Evolving Seattle's Growth Strategy

Seattle Planning Commission

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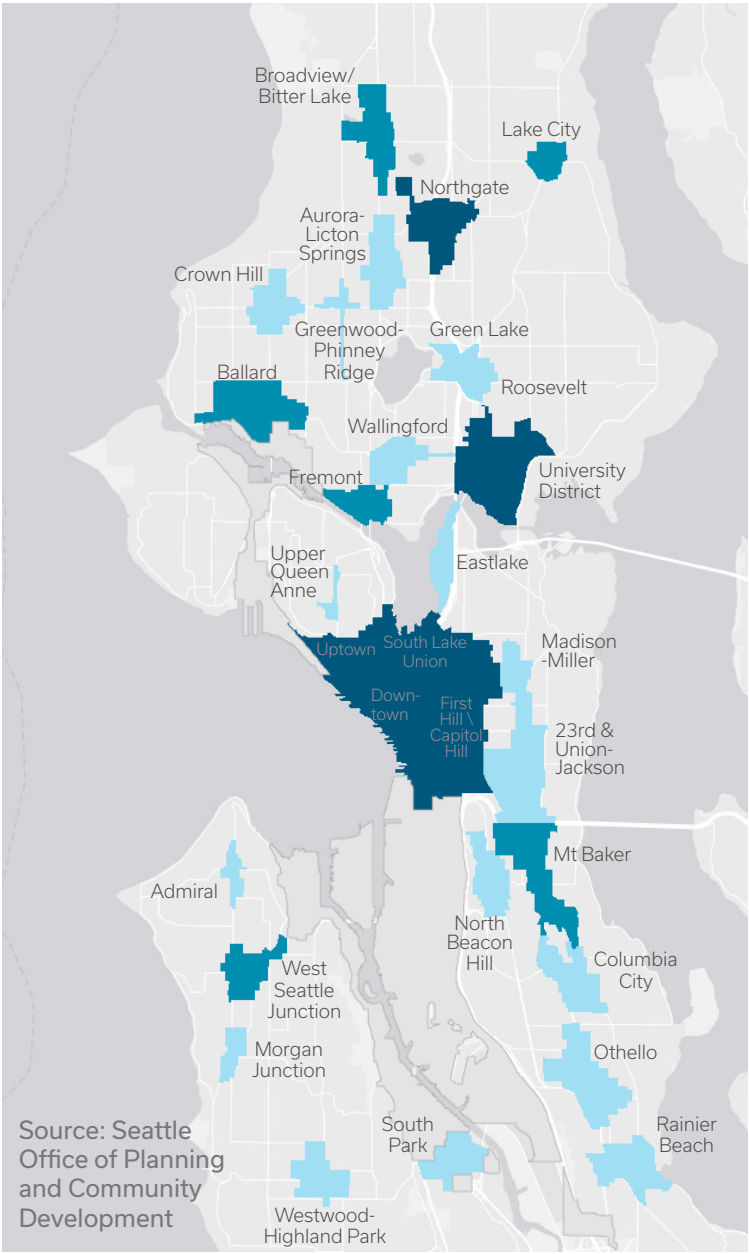


Source: Seattle Office of Planning and Community Development

Seattle's Urban Villages

- Urban Center
- Hub Urban Village
- Residential Urban Village

Photo: Seattle Parks and Recreation

After 25 years, how should Seattle's growth strategy evolve?

For two and a half decades Seattle and the Puget Sound Region have been growing. The pace of growth has accelerated over the past decade, with Seattle adding over 138,000 residents, since 2010, today approaching an estimated 747,300.[1] Such rapid growth means that policies guiding development have immediate impacts on Seattle's affordability, climate readiness, and quality of life.

Policies relating to growth are shaped by the Comprehensive Plan's growth strategy, which concentrates nearly all residential and mixed-use new construction into designated areas of the city referred to as Urban Villages (see map on previous page). These are locations with access to frequent transit and commercial services. This strategy has been successful in some regards. For example, locating people in close proximity to transit tends to encourage its use. Indeed, Seattle now has one of the highest rates of per capita transit ridership and is the only city in the country with expanding per capita ridership.[2] [3] However, there are negative consequences as well. We continue to see stark racial inequities in homeownership, employment, and health outcomes throughout the city.[4]

Construction and permitting data show that Urban Villages have added development and invited new neighbors, while areas outside of Urban Villages have been mostly shielded from growth, despite having many amenities that would support a higher quality of life for new neighbors.[5] This has disproportionately affected low-income communities, and communities of color, where many have been priced out of neighborhoods that have absorbed nearly all of the recent development.[6] These circumstances create an inconsistency between the City's commitments to reverse trends of racial inequity and the documented outcomes of City policies.[7] [8] This is a failing of the growth strategy in its current form, and falls well short of achieving the Seattle Race and Social Justice Initiative's goal to be a racially equitable and environmentally sustainable place for all.[9]

What is Comprehensive Planning?

Comprehensive plans describe high level goals and contain information about how and where development will happen in the city. They also describe how the City will support current and future residents through open space, utilities, human services, etc. Cities in Washington State are required to adopt updated Comprehensive Plans every eight years.

1. Goldman, M. (2019, July 1). *2019 Population Estimates Have Seattle Pushing 750,000 with Steady Growth.* The Urbanist.
2. Puget Sound Regional Council. (2018, June). *Puget Sound Trends.*
3. TransitCenter. (2019, February 11) *Who's on Board 2019: How to Win Back America's Transit Riders.*
4. Seattle 2035 Comprehensive Plan: Managing Growth to Become an Equitable and Sustainable City.
5. Seattle Planning Commission. (2018, December) *Neighborhoods for All.*
6. Ibid.
7. Seattle 2035 Comprehensive Plan: Managing Growth to Become an Equitable and Sustainable City.
8. Puget Sound Regional Council. (2018, June). Vision 2050: Housing Background Paper.
9. Seattle 2035 Comprehensive Plan: Managing Growth to Become an Equitable and Sustainable City.

