

Director's Report and Recommendation Urban Center College Housing Code Amendments

Purpose and Background

The purpose of this proposal is to define a pathway within City master plan regulations for earlier consideration of student housing proposals at community colleges in Urban Centers. It would allow the “minor amendment” process to be used to update the existing master plan at Seattle Central College (SCC), the only college that would meet the criteria. Under the proposal, one previously-unanticipated student housing development could be added to an existing campus master plan during its lifetime.

Seattle's codes define SCC as a “Major Institution” that must have a master plan addressing long-term anticipated future development. Large institutions like hospitals and colleges typically need facility renovations and expansions over time to support their modern health and education programs. Through the master plan process, the institutions must consider how their planned facilities for the next 15-20 years will relate to their campus setting and the neighborhood. The institution also may request adjustments to zoning regulations in a master plan, to accommodate development of new buildings while maintaining compatibility with surroundings.

Chapter 23.69 of the Land Use Code has Seattle's major institution regulations that include guidance on when master plans are required, types of plan amendments, and the public processes involved in preparing and revising master plans. These include City Council approval of new master plans, and prior to that, citizen advisory committee review and recommendations on a number of processes.

SCC is a public college that is part of the Washington State Community and Technical Colleges system. These colleges focus on basic education, workforce education, and students preparing for academic transfers to universities.

Summary of Proposal

The proposal would update the Land Use Code for major institution master plan actions, to support an easier amendment process to allow the addition of housing. It would newly allow a single previously-unanticipated housing development at community colleges in Urban Centers to be approvable as a minor amendment to an existing master plan. The only college that currently matches these criteria is SCC.

This minor amendment provides a pathway for housing that could be used just once per master plan period, which would support a degree of regulatory flexibility and adaptability to achieve student housing options sooner. Otherwise, SCC would need to complete a new campus-wide master plan process before new student housing could be permitted.

The proposal would:

- 1) Add a statement saying that accommodating on-campus student housing at educational

Major Institutions is a purpose of the regulations in Chapter 23.69;

- 2) Allow a single housing development at a community college¹ in an Urban Center to not trigger the required creation of a whole new campus-wide Master Plan, and not be a “major amendment” to an existing Master Plan;
- 3) Allow this kind of housing development proposal to be evaluated as a “minor amendment” to an existing Master Plan;
- 4) Allow the floor area of this residential use (and other related uses in the building) to be exempt from the calculations of total development capacity of the major institution overlay zone, and the total amount of floor area permitted by the master plan. This would allow a housing development without causing an institution to alter its existing plans for other future developments already covered by the existing Master Plan;
- 5) Clarify that this kind of housing may be “affiliated” with the college, meaning that it does not have to only be housing “owned” by the college. This allows flexibility in ownership arrangements of the housing while ensuring it retains a relationship to the college.

Analysis

This section evaluates the proposal’s relationship to major institution master planning, its rationale, and policy considerations.

Relationship to Major Institution Master Plans

The current code’s approach to major institution regulations was established in 1990; prior versions originated in the 1970s. The main purposes relate to accommodating growth within a major institution’s campus while minimizing impacts on nearby areas and protecting the livability and vitality of those neighborhoods.

In order to effectively regulate the uses and development that would occur in major institutions, the codes in SMC Chapter 23.69 define permissible uses, development standards and other controls, and allow “Major Institution Overlay” (MIO) zones to be mapped. When included in an adopted master plan, the MIO zones define the allowances for major institutions to have higher height limits and denser sizes of future buildings, more than the basic zoning in an area.

The major institution master plan is a conceptual plan for growth of an individual institution, describing a long term anticipated development program, the specific development standards that will apply to its campus, and its transportation management program.

The Chapter 23.69 code has many details about processes for master plans. This includes steps for the approval of new master plans. It also explains what to do if an institution proposes revisions to the plan, and how to determine what are “exempt changes,” “major amendments,” or “minor amendments.” For example, exempt changes include small buildings or additions that are 12,000 square feet or less, or with 20 or fewer parking spaces, or changes in amount of floor space that is underground.

