

Housing



Introduction

In the City's vision for the future, all people have access to housing that is safe, clean, and affordable. As Seattle grows, its housing supply grows and adapts to meet the needs of all households, regardless of color or income, including families with children, seniors, and people who are disabled. Our growing city does not force people from their homes; they are able to stay in their neighborhoods, with their established community resources and cultural institutions. Throughout the city, quality housing options exist for people of all backgrounds.

In the wake of the Great Recession, Seattle has experienced unprecedented growth in the number of housing units due to booming demand. The city added nearly twenty-one thousand housing units between 2013 and 2015, the highest number in a three-year period since at least 1980. Rents have increased sharply, particularly impacting lower-income

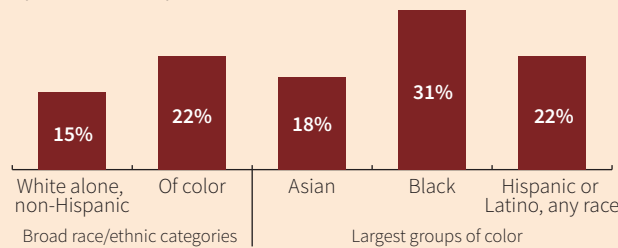
households. Stabilizing housing prices is a key step to stemming growing income inequality, a threat to the long-term strength of our region's economy.

Rising housing costs affect marginalized populations the most. Seattle has been shaped by its history of racial segregation and the economic displacement of communities of color. Over time, homeowners can gain significant wealth that they can pass down to their descendants, while renters face the risk of growing housing-cost burden. The result is significant economic disparity along racial lines. Addressing injustices and protecting marginalized populations is a primary focus of the Housing element of this Plan.

Households that spend more than half of their monthly income on housing costs are considered severely housing-cost burdened. About 22 percent of households of color and close to a third of African American households are severely housing-cost burdened.

Share of Seattle Households Who Are Severely Housing-Cost Burdened

by Race/Ethnicity of Person who Owns or Rents a Home



Source: 2006–2010 ACS CHAS special tabulation, US Census Bureau

One way the City works to address racial and social equity is by creating and preserving affordable housing, particularly for lower-income households. Public investments in affordable housing enable people to continue living in their neighborhoods. Creating affordable housing is also a way to expand housing options in historically unaffordable neighborhoods that have access to jobs, schools, and transit. As the City develops, evaluates, and implements land use and housing policies and programs, it engages historically underrepresented communities in the process. By collaborating with the larger community on these projects, the City aims to help reverse known trends of social and racial inequity.

This Housing element establishes goals and policies to address the housing needs of all Seattleites. Together, these goals and policies will contribute to building vibrant, resilient, and cohesive communities throughout our city. These goals and policies are grouped within the following five topic areas: Equal Access to Housing, Supply of Housing, Diversity of Housing, Housing Construction and Design, and Housing Affordability. Various policies in this element refer to “rent/income-restricted housing.” This means housing with conditions that legally restrict the income of the tenants who live there and the rents they may be charged. When this Plan refers to “affordable housing,” it generally means housing that lower-income households can afford without sacrificing essential needs like food and health care. Affordable housing includes rent/income-restricted housing, as well as housing that is low cost without any subsidy or incentive.

The **Housing Appendix** contains demographic information for the city and an analysis of housing need, as called for in the King County Countywide Planning Policies.

Equal Access to Housing

Discussion

The federal Fair Housing Act prohibits landlords from discriminating against or in favor of any individual or group based on race, religion, national origin, sex, color, disability, or familial status (that is, pregnancy or the presence of children under eighteen). These characteristics are referred to as “protected classes” under the law. The State of Washington and the City of Seattle have extended protection to additional classes, including marital status, sexual orientation, gender identity, age, use of Section 8 voucher, political ideology, and veteran or military status. Educating Seattleites about these federal, state, and local fair-housing laws—and enforcing them—is critical to making our city welcoming and inclusive. These laws increase housing choices for people of all incomes and backgrounds.

The City also supports removing other barriers that prevent families and individuals from securing housing. For example, the City’s approach to homelessness is to move homeless people into housing quickly and then provide them services as needed. By focusing on helping individuals and families quickly move into permanent housing, the City helps the homeless avoid a costly and lengthy series of steps from emergency shelter to transitional housing to permanent housing. Social service agencies nationwide have found that without stable housing, it is extremely difficult for someone to tackle problems, including those related to physical or mental health or addiction, that may have led to that person’s homelessness. Removing barriers to housing reduces homelessness and helps people avoid the humiliation and vulnerability caused by not having a home.