As the City begins laying the groundwork for the next update of the Comprehensive Plan due in 2023, the Planning Commission believes it is critical to evaluate the ways in which the current growth strategy should evolve to address persistent racial inequities. Without intentional, targeted actions that repair historic and present harms, the enduring nature of racial inequities ensures they will be perpetuated.

The update of the Comprehensive Plan will include revisiting many aspects of the City's work. We focus this paper on three key areas that can promote racial equity, while shaping the future of a thriving, sustainable city:

1. **Housing affordability**. With Seattle rapidly becoming unaffordable to all but the highest earners, the next growth strategy must ensure Seattle welcomes people of all incomes.

2. **Climate Change**. Slowing, mitigating, and adapting to the impacts of climate change must be the foundation for decisions about our transportation networks and land use patterns.

3. **Livability**. Seattle will continue to get denser as we grow. The City cannot be a passive bystander but must take an active role in ensuring that our neighborhoods become even more livable-- and not less. More on what we mean by this in the following pages.

SEATTLE: THEN & NOW

1994 516,259 — 2018 744,955
Total Population

1990 20 Min. — 2018 27.5 Min.
Median Commute Time

1990 *$293,283 — 2019 $723,300
Median house price

1990 *$981 — 2019 $2,591
Median rental cost

1994 428,590 — 2018 602,142
Employment

1994 26% — 2018 31%
Percent of population who are people of color

1990 31% — 2018 61%
Percent of population with bachelors degree or higher

1997 *$3,366 — 2019 $11,207
Cost for 1 year of in-state college tuition

1980 - 1990 4.5% — 2010 - 2019 22.7%
Population growth rate

*2019 dollars

Addressing the history & legacy of racial inequity

A vision of a sustainable and racially equitable future must begin with an honest look at current conditions, and the actions that brought us here. Achieving racial equity requires a deep understanding of the complex systems that have produced racial inequities. While many of today's inequitable systems are inherited, it is nonetheless our responsibility to understand them, and to identify and enact remedies.

The land known today as the City of Seattle is the traditional and current territories of the Coast Salish people. The Coast Salish people still live on this land, but the land is now managed and controlled primarily by Western systems of governance. As colonial settlers occupied the land around the Salish Sea and displaced many of the indigenous people, they created and enforced ways of using land that benefited settlers, often at the expense of people living here before them. **Many Western systems of power and control explicitly excluded indigenous people and people of color from owning property and accessing resources in many areas of the city.**

Below is a list of some of the racially discriminatory policies whose lasting effects we must address. While this list is far from comprehensive, it captures key decisions and policies that promoted inequity:

- **The Point Elliott treaty** (signed in 1855, ratified by the US Federal Government in 1859) conveyed lands of the Coast Salish people to the United States Government.[10]

- Ten years later, the City passed an Ordinance **prohibited indigenous people from living within the city.**[11]

- During the same decade, many Chinese immigrants arrived in Seattle, helping build railroads that were essential to Seattle's economy, importing and exporting goods. **The Federal Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 banned Chinese people from entering the US and deported any who arrived after 1880.** It also prohibited Chinese people from owning property, which impacted their ability to prosper in Seattle.[12] The Immigration Act of 1924 had the same impact on Japanese Americans, prohibiting them from immigrating to the US. Additionally, during this time Alien Land laws prohibited immigrants from owning property, which negatively impacted Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Indian, and other South Asian communities.[13]

> "Be it ordained by the Board of Trustees of the Town of Seattle, That no Indian or Indians shall be permitted to reside, or locate their residences on any street, highway, land, or alley or any vacant lot in the town of Seattle"
>
> -City of Seattle Ordinance, 1865

10. HistoryLink. (2000, January). *Treaty of Point Elliott, 1855.*
11. Ott, Jennifer. (2014, December). Ordinance No. 5, calling for the removal of Indians from the town. HistoryLink.
12. Unknown. (Unknown). The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. Washington State Historical Society.
13. Grant, N. (2017). *White Supremacy and the Alien Land Laws of Washington State.* The Seattle Civil Rights & Labor History Project.

- At the turn of the century, cities began to use zoning as a new tool to **designate where people could live and own property based on the use of the property, as well as the person's race.**[14] Seattle worked closely with city planner Harland Bartholomew to write the City's first zoning plan in 1923.[15] While working in St. Louis, MO, Bartholomew had previously stated that the purpose of zoning was to prevent "colored people" from moving into the "more desirable residential neighborhoods."[16] By the time Seattle's zoning plan was adopted, the Supreme court had ruled that racial zoning was illegal. However, cities responded to these legal changes by removing language about race while continuing to use the substance of the laws that promoted segregation.[17]

