

Director’s Report and Recommendations Land Use Code Amendments – Jobs Initiative/Regulatory Reform

INTRODUCTION

The recovery from economic recession has challenged Seattle residents and businesses. In order to help relieve residents, businesses and property owners who continue to face rising costs and fluctuating markets, and get people back to work, the City must pursue opportunities to eliminate barriers to economic growth. In order to guide future actions, the City Council adopted Resolution 31282 in March of this year. The resolution established guiding principles for strengthening and growing Seattle's economy and creating jobs. Those principles include the following:

- Quality of life;
- Resilient and sustainable local economy;
- Collaboration and civic leadership;
- Hospitable and responsive business climate; and
- Infrastructure investment.

In keeping with these principles, a roundtable of business, environmental, and neighborhood leaders met to develop proposals for regulatory reform that will help to restore and sustain a vibrant business environment and attract new jobs to the city. Their proposals were submitted to the City in a letter dated June, 2011 which states, in part that:

“The group shares those principles (from Resolution 31282) and believes that sustainable choices can also help foster economic renewal, especially as part of long-term regulatory reform.”

In response to the group’s recommendations for changes that will help to get people back to work, and jump-start development by simplifying regulations, the Department of Planning and Development is proposing Code amendments, summarized as follows:

Encourage Home Entrepreneurship

- Allow property owners to operate home-based businesses (home occupations) in any structure, as long as impacts are minimized to surrounding properties
- Allow alterations to structures to accommodate home based businesses, as otherwise allowed for structures in the zone
- Allow a home-based business to advertise on the internet, but customer visits must continue to be by appointment only
- Allow up to 2 non-resident employees (currently limited to one), and allow more flexibility for weekday deliveries with limits focused on heavy vehicles

Expand Options for Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs) and Backyard Cottages

- Allow backyard cottages on through lots (lots that front two streets) – recognizing that one yard typically is a rear yard (where ADUs are allowed on non-through lots)
- Allow more flexibility for the height of backyard cottages on sloping sites
- Clarify that ADUs are allowed in all housing types (including townhouses, rowhouses & in multifamily housing in NC zones)

Concentrate Street-Level Commercial Uses in Pedestrian (P) Zones

- Require street-level commercial use only in Pedestrian (P) designated zones
- Recommendation would apply to approx. 80% of Commercial (C) & Neighborhood Commercial (NC) zoned frontages on arterials throughout the city

Allow Small Commercial Uses in Multifamily Zones

- Allow ground-floor commercial uses in Lowrise 2 and 3 zones that are within urban centers or in light rail station areas (same uses and standards as in Midrise and Highrise multifamily zones)

Expand Mobile Food Vending/Temporary Uses

- Allow vending carts on private property in Lowrise 2 and 3 zones in urban centers and light rail station areas, and in Midrise and Highrise multifamily zones
- Expand the allowance for signs associated with temporary businesses in lowrise zones
- Allow farmers markets from 2 days/week to 3 days/week
- Extend temporary use permits to allow 1-year duration
- Change permit decisions for temporary uses from an appealable Type II decision to a non-appealable Type 1 permit decision.

Reduce, Eliminate or Modify Parking Requirements Where Appropriate

- Allow the market to determine how much parking should be provided in locations within ¼ mile of good transit service (generally, at least 15 minute headways): no minimum parking requirement for residential or non-residential uses (currently only applies to residential uses within urban villages)
- Modify minimum parking requirements for major institution uses in urban centers to be the same as other nonresidential uses

Allow Flexibility in Building Height Measurement

- Allow the option to measure building height as allowed in South Lake Union or to use the average grade level method as provided for in multifamily & commercial zones

Raise Environmental (SEPA) Review Thresholds

- In Urban Centers & Station Areas thresholds are proposed to be 200 dwelling units (250 in Downtown Urban Center), and 75,000 sq. ft. for commercial uses in mixed-use development
- Codify SEPA conditioning authority for transportation analysis and mitigation in the Land Use Code (as a Type I, non-appealable, decision)

BACKGROUND

The Land Use Code has been amended several times since 2007 to help improve the local economy. This includes legislation that:

- Extended the life of Master Use Permits;
- Permitted active uses on vacant and underused lots;
- Allowed temporary park and ride lots for light rail parking; and
- Allowed mobile food vending.