¹ This kind of college is part of the Washington State Community and Technical Colleges system.

Minor amendments include actions like: waiving a development standard or a master plan condition; other changes that are the minimum necessary and will not result in significantly greater impacts or be detrimental to public welfare; allowances to lease space nearby but outside an MIO zone; and actions that support neighborhood plan objectives.

Major amendments include: increases in height limits; changes to the boundary of an MIO zone; any change to a development standard that is less restrictive; additional demolition of housing that is beyond what was approved in a master plan; a change in a single-occupant vehicle goal of a transportation management program; a special use needing City Council approval that was not in an approved master plan; and updates to development programs that increase total gross floor area allowed or increased total parking spaces.

Relationship of this proposal:

These definitions of minor and major amendments are protectively worded, and in practice they are very limiting of what can qualify as a minor amendment. This has tended to prevent some possible actions from being proposed by institutions, even if they might objectively have merit. Also, even if an action might be pursuable as a major amendment to a master plan, the time involved and uncertainties about the outcomes of major amendment review processes can discourage an action from being proposed.

Because the master plans are in place for such a long period and are difficult to update, this means the institutions and the City do not have enough flexibility to efficiently respond to changes in public priorities and previously-unanticipated needs. This becomes more significant when recognizing that housing needs are now at the forefront of public interests, while several existing master plans are twenty years old.

The community and technical colleges' role in providing affordable educational opportunity is ever more important, and the college system's more recent interest in serving their students with campus housing opportunities is also compelling. Housing affordability and supply, growth management, and transportation mobility management are all vital public planning purposes, and yet SCC's master plan could not have anticipated the college's interest in housing, or this level of significant public interest in housing, back in 2002.

The newer systemic needs relating to housing at community and technical college campuses should be recognized as a significant exception to the major institution code's purposes. This justifies granting more flexibility and relief from the code's strict categories for minor and major amendments.

The proposal addresses these compelling needs by allowing such housing to be proposed as an addition to an existing master plan for a community college in an Urban Center, using the current "minor amendment" process. This provides a relatively efficient pathway for accommodating new housing that still abides by the established processes, which include input from a citizen advisory committee with public representation. All of the proposed code amendments work together to serve this purpose.

Policy Considerations

The proposal increases code flexibility to accommodate beneficial housing actions that could not previously be anticipated: The major institution code has proven to be thorough, rigorous, and protective of the public interest. However, for the narrow but compelling public interests related to promoting affordable housing for students, the code is currently not flexible enough to allow an efficient response for community colleges in Urban Centers. The proposal would remedy this gap.

The proposal would help expedite consideration of new student housing: Without approval of this legislation, the college would need a “major amendment” to its master plan or wait until they finish a new master plan. SCC is beginning to write a new campus master plan but that will take 2-4 years to complete, which would delay the timing for even beginning to permit new student housing.

Will not set a precedent: This action does not set a precedent for future major institution master plans. The City will still expect that new master plans define all parts of the institutions’ future development programs including housing. Also, there is not an expectation that institutions should be able to insert other kinds of non-housing development into an existing master plan. Rather, the existing code should continue to regulate a major institution’s general development program.

The proposal is narrowly defined: The proposal limits the added housing allowance to be only for community and technical colleges within Urban Centers. The only major institution that meets these criteria is Seattle Central College. (North Seattle College is not within an Urban Center and its leadership has not expressed an interest in having this proposal apply at their campus.) The Capitol Hill Urban Center is already dense and urban in nature, and can accommodate an additional housing development while also benefiting as a neighborhood from the increased presence of more student residents in its core.

The proposal allows for actions that are larger than the current actions defined by the “minor amendment” category: The proposal creates the possibility of an added housing development to a master plan, which is more than previously contemplated within the code’s assumptions about what is “minor.” However, the processes followed to approve a minor amendment would still address the topics of most interest, which would be a housing development’s compatibility with its surroundings and its degree of overall impacts. Also, a more holistic view should be taken about the prospective benefits of creating more student housing at the SCC campus, which would help support neighborhood vitality, transportation efficiencies, housing affordability, and growth management objectives that the City supports.