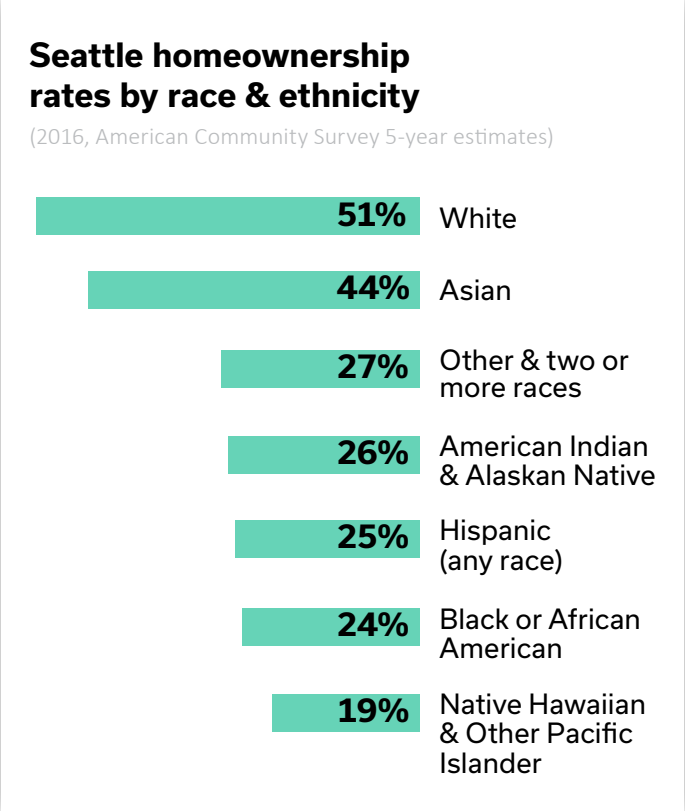
- In the 1930s the Home Owner's Loan Corporation (a government-sponsored corporation) drew redlining maps for over 200 cities, including Seattle, that dictated which neighborhoods could receive home loans. Areas where people of color were the predominant residents were labeled "hazardous" and the **Federal Housing Administration denied loans** in those neighborhoods.[18] This was not made illegal until the 1968 Fair Housing Act.

- Another federal policy that impacted the prosperity of Seattle's communities of color was the **Japanese American Internment in 1942** (Executive Order 9066).[19] Over 7,000 of Seattle's Japanese American residents were interned in concentration camps, the majority of whom were never able to recover the property or possessions they were forced to leave behind.[20]

- The Federal Government further perpetuated segregation through the G.I. Bill of 1944, in which **black military veterans across the nation were denied the opportunity to access GI funds** that would have helped them purchase homes.[21]

- The use of **racially restrictive covenants** also blocked people of color from owning homes. Covenants on the deeds of homes prevented sale to people of color, and in many cases prevented them from renting or occupying homes (unless they were employed by white residents). Covenants were eventually ruled unenforceable in 1948 by the US Supreme Court.[22]

- Less explicit, but still resulting in inequitable impacts, **the construction of transportation infrastructure (in particular, freeways in the 1960s) have regularly been built in areas where**



14. Wilson, M. H. (2019, May 21). *The Racist History of Zoning Laws.* Foundation for Economic Education.
15. A Zoning Program for Seattle, Prepared by Harland Bartholomew 1921. Record Series 1651-02 Box 1, Folder 1. Seattle Municipal Archives.
16. Rothstein, R. (2014, October 15). The Making of Ferguson. Economic Policy Institute.
17. Rothstein, R. (2017). *The Color of Law.* New York, NYLiveright Publishing Corporation.
18. Nelson, K. R. (unknown). *Mapping Inequality: Redlining in New Deal America.* Retrieved from https://dsl.richmond.edu/panorama/redlining/#loc=4/36.71/-96.93&opacity=0.8&text=bibliography.
19. Speidel, J. (2005). After Internment. The Seattle Civil Rights & Labor History Project.
20. Varner, N. (2017, April 4). Sold, Damaged, Stolen, Gone: Japanese American Property Loss During WWII. Densho Blog.
21. Callahan, D. (2013, November 11). How the GI Bill Left Out African Americans. Demos.
22. Silva, C. (unknown). Racial Restrictive Covenants: Neighborhood by neighborhood restrictions across King County. The Seattle Civil Rights & Labor History Project.

people of color were the majority of residents. This was especially common in Chinatowns nationwide. Seattle's Chinatown-International District is an example of this, having been disrupted by the construction of several infrastructure projects, including I-5, later I-90, and a transit station. Planning has begun for a new light rail station within the Chinatown-International District.

These (among other policies and practices) denied people of color access to home ownership, which is the country's most robust tool for wealth building. By the time most forms of explicit racial discrimination became illegal during the late 1960s, these policies had already **contributed to an inequitable access to wealth over several generations**, leaving white people with more access to housing, political power, and a wide array of other benefits from the systems put in place. This has caused **lasting racial and economic inequities that we see today, reinforced segregation, and created barriers for people of color to benefit from the city's economic growth.**[23]

Certainly, not all racial discrimination comes from past practices. There are also ongoing forms of racial discrimination in housing, one of which was studied by the Seattle office of Civil Rights (SOCR) in 2014. After testing 42 rental properties, SOCR found that 64% of them "showed evidence of different treatment" based on race.[24] These findings point to an ongoing need for proactive policy and enforcement that extent beyond developing additional housing units.

Despite expressing intent to address racial inequity, Seattle's existing land use and transportation policies and practices have done little to dismantle the legacy of segregation and racial injustice. In some cases, there are inequities that appear to be perpetuated by the current growth strategy. This suggests that the racial equity impacts of our current growth strategy are worthy of a deeper and more complete analysis than we can perform here. The City's Growth and Equity analysis in 2016 made visible many existing disparities that have been reinforced by the far-reaching impacts of the existing growth strategy. It is our intention to suggest opportunities for a growth strategy more aligned with the goal of achieving racial equity in Seattle.[25]

What does it mean to achieve racial equity?

In 2005, the City of Seattle began the Race and Social Justice initiative (RSJI), which has the long-term goals of "changing the underlying system that creates race-based disparities in our community and to achieve racial equity."

An example of racial inequity comes from a report by the Seattle Women's Commission, Losing Home, which showed that over half of the individuals with evictions filed against them were people of color in 2017, even though people of color are a less than a third of Seattle's total population. If racial equity was achieved in Seattle, it would mean that race would not be able to predict one's outcomes. For that example, it would mean race wouldn't predict one's likelihood of being evicted.

23. Traub, A.,Et al. (2016, June 21). The Racial Wealth Gap: Why Policy Matters. Demos.
24. Seattle Office of Civil Rights. (2014). City files charges against 13 property owners for alleged violations of rental housing discrimination.
25. City of Seattle Office of Community Planning and Development. (2016). Seattle 2035 Growth & Equity: Analyzing Impacts on Displacement and Opportunity Related to Seattle's Growth Strategy.