The Roundtable's proposals are consistent with these prior actions and are intended to reinforce Seattle's greatest assets and strengthen the community through support for:

- An invigorated and sustainable economy;
- An open environment that fully supports investment and entrepreneurship;
- Safe, walkable, and livable neighborhoods;
- Land use rules that support accessible and efficient transit systems;
- A wide array of desirable and affordable housing options; and
- A high-quality sustainable natural environment.

These proposals help people weather the difficult economy in three important ways:

1) Get people back to work - encourages entrepreneurship and new business development:

Through helping people to develop new business enterprises, the proposal can assist people who are unemployed to re-enter the workforce. New business enterprises often begin as sole proprietors or small partnerships and grow into larger employers over time. Microsoft began in the garage of a single family home. The proposal would revise home occupation rules to better accommodate startups and encourage their growth within appropriate limits for an occupation that is still incidental to the residential use of a dwelling. Also, enabling temporary uses, other small business ventures such as mobile vending, and small retail uses in multifamily zones in urban centers and light rail station areas will encourage economic growth and enliven the city.

2) Promote flexibility in the Land Use Code to foster innovation, improve efficiency and eliminate unnecessary delay in permitting:

By allowing a more diverse mix of uses in multifamily zones, and providing more flexibility and choice for developers in design of buildings in commercial zones, the proposal would encourage new more innovative and efficient building decisions that are responsive to market conditions.

Modifying thresholds for environmental review (SEPA) to focus on projects that have the potential for impacts that are not otherwise addressed by code standards and processes already in place to mitigate impacts, will further encourage new growth and infill development in urban centers and station areas where it is best able to be accommodated. These areas also benefit from other recent programmatic SEPA impact studies that were intended to address the impacts of different development scenarios and effectively fulfill environmental review purposes.

3) *Jumpstart new housing opportunities - encourages new investment in affordable housing:*

The proposal enables detached accessory dwelling units to be built on a greater variety of residential lots across the city, in some cases with a more flexible height envelope. This will encourage economically-beneficial new housing choices, more affordable to a diversity of households while continuing to promote development that is not disruptive to existing neighborhoods.

ANALYSIS

Home-based Businesses

Updating rules addressing home occupations, or home-based business, recognizes and encourages the emerging trend of small business startups in the home that can grow and meaningfully contribute to area employment and economic growth objectives. Home occupations of a person residing in a dwelling unit are permitted as an accessory use subject to the standards in the Land Use Code. Home occupations are currently allowed wherever residential use is permitted.

The proposed amendments are as follows:

- Allow a home-based business to be located in any structure on a lot, such as a garage (currently a home-based business is only allowed in the principal dwelling or in an accessory dwelling unit);
- Allow additions and alterations to a structure within the limits of the applicable zone to accommodate the home-based business. Allowing home alterations continues the current practice of limiting visual evidence of the occupation, as observed from the exterior of the structure(s), while ensuring that the perception of the home as a residential use is not compromised;
- Allow a home based business to advertise (no advertising is currently allowed, even on the internet);
- Allow up to 2 non-resident employees (one is currently allowed) to assist in operation of the business;
- Allow weekday deliveries without limit, except as applies to heavy vehicles (currently all deliveries are limited to two per day during the week and prohibited on weekends and holidays); and
- Clarify that customer visits are by appointment only.

By allowing greater flexibility for home-based business, such an enterprise will have a better chance to be successful, build a customer base and grow the business in an often rapidly changing local and regional marketplace. All of these elements would help foster a more predictable and supportive environment for small businesses to start and grow in a home setting.