The proposal allows more flexibility in ownership arrangements: Many arrangements for who owns a housing development may be possible. The Land Use Code wording should be updated to allow the housing use to be “affiliated” with the college, but not necessarily “owned” by the college as a minimum code definition of the residential use.

If adopted, what next steps would the City require for a student housing development?

With approval of this legislation, any housing related master plan amendment and future housing proposal at SCC would still need to be approved by the SCC citizen advisory committee at a

public meeting. In addition, other land use and building permit approvals by SDCI would be needed, which would involve one or more public comment periods and likely additional citizen advisory committee meetings about building design.² SEPA review would also likely be required. These future forums will fulfill typical required public process purposes, including public comment and related citizen advisory committee deliberations that will help ensure a future development is compatible with the neighborhood. These steps would likely occur over the next year or so.

Comprehensive Plan Policies

The proposed action does not conflict with policy provisions for Major Institutions in the City's Comprehensive Plan. These policies recognize the rationale for preparing master plans for large institutions located within neighborhood settings, and accommodating zoning flexibility that relates to the institution's future development plans. Also, the policies seek to:

- maintain compatible conditions between the institutional and non-institutional uses nearby;
- avoid demolition of housing in surrounding areas (Policy LU 13.15);
- “*balance the need for major institutions to grow and change with the need to maintain the livability and vitality of neighboring areas*” (Policy LU 13.3); and
- require revisions to master plans or new master plans when a “*proposed major development...does not conform to the underlying zoning and is not included in an existing master plan.*” (Policy LU 13.8).

With the proposal, the Land Use Code would continue to require a revision to a master plan for a future housing development, within the framework of the existing minor amendment process. Such a development would be able to conform to the underlying zoning.

Selected Comprehensive Plan goals and policies include:

Land Use Element – Major Institutions

Land Use Goal LU G13: Encourage the benefits that major institutions offer the city and the region, including health care, educational services, and significant employment opportunities, while mitigating the adverse impacts associated with their development and geographic expansion.

Policies

LU 13.2: Support the coordinated growth of major institutions through conceptual master plans and the creation of major institution overlay districts. Use a master plan process to identify development standards for the overlay district that are specifically tailored to the major institution and the surrounding area.

LU 13.3: Balance the need for major institutions to grow and change with the need to maintain the livability and vitality of neighboring areas.

² Projects subject to review by a Major Institution's citizen advisory committee do not go through Design Review.

LU 13.5: Encourage community involvement in the development, monitoring, implementation, and amendment of major institution master plans, including the establishment of citizens' advisory committees that include community and major institution representatives.

LU 13.6: Allow the MIO to modify underlying zoning provisions and development standards, including use restrictions and parking requirements, in order to accommodate the changing needs of major institutions, provide development flexibility, and encourage a high-quality environment.

LU 13.8: Require either that a master plan be prepared or that the existing master plan be revised when a proposed major development that is part of a major institution does not conform to the underlying zoning and is not included in an existing master plan.

LU 13.10: Define as major institution uses those that are part of, or substantively related to, the major institution's central mission or that primarily and directly serve institution users, and allow these uses within the MIO district, in accordance with the development standards of the underlying zoning classifications or adopted master plan.

LU 13.18: Achieve a better relationship between residential, commercial, or industrial uses and the major institution's activities when considering rezones, while also trying to reduce or eliminate major land use conflicts.

Public Outreach and Notice

The SEPA environmental review for the proposal includes analysis and disclosure of impacts. During this process, the public will have opportunities for comment. Also, a public meeting of the Seattle Central College's Citizen Advisory Committee was held on October 11, 2021, that included a discussion of the proposal.

After the proposal has been transmitted to City Council, a public hearing on the proposed legislation will be scheduled before the Council's Land Use and Neighborhoods Committee in 2021 or early 2022. Additional opportunities to provide input will occur as the City Council deliberates on the proposal.

Recommendation

The SDCI Director recommends the proposed legislation to increase flexibility for new student housing at community colleges and technical colleges in Urban Centers.