Seattle Streetcar, University Way, 1939. Photo: HistoryLink

Historical distribution of Seattle's growth

In the early 1890's Seattle established electric streetcar lines. Financial pressures and the introduction of the personal automobile contributed to the eventual decommissioning of the streetcar in the early 1940s. Maps of the network at its full extent show lines crisscrossing the city and traveling into neighborhoods, which helped cultivate the vibrant communities now living there.

Today, public transit to these areas is provided by King County Metro bus service, and neighborhood businesses built along the transit networks are supported by the density of neighbors made possible partly by small-scale multi-family housing built before the City restricted development to only allow single, detached homes.

Photo by Jachan Devol on Unsplash

Affordability, climate change, and livability

The growth strategy is an element of the City's Comprehensive Plan, originally developed in 1994. The strategy manages the projected growth that Seattle is directed to accommodate per the Washington State Growth Management Act. In the past quarter century the growth strategy has had small revisions through updates and amendments to the Comprehensive Plan, without substantially changing its intent, administration, or outcomes. **Since it was developed, the strategy has affected Seattle's racial segregation, housing affordability, environmental quality, infrastructure investments, transit access, carbon emissions, access to jobs and services, displacement, and more.**

Coded language

The 1994 growth strategy explains that the "preferred development pattern" is one that "maintains and enhances Seattle's character." Terms such as "neighborhood character" are problematic, as many people assume a meaning that extends beyond architectural aesthetic and scale, ultimately prompting people to also think about the type of person that lives in a neighborhood, potentially fueling discrimination.

By identifying some of the limitations of the current growth strategy in the three broad categories of affordability, climate change, and livability, as well as noting opportunities to improve in those areas, we hope to support the City's efforts to realize the equitable vision of the Comprehensive Plan. Opportunities for advancing the City's work in these focus areas are also emerging as we approach the unprecedented investments in light rail that will connect West Seattle to Ballard. That work will transform a large portion of the city, and could be harnessed to great effect for many of the strategies we advocate for in this paper.

The growth strategy & affordability

During the 25 years since adopting the growth strategy, the median price for a single-family home increased dramatically. The median home price in 1990 was $293,283 (in 2019 dollars), and it has increased to $723,300 as of early 2019, making it two and half times more expensive to purchase a home in 2019.[26] During that same time, median rents (across all housing types measured together) have increased from $981 (in 2019 dollars) per month to just over $2,500 per month.

Between 2006 and 2017, Urban Villages have accommodated 28,240 of the 35,300 new housing units-- 80% of the city's recent housing growth. In that same time, areas that are zoned single-family (which make up 75% of the residential land) only received 6% of the new

26. Zillow Average Housing Cost Estimate. (2019, April).
27. Seattle Planning Commission. (2018, December). *Neighborhoods for All.*

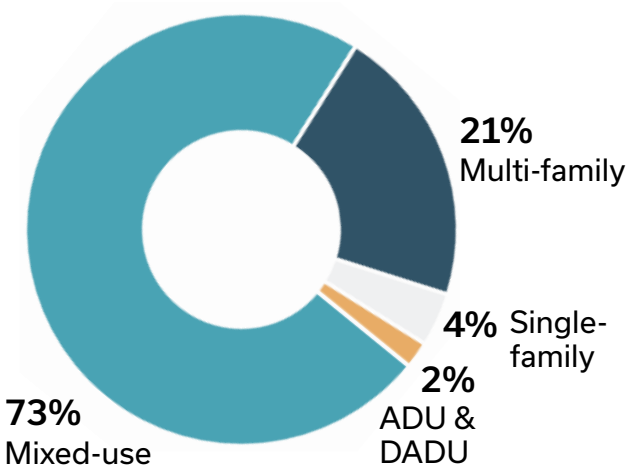
development.[27] **Concentrating development to only a small portion of the residential land yields an inequitable distribution of the impacts of growth and limits the effectiveness of the Urban Village growth strategy as a means to promote livable and sustainable neighborhoods across the city.** While the current growth strategy creates opportunities for new housing near jobs and transit on a small portion of the city's residential land, it limits opportunities for growth and flexibility on most of the city's land. For example, minimum lot sizes do not allow homeowners to subdivide their lot, making it difficult for low-income and/or aging homeowners to stay in their homes while the housing shortage boosts housing prices, and subsequently, property taxes.

A consequence of the growth strategy is that housing options are limited to two main types: detached single-family homes on quiet residential streets or large apartment buildings on busy arterials.[28] This dearth of housing variety and choice makes it challenging for first time home buyers to purchase homes, older adults to downsize, and for students and non-traditional households to find housing that fits their needs and income. Seattle is not alone in facing this issue, which has come to be commonly referred to as "missing middle" housing.[29]

There are housing-related demographic trends that have evolved over the past 25 years that are not accounted for in the current growth strategy. Planners anticipate that the portion of the population who are older adults (over age 65), will increase to 25% in King County in the next 20 years (up from 16.2% in 2010).[30] Many older adults are single, or part of a small household, and find it challenging to maintain a large home. For those interested in downsizing while staying in their neighborhood, the growth strategy limits their options. The current strategy also limits the housing choices for non-traditional or intergenerational families. The City must prepare for the increasing demand for a variety of housing types that meet the needs of a greater diversity of households than have existed in the past. Meeting today's housing needs, and preparing for the future, mandates having more housing types in walkable areas with amenities and access to transit.