Home occupations will continue to be required to avoid spillover impacts on adjacent properties such as odors, dust, light/glare, excessive noise, substantial traffic or other similar impacts. In addition, on-site activity would be non-customer based or conducted by appointment only.

Accessory dwelling units (ADUs)

Expanding the ability to build detached accessory dwelling units (or backyard cottages) increases opportunities for more affordable housing in neighborhoods across the city.

The amendments would allow more flexibility as follows:

- Allow backyard cottages on “through lots” (lots that border upon two streets) in the yard that is identified as the rear yard;
- Allow a modest height increase for backyard cottages to account for circumstances such as a sloping back yard; and
- Clarify that certain multifamily housing types may include ADUs, particularly if the individual units are owned on fee simple lots.

“Through lots” extend between two public rights-of-way. While they typically can be visually categorized as having “front” and “back” yards, the code currently classifies both yards as front yards. The proposal would allow a backyard cottage to be located in the yard that functions most like a rear yard.

The limitation that the height of a backyard cottage be no more than 15 feet higher than the height of the primary house penalizes lots where the rear yard slopes up from the primary dwelling on the lot. In addition, because many primary residences are constructed to a height that is lower than the allowable height in the zone (30 feet), this places an overly restrictive limit on the height for backyard cottages. Height limits for backyard cottages would continue to be limited to 15 to 23 feet, depending upon the width of the lot and the roof type. Review of DPD’s 2011 annual report on backyard cottage development indicates that the more restrictive height limit provision is of limited use as most cottages are generally in scale with the existing houses, even when the cottage is built above a garage.

Clarifying that certain multifamily housing types, such as rowhouses, may include an accessory dwelling unit would facilitate the inclusion of accessory units in situations where lots have been subdivided using the unit lot subdivision process, allowing fee simple ownership of the lot. A rowhouse is currently defined as a single housing unit from the ground to the sky.

While these changes may only affect a limited number of lots, it will expand opportunities for new housing options and investment in neighborhoods. Accessory housing tends to be relatively more affordable than other types of housing.

Street-level commercial uses in Pedestrian (P) zones

Requiring non-residential use along street fronts in areas that may not support additional commercial uses often leads to disinvestment in some areas or the perception of blight due to the vacant storefronts and neglected properties. The proposal would eliminate a requirement for ground-floor building frontages along an arterial to include non-residential uses, but retain such requirements in pedestrian-oriented districts designated with Pedestrian “P” zones. Ground-floor non-residential use requirement would continue in neighborhoods within the Bitter Lake and Lake City Urban Villages, NC1 zones, and commercial zones with height limits of 85 feet or higher.

Currently, in commercial zones including both C and NC designations, new structures along arterials must include non-residential uses for at least 80% of their ground-floor street-facing building frontage. This requirement applies extensively across the city, regardless of a property’s or area’s economic viability. The effect in some neighborhoods can be a multitude of commercial spaces that sit vacant or underused. In many cases, the requirements for such spaces are a significant impediment to a development’s economic feasibility and architectural design flexibility, which adds to overall development costs.

The City has identified a number of areas pedestrian “P” designated zones that have significant value as vital pedestrian-oriented environments. In these areas, with higher pedestrian volumes, non-residential street level uses contribute to the goods and services needed by local residents, provide “eyes on the street,” and an engaging pedestrian environment. The proposal re-focuses ground-floor commercial use requirements to developments within those pedestrian-oriented business districts and allows the market to otherwise determine where retail can be successful. Removal of the overly restrictive ground-floor use rules will benefit approximately 3/4 of the city’s commercial-zoned property frontage along arterials. This should increase the economic feasibility and attractiveness of many properties for infill residential development, which in many areas is preferable. Ground-level floors must be a minimum of 13’ in order to allow easy transition to retail space when the market changes.