GOAL

H G1 Help all people have fair and equal access to housing in Seattle.

POLICIES

H 1.1 Help create a culture where everyone understands and respects the fair-housing rights protected by federal, state, and local laws.

H 1.2 Promote a diverse and inclusive city through housing programs that serve lower-income households.

- H 1.3** Encourage actions, such as affirmative marketing and fair-housing education and enforcement, to overcome historical patterns of segregation, promote fair-housing choices, and foster inclusive communities that are free from discrimination.
- H 1.4** Remove barriers that prevent lower-income households from using rental assistance throughout Seattle, particularly in areas with frequent transit, schools, parks, and other amenities.
- H 1.5** Identify and remove, in coordination with other jurisdictions in the region, potential barriers to stable housing for individuals and families, such as housing screening practices that do not align with all applicable federal, state, and local laws in their use of criminal and civil records and that perpetuate disparate impacts of our criminal justice system and other institutions.

Supply of Housing

Discussion

Seattle is a fast-growing city, and as the population increases, demand for housing will continue to increase as well. The City is planning for seventy thousand new housing units by 2035. The majority of new housing is planned for urban centers and villages. These are the areas where investments in transportation, open space, and services are planned or have already been made. Record levels of housing development in the last few years have not been enough to keep up with the demand for housing that is caused by rapid economic growth. That inability of the market to meet demand has contributed to rising rents in Seattle.

In 2015, the mayor announced the Seattle Housing Affordability and Livability Agenda (HALA). The HALA contains sixty-five recommendations for how Seattle can accommodate more housing. It includes steps that will help both for-profit and nonprofit housing developers build and preserve affordable housing. The HALA outlines a road map to build or preserve fifty thousand housing units over the next ten years, including twenty thousand units of rent/income-restricted housing. As housing development continues, the City will promote policies that limit displacement, stabilize marginalized populations in their communities, and encourage a net increase in affordable housing over time.

GOAL

- H G2** Help meet current and projected regional housing needs of all economic and demographic groups by increasing Seattle's housing supply. Strive to add or preserve fifty thousand housing units by 2025, including twenty thousand rent/income-restricted housing units.

POLICIES

- H 2.1** Allow and promote innovative and nontraditional housing design and construction types to accommodate residential growth.
- H 2.2** Identify publicly owned sites suitable for housing, and prioritize use of sites, where appropriate, for rent/income-restricted housing for lower-income households.
- H 2.3** Consider Land Use Code and Building Code regulations that allow for flexible reuse of existing structures in order to maintain or increase housing supply, while maintaining life-safety standards.
- H 2.4** Encourage use of vacant or underdeveloped land for housing and mixed-use development, and promote turning vacant housing back into safe places to live.
- H 2.5** Encourage the replacement of housing that is demolished or converted to nonresidential or higher-cost residential use.

Diversity of Housing

Discussion

Seattle needs a greater variety of housing types and a wider spectrum of affordability. Seattle's high housing costs are making it increasingly difficult for many households to live in the city. Even middle-income households, especially families with children, struggle to meet the high prices of housing in most areas of the city. To address these issues, the City will consider allowing different types of housing than some zoning rules currently permit. Courtyard housing, row housing, and apartments are examples of potentially affordable and family-friendly housing options. The policies below encourage a broader array of housing choices in Seattle.

GOAL

- H G3** Achieve a mix of housing types that provide opportunity and choice throughout Seattle for people of various ages, races, ethnicities, and cultural backgrounds and for a variety of household sizes, types, and incomes.

POLICIES

- H 3.1** Identify and implement strategies, including development standards and design guidelines reflecting unique characteristics of each neighborhood, to accommodate an array of housing designs that meet the needs of Seattle's varied households.
- H 3.2** Allow and encourage housing for older adults and people with disabilities, including designs that allow for independent living, various degrees of assisted living, and/

or skilled nursing care, in or near urban centers and urban villages where there is access to health care and other services and amenities.

- H 3.3** Encourage the development of family-sized housing affordable for households with a broad range of incomes in areas with access to amenities and services.
- H 3.4** Promote use of customizable modular designs and other flexible housing concepts to allow for households' changing needs, including in areas zoned for single-family use.
- H 3.5** Allow additional housing types in areas that are currently zoned for single-family development inside urban villages; respect general height and bulk development limits currently allowed while giving households access to transit hubs and the diversity of goods and services that those areas provide.