Net New Units in Seattle by Type

Single-family and Accessory Dwelling Units account for only 6% of net new units from 2006-2017



Source: SDCI Permit Data 2006 - 2017

Housing development trends are also changing. Our current strategy dictates that three quarters of the city's residential land be reserved for detached single-family houses on increasingly expensive land. **This incentivizes new development to build as big a home as the City allows on any given lot, resulting in very large homes.**[31]

As older, smaller, and more affordable homes are purchased, they are often demolished and replaced with much larger homes that are sold at a much higher price. This increase in price also inflates the value of houses around them as the more expensive home provides a new real estate comparison in the neighborhood. The average size for home construction in 2016 was 46% larger than the average home built before single-family zoning was adopted.[32] This trend stands in stark opposition to the City's affordability and sustainability goals.

28. Ibid.
29. (2015). Missing Middle Housing. Opticos Design, Inc.
30. (2016). Aging In King County. King County.
31. Seattle Planning Commission. (2018, December). *Neighborhoods for All.*
32. Ibid.

Strategies for more affordability

Wrestling with housing crises of their own, Vancouver B.C., Minneapolis MN, and Oregon State have already taken action to allow small scale increases in density. **In response to the housing crisis, many cities across the country are exploring updates to their residential zoning to allow up to three or four units per lot.**[33 34 35 36 37]

Combined with design guidelines and building standards that maintain high quality development, allowing small scale multi-family housing (triplexes, townhomes, etc.) could increase housing opportunities in Seattle, the impacts of which should be studied during the City's update to the Comprehensive Plan. The 2023 update process is an opportunity to conduct robust outreach and engagement to better understand what community members envision as the best means for adding essential missing middle housing options to what are now exclusive, single-family areas.

There are additional tools for increasing housing options that are consistent with the scale of Seattle's residential neighborhoods. In tandem with updates to the Land Use element of the Comprehensive Plan, these could be designed to respond to the unique attributes of different types of parcels within the city when small-scale multifamily units are proposed.

For example, allowing increases in the building size or reducing setback requirements for corner lots or lots adjacent to alleys could incentivize the construction of additional units, or the conversion of existing homes into multiple units, potentially reducing the demand for demolition of those dwellings. In addition, reducing or removing minimum lot sizes could encourage more small-scale housing density in contrast to the ever-expanding size of new homes that we see today.

By increasing opportunities to develop more housing, and different types of housing at different price points, an evolved growth strategy can support first time home buyers, homeowners who want to add on to their property, older adults seeking affordable ways to age in place, and renters who are competing for a limited supply of available housing. Together, these changes could facilitate the evolution of a growth strategy that allows more housing while enhancing livability.

The Planning Commission also views anti-displacement strategies such as community land trusts and renter protections as key components of a more racially equitable growth strategy. The

Photo by Charles DeLoye on Unsplash

Financial burdens

Additional socio-economic factors play in to the total budget one has for housing. In 2019, 1 in 4 Americans have student loan debt: An estimated 44.7 million people. The average student loan debt is $37,172.[38] A growth strategy must respond to these kinds of economic trends.

33. Capps, K. (December 7, 2018). Why Minneapolis Just Made Zoning History. CityLab.
34. Holder, S. & Capps, K. (May 21, 2019). The Push for Denser Zoning Is Here to Stay. CityLab.
35. Chemtob, D. (April 11, 2019). Charlotte leaders consider how to undo a 'legacy' of housing segregation. The Charlotte Observer.
36. Badger, E. & Bui, Q. (June 18, 2019). Cities Start to Question an American Ideal: A House With a Yard on Every Lot. The New York Times.
37. Schneider, B. (May 8, 2019). Liberal America's Single-Family Hypocrisy. The Nation.
38. (2019). Student Loan Debt: A current picture of student loan borrowing and repayment in the United States. Nitro.

Commission is tasked with reviewing and making recommendations based on the work of the Equitable Development Monitoring Program, which collects data to better understand the impacts of growth, and the risks of displacement in the city.

The Commission will work closely with the Office of Planning and Community Development staff who lead the monitoring program, and provide input based on its findings. While not fully developed in this paper, the Commission is currently identifying additional anti-displacement work to inform recommendations for the update of the Comprehensive Plan, and the City's growth strategy.

Growth and climate change

In October of 2018, The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change shared data forecasting that the planet has until 2030 to curb carbon emissions by 45%.[39] Researchers say this reduction in emissions is necessary in order to keep climate change impacts "at survivable levels."[40] Additionally, because of the work of environmental justice activists and others, we know that communities of color, and low-income communities are disproportionately impacted by climate change-- an injustice that will deepen as climate change impacts increase in severity.[41]

Some of the neighborhoods that have experienced historic environmental injustice will also experience disproportionate climate change impacts such as with sea level rise in Seattle's South Park neighborhood. At present, the growth strategy does not account for climate change impacts when directing growth, missing opportunities to grow in ways that address environmental injustice and racial inequities.

By preventing most forms of small-scale housing in the majority of the city's residential areas, the growth strategy reduces the capacity to house more people, which contributes to displacement pressures. Displacement disrupts community networks as it forces people to leave the city in order to find affordable housing options. In terms of climate resilience, displacement weakens community social networks and reduces the ability to communicate, share resources, and care for each other during extreme weather events.[42] Not only does this increase the number and length of car trips, but the high price of land encourages developers to urbanize more affordable outlying farm and natural areas.