Small commercial uses in multifamily zones

Promoting mixed-use development in certain Lowrise 2 and Lowrise 3 (LR2 and LR3) zones by allowing certain smaller commercial uses to locate at the ground floor of buildings is intended to transform what would otherwise be single-purpose residential development, into more vibrant mixed-use environments, while continuing to emphasize a residential character. This allowance is similar to Midrise (MR) and Highrise (HR) zones where limited non-residential uses are allowed at the ground level of multifamily buildings. The proposal will improve access to goods and services for surrounding residents, reducing the need to drive, especially in areas prioritized to accommodate future infill growth.

The amendments would allow more flexibility for commercial uses to be located in multifamily zones as follows:

- Allow compatible commercial uses at street-level in LR2 and LR3 zones in urban centers and light rail station areas such as: retail sales and services, business support services, offices, restaurants, medical services, food processing, craft work and live-work uses, and outdoor general sales and services and outdoor sales and/or services of food or beverages (i.e. mobile food and retail vending – *see item below*);
- Allow commercial uses in MR zones throughout the city (current provisions limit commercial uses to MR zoned lots that are within 800 feet of a neighborhood commercial zone);
- Apply a maximum size per business establishment of 4,000 square feet, except 10,000 square feet for a multi-purpose retail sales use (grocery or drug store); and
- Allow signs for the proposed outdoor (in many cases temporary) commercial uses up to a 32 square foot limit, in the aggregate.

The strict separation of residential uses from commercial uses in zoning often results in large areas where goods and services are limited, inconveniencing residents and encouraging car trips for local shopping. In contrast, the proposal encourages mixing of various types of businesses within strict size limits for retail, office, restaurant and other uses that are intended to serve nearby residents. This would be allowed in LR 2 and LR 3 zones that are located in urban centers and light rail station areas where growth is encouraged by the City's comprehensive plan. Adding the ability to mix commercial uses into predominantly multifamily residential areas will encourage adaptive use of property to more conveniently serve residents and workers.

The proposed amendment to allow limited signage for commercial uses would clarify the ability for a longer-term temporary use to be able to display business signage rather than being limited to restricted time periods as in the existing "temporary signage" limits. The temporary signage limits do not fit the approach to mixed-use (residential and commercial uses) envisioned by this proposal.

The proposal expands upon Seattle's long-standing zoning objectives encouraging mixed-use communities with an active pedestrian-orientation, particularly in areas well-served by transit. While the neighborhood commercial zones (and to a lesser extent, MR and HR zones) have been the primary places for mixed-use development, LR2 and LR3 zones can contribute to the evolution of growing neighborhoods into more interesting and active places that can support small businesses and local entrepreneurs. Ideally, the added flexibility to design innovative new forms of mixed-use development will foster the near-term construction of varied new developments, small and large, that will expand living and shopping opportunities.

Mobile food vending/temporary uses

Business startups and micro-businesses are playing an increasingly important role in the local economy. The City's rules, though evolving, are not flexible enough to accommodate events and temporary uses that can add life to the community and support local business entrepreneurs. Adjustments that would ease the process of obtaining intermittent or temporary use permits

would foster opportunities for those wishing to create and promote new products and services. Such changes would reduce delays in permitting, while ensuring that such activities do not detract from their surroundings. Two types of uses are addressed in the proposal: intermittent uses (Farmers Markets); and temporary uses (such as food vending and retail kiosks).

The amendments would allow more flexibly for small businesses as follows:

- Allow for a simpler non-appealable (Type I) permit lasting more than four weeks in length, up to one year (currently these temporary use permits are appealable (Type II) and have a maximum term of six months);
- Allow intermittent use permits for up to three days (rather than two days);
- Exempt farmers markets from SEPA environmental review;
- Increase flexibility to allow food vending carts as temporary or permanent uses on private property in Lowrise 2 and Lowrise 3 zones within urban centers and light rail station areas and in Midrise and Highrise zones, where certain commercial uses are proposed to be or already are permitted at street level.