Housing Construction and Design

Discussion

High-quality housing design and construction can help protect our natural environment and resources, prepare for the challenges of climate change, and respond to changing housing needs over time. All Seattle housing should be safe, resilient, and well maintained. People generally have a common understanding of what constitutes safe housing. The Seattle Department of Construction and Inspections (SDCI) enforces codes that protect public health, safety, and general welfare, such as the Building Code and the Housing and Building Maintenance Code. Now that the majority of housing units in Seattle are rentals, the SDCI's rental inspection program is particularly important. In addition to being safe, homes must be resilient. That is, individuals, households, communities, and regions should be able to maintain livable conditions in the event of natural disasters, loss of power, or other interruptions of normally available services.

GOAL

- H G4** Achieve healthy, safe, and environmentally sustainable housing that is adaptable to changing demographic conditions.

POLICIES

- H 4.1** Provide programs, regulations, and enforcement to help ensure that all housing is healthy and safe and meets basic housing-maintenance requirements.
- H 4.2** Encourage innovation in residential design, construction, and technology, and implement regulations to conserve water, energy, and materials; reduce greenhouse gas emissions; and otherwise limit environmental and health impacts.

- H 4.3** Consider providing assistance for seismic retrofit of residential buildings, particularly those occupied by lower-income households, to reduce the risk of displacement after an earthquake.
- H 4.4** Increase housing opportunities for older adults and people with disabilities by promoting universal design features for new and renovated housing.
- H 4.5** Promote opportunities to combine housing and historic preservation efforts by rehabilitating structures of historic value for residential use.
- H 4.6** Promote access to public decision-making about housing for all Seattleites.
- H 4.7** Promote housing for all Seattleites that is safe and free from environmental and health hazards.
- H 4.8** Explore ways to reduce housing-development costs.

Housing Affordability

Discussion

Affordable housing for Seattle’s lower-income residents increases their ability to access opportunities in Seattle and helps reduce existing disparities. Research shows that investing in affordable housing for lower-income households yields positive social and economic outcomes, especially for families with children.

Washington State’s Growth Management Act (GMA) requires each jurisdiction to include an inventory and analysis of existing and projected housing needs in its Comprehensive Plan. King County’s Countywide Planning Policies (CPPs) provide additional direction and guidance for the inventory and analysis. The report on Seattle’s housing supply and needs is provided in the **Housing Appendix** of this Plan.

As of 2015, there were approximately 27,200 units of rent/income-restricted housing in Seattle. Although this number may seem large, there is still significant need for affordable housing for households at the lowest income levels.

Seattle also currently has some low-cost market-rate rental housing, although not nearly enough to meet demand. Higher-income households occupy a portion of this housing.

AMI (area median income): the annual median income for families in the Seattle area, as published by the US Department of Housing and Urban Development, with adjustments for household size assuming 1 person for studio units and 1.5 people per bedroom for other units

Lower-income includes the following subcategories:

Extremely low-income: a household whose income is equal to or less than 30 percent of AMI

Very low-income: a household whose income is greater than 30 percent of AMI and equal to or less than 60 percent of AMI

Low-income: a household whose income is greater than 60 percent of AMI and equal to or less than 80 percent of AMI

Moderate-income: a household whose income is greater than 80 percent of AMI and equal to or less than 100 percent of AMI

Middle-income: a household whose income is greater than 100 percent of AMI and equal to or less than 150 percent of AMI

Roughly a third of units that have rents affordable to households with income below 80 percent of the area median income (AMI) are actually rented by households with higher incomes. That leaves a shortage of rental units for the households who need them. There would be no shortage of units for households with incomes between 50 percent and 80 percent of AMI were it not for down-renting by higher-income households. That is not the case for units with rents affordable at or below 50 percent of AMI, where the affordable rental housing shortages far exceed those caused by down-renting.

The Housing Appendix presents information on renter households in Seattle that have incomes in three income ranges—0 to 30 percent of AMI, 30 to 50 percent of AMI, and 50 to 80 percent of AMI. The Housing Appendix shows that in the two lowest of the three categories, there are many more households than there are affordable and available rental units. For instance, households with incomes of 0 to 30 percent of AMI outnumber the affordable and available units by at least 23,500. Rent/income-restricted housing plays a critical role in ensuring that low-cost housing actually serves lower-income households.

To meet needs associated with growth, an estimated 27,500 to 36,500 additional housing units affordable to households with incomes at or below 80 percent of AMI will be needed by 2035. This includes 10,500 rent/income-restricted housing units for extremely low-income households.