The growth strategy raises additional concerns related to the air quality and pedestrian safety impacts of locating Urban Villages along arterials. The public health impacts of increasing the number of residents in these areas is not adequately addressed. Air quality and other environmental justice impacts are of serious concern in Seattle, where some neighborhoods have an estimated lifespan that is up to thirteen years shorter than those living in whiter, wealthier neighborhoods.[43] The reasons for lifespan inequities are complex, with one part of the equation likely being the proximity to freight roadways and other air-polluting land uses.[44]

By promoting large apartment buildings on arterials, the growth strategy also encourages

Photo: Markus Spiske on Unsplash

39. Allen, M.R., Et al. (October, 2019). Special Report: Global Warming of 1.5 Degrees Celsius. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.
40. McGrath, M. (July 24, 2019). Climate change: 12 years to save the planet? Make that 18 months. BBC News.
41. Casola, J., Et al. (2018). Unfair Share. The University of Washington climate impacts Group.
42. Stapleton, S.O., Et al. (November, 2017). Climate change, migration and displacement. United Nations.

families to live on busy streets where it is not safe for children to play, reducing their opportunities to get the recommended daily amount of physical activity.[45] **As in many parts of the country, health inequities in Seattle correspond to race and ethnicity.** These examples of environmental inequities further illustrate the importance of updating the growth strategy with a sound racial equity framework.

Strategies for climate change

As we learn more about what is at stake, and the limited time in which to act, aligning climate-adaptive land use, and climate-smart transportation policies is one of the biggest and most essential strategies for ensuring the Earth remains habitable.

Climate change necessitates that we adapt our infrastructure and built environment to anticipate current and future climate impacts. The increased frequency of extreme weather events present new challenges to managing urban flooding, runoff, and sea level rise.[46] With those challenges come opportunities to rethink our growth patterns and use of the public rights-of-way. For example, we could configure more of our public rights-of-way from paved to green infrastructure.

Furthermore, there is no approach to mitigating Seattle's contribution to climate change that does not require a substantial, if not radical, reduction in motor vehicle emissions. Nearly two-thirds of local carbon emissions are from transportation.

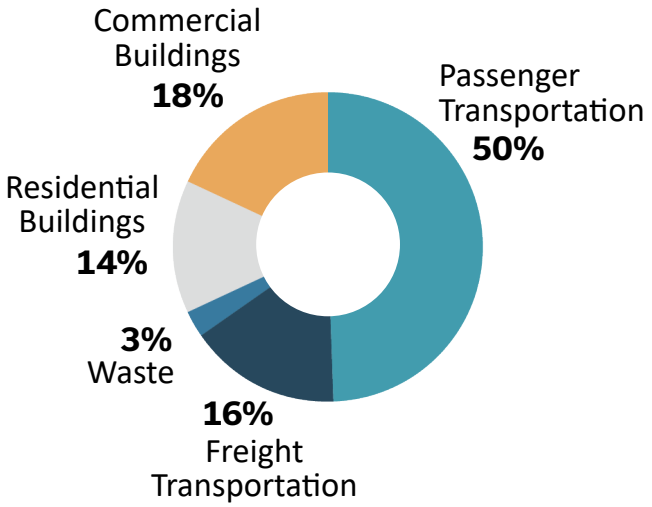
In the years following World War II, Seattle joined cities across the country in an aggressive campaign to remake the city in the image of the automobile. The persistence of that legacy has myriad implications for the city's ability to attain our goals of sustainability, livability and affordability.

The existing growth strategy, as successful as it has been in fostering transit-supportive nodes of housing, has nonetheless left the majority of the city's land area in a state of near or total dependence on automobile travel. It is critical that the next iteration of Seattle's growth strategy explicitly abandon the car-centric focus that has held sway since the middle of the last century. Doing so would have benefits not only for Seattle's climate strategy and resilience, but would also help the city become more affordable, less dangerous, healthier and, ultimately, more livable.

A more walkable city with streets that are greener, quieter and safer would make more parts of the city friendly for families and children of all incomes. A city that is easier and safer to navigate without owning or hiring a car will be more affordable.

Sources of Green House Gas Emissions in Seattle (2016)

The majority of Seattle's direct emissions (66%) come from road transportation, with the bulk of them (50%) coming solely from passenger vehicles. This measurement counts the number of vehicle trips starting and ending within Seattle, and does not account for vehicles traveling through the city.



Source: Seattle Office of Sustainability and Environment (2016)

43. Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation. King County Census Tracts online map. University of Washington.
44. (Unknown). February 2, 2016. Proximity to Major Roadways. US Department of Transportation.
45. The Aspen Institute. (2019). State of Play Seattle-King County. University of Washington & King County Parks.
46. Seattle Public Utilities. (December 29, 2017). Intensity Duration Frequency Curves and Trends for the City of Seattle. City of Seattle.

A comprehensive shift to electric vehicles, if we can attain it, would certainly have benefits in terms of easing some of the water and soil contamination associated with gasoline and would reduce-- but not eliminate-- climate-harming emissions. But even if we could convert all vehicles to electric overnight, we still would be left with the hard truth that we will not have physical space to move and store cars in our growing city. Nor would it address the fact that we devote the majority of the public right of way to the movement and storage of privately owned vehicles.

From an equity perspective, a strategy that relies on personal ownership of expensive, new electric vehicles fails all but the most affluent. A key aspect of a growth strategy that pursues racial equity, affordable homes and livability for all while responding to climate change will necessarily involve transportation and land use decisions that reduce reliance on the car.

In addition to transportation and use of the public right-of-way, a strong focus on anti-displacement and affordable housing within the growth strategy would simultaneously benefit efforts to promote racial and social justice, and to mitigate the climate change.[47] Evolving the growth strategy to expand housing opportunities, both in housing type and price, is one way that the City can reduce vehicle trips while increasing walkability and sustainability. This is another gain for livability, as Seattle remains on the list of the top ten US cities with the worst traffic.[48]

Adding housing opportunities within Seattle also reduces the demand for converting farms and forestland to housing, preserving green space, and helping keep carbon capturing trees and other vegetation in place.

Increases in housing density can also reduce the energy costs of housing. Most residential energy consumption stems from heating and cooling, and multi-family buildings with two to four units use less energy per unit than single-family homes.[49] Building more densely also means that we can add housing to areas where roads, power lines, sewer and water pipes already exist (and are more affordable to expand, as needed) making more efficient use of infrastructure investments.