Extending temporary use permits for up to one year for outdoor vending uses would empower individuals to initiate a business venture, starting small, perhaps filling a niche that is not well-served. For example, fruits and vegetables could be sold from temporary structures that could locate closer to area residents, serving areas where healthy fresh produce is not readily available due to scarcity of traditional grocery stores or green grocers. Expanding the current six month time limit imposed on temporary uses to one year, will make these ventures more attractive.

In addition, outdoor sales in the LR2, LR3, MR and HR zones would be excluded from size of use limits for nonresidential uses, and permitted within property line setback areas. The combined effects could be the creation of newly enlivened districts within these areas where growth is already encouraged by the City's policies.

Parking requirements

Proposed reductions in minimum parking requirements recognize the benefits provided by improving transit service for people to more conveniently move around the city, especially in those areas with frequent transit service. Recent data indicates that automobiles are owned and used less frequently by households in growth areas and areas well-served by transit. Reductions in auto ownership and use over time results in more residents fulfilling their needs for local goods and services in ways less dependent on car trips and as a result there is less demand for large quantities of parking.

The amendments would allow more flexibility for developers to provide parking in amounts tailored to the market and intended users of new development as follows:

- Extend no-minimum-parking requirements for any use in multifamily, commercial or industrial-zones throughout the city where frequent transit service is available within ¼ mile.

- Extend a similar no-minimum-parking requirement for new development on Major Institution properties located in urban centers or light rail station areas, where frequent transit service is available within ¼ mile.

The proposal recognizes that the market is a better measure of need for automobile parking. Requiring parking where it may not be needed substantially raises the cost of construction, particularly for housing and undermines efforts to reduce the cost of housing in the city. This is particularly true for development within areas that are well served by transit. Frequent transit service is a term used by the Seattle Transportation Department for transportation planning purposes to describe areas that are well served, generally with ‘headways’ (wait times) in at least one direction of 15 minutes or less for at least 12 hours per day, 6 days per week, and 30 minutes or less for at least 18 hours every day (*from the definition of “Transit, service frequent” in the Land Use Code, Section 23.84.038 “T”*). Currently in the Code, parking requirement reductions are available for certain uses, such as residential, for development within ¼ mile transit stops meeting the frequent service definition.

Major institutions located in urban centers and light rail station areas are also proposed to benefit from reduced parking requirements, in similar circumstances. Institutional development is already constrained by their available property and requirements for master planning. Major Institutions are subject to transportation management program (TMP) requirements that are largely effective in reducing single occupant vehicle trips and resulting in a reduced demand for parking. Balancing parking provided by an institution to serve its mission, modified by the TMP, parking pricing for on-street and off-street parking, and the continued on-street parking methods (including metering and residential parking zones) will be effective in preventing significant spillover parking.

Shaded cells show where the proposal would amend parking requirements:

Current

Use category	Location(s)		
	Urban Center (UC) or Light Rail Station Area Overlay District (SAOD)	Urban Villages (UV) w/ Frequent Transit Service (FTS)	All other areas w/ FTS (except UC, SAOD & UV w/ FTS)
Residential	None required	None required	Generally one space per housing unit
Commercial	None required	Various amounts required by use	Various amounts required by use
Industrial	NA	Various amounts required by use	Various amounts required by use
Major Institutions	Various amounts required per Major Institution Overlay zone provisions	Various amounts required per Major Institution Overlay zone provisions	Various amounts required per Major Institution Overlay zone provisions

Proposed

Use category	Location(s)		
	Urban Center (UC) or Light Rail Station Area Overlay District (SAOD)	Urban Villages (UV) w/ Frequent Transit Service (FTS)	All other areas w/ FTS (except UC, SAOD & UV w/ FTS)
Residential	None required	None required	None required
Commercial	None required	None required	None required
Industrial	NA	None required	None required
Major Institutions	None required	Various amounts required per Major Institution Overlay zone provisions	Various amounts required per Major Institution Overlay zone provisions

Amending parking requirements will provide significant cost savings in future development, thereby encouraging new development and investment.

