower socioeconomic status.

This update is also a process improvement. It is problematic to have undefined language in any policy if it serves as a source of ambiguity and debate. The term “neighborhood character” is linked to the Engineering Design and Development Standards (EDDS), which give our staff direction on how to evaluate new development. Not having this term defined has been a hole in our community’s vision. It is our responsibility to correct this issue in our policy, since many more decisions that shape our city will be made before the next periodic update to the Comprehensive Plan.

It was also asked – why not just remove “neighborhood character” altogether? We considered this idea. Our original inquiry to staff included the possibility to either remove or define this term. Ultimately, because this term is woven throughout several sections of the Comprehensive Plan, is tied to the EDDS, and is identified in the Growth Management Act, we decided that it would be more appropriate to define this term than remove it. We also received feedback from the Deputy State Historic Preservation Officer, who encouraged us to consider that diverse communities also have character. We recognize that “neighborhood character” is important and can be used to build a stronger, more inclusive Olympia that will help us realize the goals of our Comprehensive Plan.

We find it important to include equity and the history of exclusion at the top of the values and visions section of the Comprehensive Plan. The details of this history are included in our recently approved Housing Action Plan. Environmental sustainability and the economy have long been priorities of the city. Because of these goals, we have beautiful parks, strong environmental practices, a vibrant local economy, and a cherished downtown. **Equity has never been included in the Comprehensive Plan as a value of our city.** For that reason, our work on the environment, economy, and every action of our city has disproportionately benefited those who have had greater access to residency in Olympia. Because people have been intentionally excluded from our community,

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they are impacted in ways far greater than housing alone. By naming the history of exclusion at the very top of our values and vision section, we are acknowledging the role that government has played and are sending a message that we are committed to change.

There was also a question from the Planning Commission as to whether there is a middle ground on the language that we have proposed. Planning staff have included additional language in the proposed amendment that will help guide their work at the city. It has been reviewed by the Equity and Inclusion Coordinator and brought to the attention of founding members of the soon-to-be-formed Social Justice and Equity Commission. It has also been evaluated and refined with input from the Heritage Commission. We are aware that the Coalition of Neighborhood Associations has also proposed language for your consideration. At the heart of this discussion is the question: what are the desirable characteristics of our neighborhoods? We welcome your recommendations on how we could answer this question to create a more just, equitable, and inclusive community.

Sincerely,

Councilmembers Yến Huỳnh, Dani Madrone, and Jim Cooper