The growth strategy and livability

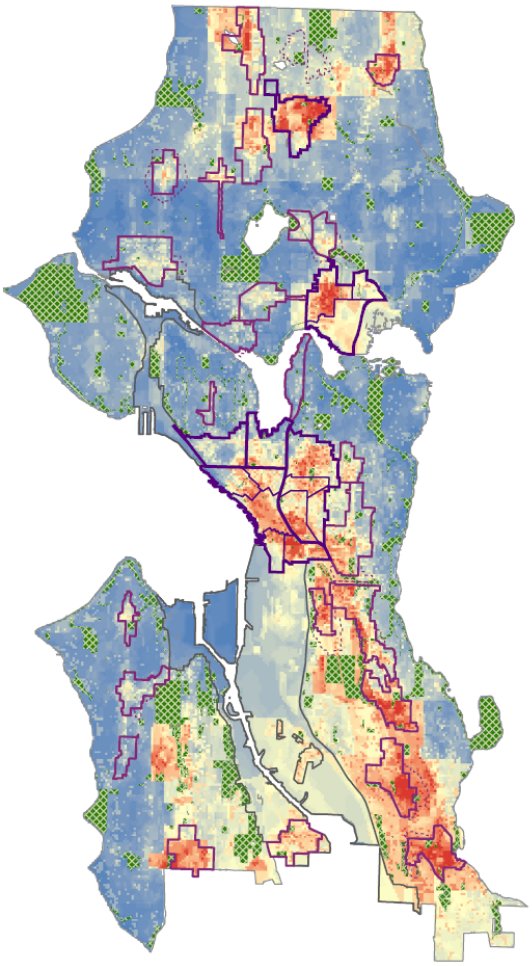
The term livability is often used as shorthand for many aspects of the built environment, as well as socio-economic conditions. Livability can also refer to elements of public health, including clean air, water, and living spaces; a walkable urban environment and active transportation options; and access to healthy foods and public space, including the public right of way.

Some outcomes of the current growth strategy have increased the city's livability and quality of life. One direct consequence has been the growth in population density that creates sufficient ridership to support transit investments. This has made Seattle a national leader in expanding transit ridership, even as other cities have seen declines in ridership in recent years.[50] [51] That increase in residential density has also supported neighborhood businesses that provide employment, neighborhood identity and spaces for people to gather.
At the same time, the boundaries of our Urban Villages appear to be unnecessarily limiting those transit benefits. Rather than a rigorous application of planning principles, those boundaries were established by a political process that largely reflected the influence of the homeowners that surround the villages. As a result, several of Seattle's Urban Villages have very narrow boundaries, preventing the development of much needed housing, which limits the number of households with access to transit. This is a barrier that limits the city's ability to promote livability, as well as to implement climate-friendly strategies. Limiting density to Urban Villages with existing frequent transit hampers the city's ability to

47. Austin, A. (November 15, 2017). To Move Is To Thrive: Public Transit and Economic Opportunity for People of Color. Demos.
48. Lindblom, M. (February 20, 2019). Did you lose 138 hours to Seattle-area traffic last year? New report ranks 5 other cities even worse. The Seattle Times.
49. US Energy Information Administration. (June 18, 2013). Apartments in buildings with 5 or more units use less energy than other home types
50. Shafer, D. Seattle Is Climbing National Rankings as a Top Transit City and Leads the Country in Ridership Growth. Seattle Business Magazine
51. Lindblom, M. (February 15, 2018). Transit ridership continues to grow in central Seattle, while solo car commutes decline. The Seattle Times.

advocate for expanded transit service to more areas. In this way, Seattle's current growth strategy creates a chicken-or-egg situation: areas need to meet the definition of a frequent transit node to become an Urban Village (or expand an existing one), yet the density necessary to support frequent transit cannot be achieved without the new development created by expanding or establishing an Urban Village. In other words, the areas of the city with fewer characteristics of sustainability and livability result not from a shortcoming of the growth strategy but, instead, from the limits on the size and number of Urban Villages.

The practice of redlining is especially relevant to the current growth strategy's potential to foster livability for all residents. The City's Growth and Equity Analysis identified eight Urban Villages that are at high risk of displacement. Those high-risk Urban Villages are in areas that were previously redlined, denied investments and have historically been home to higher populations of people of color. **Thus, the initial injustice of policies that promoted segregation by pushing people of color into certain areas of the city, was exacerbated when the growth strategy subsequently concentrated development into areas where residents were more vulnerable to displacement.**



Displacement Risk (2016)

The City's Growth and Equity analysis was prepared for the Seattle 2035 Comprehensive Plan. The analysis identified areas of access to opportunity, and areas with a high risk of displacement.