Height Measurement in South Lake Union

This proposal would accommodate an alternative height measurement technique (currently used in multifamily and commercial zones) for development in the South Lake Union (SLU) Urban Center. The amendment would enable a choice between two height measurement techniques to avoid inadvertently restricting building bulk due to localized conditions, such as sloping sites and sites with previous grading activity (such as level surface parking lots that are surrounded by retaining walls at the property lines).

The following summarizes the applicable height measurement techniques, which are detailed in Land Use Code Section 23.86.006:

- The current SLU measurement technique: generally, to determine the grade level of the ground from which structure height is measured, a straight line is drawn between

corresponding grade elevations at the perimeter of the proposed structure. These lines are used for the purpose of height measurement. This technique is only used in SLU. Similar to a technique only used in downtown, the SLU technique was envisioned as appropriate for an area that is expected to develop at a highly urbanized scale and density with buildings built at or near the property lines.

- The proposed alternative measurement technique for SLU: generally, outside of downtown and SLU, structure height is measured from an average grade level that is determined by averaging the grade elevations that fall below the midpoint of the exterior walls of the proposed structure. This technique was adopted for use broadly in 2010 (i.e. in multifamily, commercial and single-family zones).

Given that residential development may be proposed in SLU in structures that would be set back from the property lines, particularly street property lines, the more urbanized technique would not be a good fit, as it was envisioned for a different development type. Therefore, the proposal would allow more flexibility to choose a height measurement technique befitting the type of development proposed. The current technique used in SLU was anticipated to be used primarily for larger-scaled-development, such as biotech research laboratories and office buildings. The introduction of the more general, lower-scaled-development technique is expected to result in development that would be compatible in the neighborhood.

Change Environmental (SEPA) thresholds to eliminate redundant review

The SEPA environmental review threshold (“categorical exemption” levels) is the level above which significant adverse environmental impacts are deemed possible, requiring that a SEPA determination of environmental significance be made. In the past, Seattle and other jurisdictions relied upon SEPA to minimize or eliminate the impacts of development that were not effectively addressed by local code requirements or for which sufficient protection was not provided.

As City codes have evolved, SEPA review has become redundant because other codes have been adopted that effectively mitigate the potential for significant environmental impacts. Relevant policies and codes the City has adopted include: Comprehensive Plan policies, environmental critical areas code, shoreline management programs and regulations, stormwater code, grading code, design review, Land Use Code, noise limits, transportation mitigation programs, energy code, building code and historic preservation policies and rules.

In addition, Seattle’s planning efforts are increasingly emphasizing actions that promote infill development in designated growth centers, as favored by growth management objectives in the Comprehensive Plan. In recent years, the State Legislature also has produced a number of bills to streamline SEPA review, adopting legislation in 2003 that allows exemption of infill residential and mixed-use development in urban growth areas from SEPA review. Seattle’s urban centers and station areas meet the criteria for this exemption, and raising SEPA thresholds, as was more modestly done in 2008, is warranted.

The proposal is to exempt from SEPA residential and mixed-use developments up to 200-250 dwelling units in urban centers and station areas. Similarly, to avoid impractically low-level

SEPA reviews for non-residential space in such developments, the proposal would exempt non-residential space up to 75,000 square feet in size when part of a mixed-use development. These threshold levels would reorient SEPA review to distinguish projects that realistically have the potential to generate adverse environmental impacts, thus creating a need for a SEPA determination and possible impact-mitigating measures. This would represent a better interpretation of where such impacts are possible in those urban center and station areas where the City's Comprehensive Plan policies and strategies already encourage growth to occur. The proposal also includes a clarification to the City's SEPA rules in relation to State rules so that procedural requirements are clearer, and eliminate risks of improper procedural delays.