The City's housing programs and regulatory strategies will continue to prioritize affordable housing for extremely low- and very low-income households. These households have the greatest housing need by far. The City assumes the large majority of units affordable to households with incomes between 60 percent and 80 percent of AMI will continue to be provided by the market.

Seattle in 2016 is in the midst of a housing-affordability crisis. The goals and policies in this Housing Affordability section help establish a framework for making Seattle a more affordable and equitable city.

GOAL

H G5 Make it possible for households of all income levels to live affordably in Seattle, and reduce over time the unmet housing needs of lower-income households in Seattle.

POLICIES

H 5.1 Pursue public and private funding sources for housing preservation and production to provide housing opportunities for lower-wage workers, people with special needs, and those who are homeless or at risk of being homeless.

- H 5.2** Expand programs that preserve or produce affordable housing, preferably long term, for lower-income households, and continue to prioritize efforts that address the needs of Seattle's extremely low-income households.
- H 5.3** Promote housing affordable to lower-income households in locations that help increase access to education, employment, and social opportunities, while supporting a more inclusive city and reducing displacement from Seattle neighborhoods or from the city as a whole.
- H 5.4** Monitor regularly the supply, diversity, and affordability of housing for households by income level, and use this information to help evaluate whether changes to housing strategies and policies are needed to encourage more affordable housing or to advance racial and social equity.
- H 5.5** Collaborate with King County and other jurisdictions in efforts to prevent and end homelessness and focus those efforts on providing permanent housing and supportive services and on securing the resources to do so.
- H 5.6** Increase housing choice and opportunity for extremely low- and very low-income households in part by funding rent/income-restricted housing throughout Seattle, especially in areas where there is a high risk of displacement. Also increase housing choice in areas where lower-cost housing is less available but where there is high-frequency transit service and other amenities, even if greater subsidies may be needed.
- H 5.7** Consider that access to high-frequency transit may lower the combined housing and transportation costs for households when locating housing for lower-income households.
- H 5.8** Strive for no net loss of rent/income-restricted housing citywide.
- H 5.9** Use strategies that will reduce the potential for displacement of marginalized populations when making decisions related to funding or locating rent/income-restricted housing.
- H 5.10** Encourage rental-housing owners to preserve, rehabilitate, or redevelop their properties in ways that limit housing displacement, maintain affordable, healthy, and safe living conditions for current residents, and consider cultural and economic needs of the surrounding neighborhood.
- H 5.11** Require advance notice to all tenants and payment of relocation assistance to tenants with household incomes below established thresholds before issuing permits for housing demolition, change of use, or substantial rehabilitation or before removing use restrictions from rent/income-restricted housing.
- H 5.12** Require culturally sensitive communication with the neighbors of proposed rent/income-restricted housing for extremely low- and very low-income households, with the goal of furthering fair housing.
- H 5.13** Seek to reduce cost burdens among Seattle households, especially lower-income households and households of color.

- H 5.14** Encourage and advocate for new federal, state, and county laws, regulations, programs, and incentives that would increase the production and preservation of lower-income housing.
- H 5.15** Encourage a shared responsibility between the private and public sectors for addressing affordable housing needs.
- H 5.16** Consider implementing a broad array of affordable housing strategies in connection with new development, including but not limited to development regulations, inclusionary zoning, incentives, property tax exemptions, and permit fee reductions.
- H 5.17** Consider using substantive authority available through the State Environmental Policy Act to require that new development mitigate adverse impacts on housing affordable for lower-income households.
- H 5.18** Consider implementing programs that require affordable housing with new development, with or without rezones or changes to development standards that increase development capacity.
- H 5.19** Consider requiring provision for housing, including rent/income-restricted housing, as part of major institution master plans and development agreements when such plans would lead to housing demolition or employment growth.
- H 5.20** Implement strategies and programs to help ensure a range of housing opportunities affordable for Seattle’s workforce.
- H 5.21** Encourage major employers to fund local and regional affordable housing for lower-income, moderate-income, and middle-income households.
- H 5.22** Continue to promote best practices in use of green building materials, sustainability, and resiliency in policies for rent/income-restricted housing.
- H 5.23** Support programs that enable Seattle’s lower-income homeowners to remain safely and affordably housed.
- H 5.24** Support financially sustainable strategies to provide homeownership opportunities for low-, moderate-, and middle-income households, especially for families with children, in part to enable these households to have a path toward wealth accumulation.