High Displacement Risk

Low Displacement Risk

Urban Villages

Parks

Source: Seattle Office of Planning and Community Development

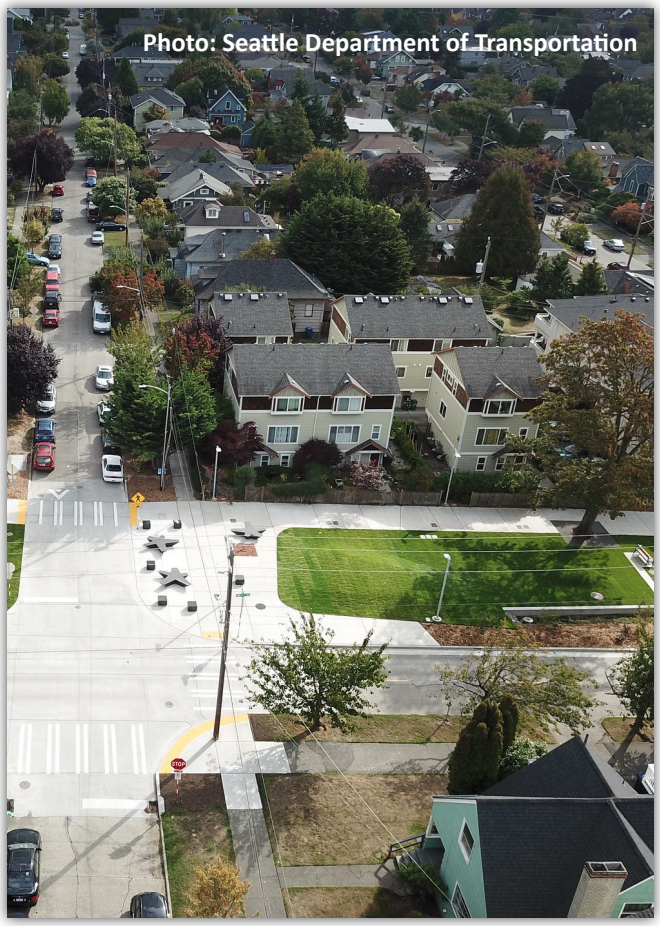
Strategies to promote livability

Livability components of an evolved growth strategy could include increasing the size of Urban Villages, as well as adding new ones. **New types of Urban Villages, such as Urban Hamlets, as discussed in the Planning Commission's *Neighborhoods for All* report, could provide moderate increases in housing density around existing commercial nodes, or close to schools and parks**. This would allow more residents to access the many amenities and services that draw residents to those neighborhoods. Areas that might support Urban Hamlets include, portions of

Delridge, Leschi, Madison Park, Madrona, Magnolia, Montlake, Seward Park, South Beacon Hill, Tangletown, Wedgwood, Sand Point, and others that could be explored further with careful study during the update of the Comprehensive Plan.

To create walkable neighborhoods with transit access, density and transit must be expanded concurrently. Allowing more density in existing low-density areas would boost transit ridership, increasing the feasibility of expanded transit investments, which, in turn, further boosts ridership. In addition to expanding the number and size of walkable neighborhoods with access to transit, there are racial equity benefits as well. Given the clear historical relationship between exclusionary single-family zoning, racial segregation, and economic inequality, revised single-family zoning with policies that allow a greater number and variety of housing options is a logical step towards achieving the city's racial equity goals.[52] [53]

An updated growth strategy should also respond to the documented inequities in health, income, education, and other quality of life measures seen between neighborhoods that were previously redlined, and those that have historically housed higher populations of white residents. **Growth and development need to be more equitably distributed, creating opportunities for a greater variety of housing types, and allowing more development in those areas with the lowest estimated risk of displacement.** This would entail employing proven planning criteria, such as urban walksheds, for expanding existing Urban Village boundaries from the irregular shapes seen today that reflect the political power of those living just outside them. Those same political forces persist today, and altering existing policies will require strong leadership from elected officials, and a compelling narrative of the historical and current racial and social justice inequities that we have the responsibility to address.



14th Ave NW & NW 60th is an example of small-scale housing density adjacent to a section of public right-of-way that has been converted to a green space.

52. Rothstein, R. (2017). *The Color of Law.* New York, NYLiveright Publishing Corporation.
53. Kruse, K. M. (August 14, 2019). What does a traffic jam in Atlanta have to do with segregation? Quite a lot. The New York Times Magazine.

A Vision for Seattle's Future

The dramatic changes in economic, demographic, and environmental conditions over the past 25 years demand new ideas that address the magnitude of our housing and climate crises, while increasing the quality of life for all residents. Fortunately, Seattle need not start from scratch. There are successful strategies for enhancing racial equity, sustainability and livability many of which Seattle already pursuing. **However, Seattle's existing growth strategy needs revision and evolution to firmly establish a racial equity framework that can respond to the limitations we see in its present form.**

The Planning Commission's report, *Neighborhoods for All*, prompted a conversation regarding the need to re-envision Seattle's 25-year-old growth strategy. This white paper is intended to advance that conversation. The Commission looks forward to working with City staff, elected officials and, most importantly, communities throughout the city to redefine strategies for growth that address the challenges outlined above while addressing community members' concerns. The update of the Comprehensive Plan is a timely opportunity to envision a growth strategy designed to advance racial equity, end housing disparities by race, repair harms caused by racially biased policies and ensure that the existential threat of climate change not contribute to racial inequities. A city-wide strategy of increased housing options, including affordable housing, paired with expanded public transit can play a significant role in addressing Seattle's most vexing challenges while creating more walkable and livable neighborhoods for every resident.

Role of the Planning Commission

The Seattle Planning Commission advises the Mayor, City Council and City departments on broad planning goals, policies and plans for the physical development of the City. The Commission's work is framed by the Comprehensive Plan and its vision for Seattle into the 21st Century, and by a commitment to engaging citizens in the work of planning for and working to reach these goals. See the next page for more information about current Commissioners.

Who serves on the Planning Commission?

The Seattle Planning Commission is an independent advisory body appointed by the Mayor, City Council, and the Commission itself. The members of the Commission are volunteers who bring a wide array of expertise and a diversity of perspectives to these roles.

Current Seattle Planning Commissioners

Michael Austin, Chair
Urban Designer

Patti Wilma, Vice Chair
Retired City Planner

Sandra Fried
Public Health Program Officer

Rick Mohler
Architect, Professor, Advocate

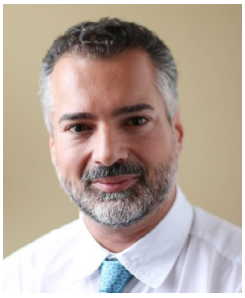
David Goldberg
Smart Growth Strategist

Kelly Rider
Housing Policy

Grace Kim
Architect & Principal Schemata Workshop

Amy Shumann
Lead and Toxics Program Manager

Lauren Squires
Multimodal Transportation Planner



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