Transportation impacts are the most apparent type of impact evaluation that could warrant continuation in future development reviews, due to the potential for individual future developments' contributions to local traffic congestion and a possible need for future conditioning. As a result, the proposal includes the codification of the City's ability to continue to require a transportation study that would examine traffic generation and other non-automobile transportation factors. These new rules would continue to allow conditioning of future developments to mitigate identified adverse effects, and would continue to allow an applicant to voluntarily participate in traffic mitigation payment programs that currently apply in the Northgate and South Lake Union areas.

The SEPA thresholds would be as shown below.

Exemptions for Residential Uses			
Zone	Number of Exempt Dwelling Units		
	Outside of Urban Centers and SAOD	Within Urban Centers or SAOD	For additions, modifications, demolitions, or replacement of non-landmarks that may meet landmark criteria
SF, RSL	4	4	4
LR1	4	((6)) 200	4
LR2	6	((30)) 200	4
LR3	8	((30)) 200	4
NC1, NC2, NC3, C1, C2	4	((30)) 200	4
MR, HR, SM	20	((30)) 200	4
Downtown zones	Not Applicable	((80)) 250	4
Industrial zones	4	4	4

SAOD = Station Area Overlay Districts.

Exemptions for Non-Residential Uses			
Zone	Exempt Area of Use (square feet of gross floor area)		
	Outside of Urban Centers and SAOD	Within Urban Centers or SAOD	For additions, modifications, demolitions, or replacement of non-landmarks that may meet landmark criteria
SF, RSL, LR1	4,000	4,000	4,000
<u>LR2, LR3</u>	4,000	((4,000)) 12,000, or 75,000*	4,000
MR, HR, NC1, NC2, NC3	4,000	12,000, or 75,000*	4,000
C1, C2, SM zones	12,000	12,000, or 75,000*	4,000
<u>Industrial zones</u>	<u>12,000</u>	<u>12,000</u>	4,000
Downtown zones	Not Applicable	12,000, or 75,000*	4,000

SAOD = Station Area Overlay Districts.

*When part of mixed-use (residential and commercial) development.

Research of Seattle development from 1995-2010 confirms that permitting decisions have used SEPA's impact mitigation authority primarily for construction noise (limiting the hours of the day when noisy construction activities can occur) and transportation impact mitigation. Review of extensive numbers of residential and mixed-use development SEPA analyses shows that construction impact controls were of most concern, but other categories of actual environmental impacts were rarely identified as warranting mitigation, within the range of project sizes that are affected by this proposal.

Based on this past data, approximately 35 to 40 development projects per year could benefit from the proposed SEPA threshold increases. This is the mid-range of development project sizes in Seattle, the proposed thresholds would still affect the largest developments, and the smallest projects would still remain unaffected by the SEPA thresholds. These changes would likely provide an incentive for infill development within these growth areas, due to a reduction in permitting costs, times and uncertainty risks. Such projects would still be subject to Design Review processes in nearly every case, which would help avoid most design-related potential impacts.

Another reason for the SEPA thresholds to be adjusted is that Seattle has also expanded its efforts to evaluate the impacts of future growth at a subarea level, which provides a more comprehensive perspective about the effects of growth. Examples from the past 10 years include environmental impact statements for broad rezones of Downtown and South Downtown, Northgate and South Lake Union. These evaluations provided a more holistic perspective on growth impacts and fit better with current local and regional growth management perspectives that are advanced by our Comprehensive Plan.

RECOMMENDATION

The proposed amendments are intended to spur innovation, create new jobs and employment opportunity, and to help jump-start development, particularly housing, by simplifying regulations, eliminating redundant City reviews, reducing development and business costs, and increasing entrepreneurial opportunity. The proposals will also improve affordable housing choices. DPD recommends adoption of the Roundtable's recommendations.