

Lowrise Multifamily Code Corrections Citywide Community Meeting - Summary January 14, 2014 Lowell Elementary School

Participation

Meeting attendees began arriving at around 6:00 PM. Attendees spent some time conversing, signing in and finding seats. A total of 170 people signed in on the sign-in sheets. There were likely additional attendees who may not have signed in.

City staff in attendance were:

- Jesse Gilliam – Councilmember Sally Clark’s office
- Marshall Foster – DPD Planning Director
- Mike Podowski – DPD Land Use Planning Manager
- Geoff Wentlandt – DPD Senior Planner
- Tim Durkan – Department of Neighborhoods



Community members at Lowell Elementary School assembling before the start of the meeting.

Welcome and Introductions

At approximately 6:40 PM Mike Podowski called the meeting to order. Mike introduced himself and members of DPD and DON staff. Mike provided an overview of the agenda for the meeting, and discussed a set of ground rules meant to help the meeting run smoothly.

Presentation

At approximately 6:50 PM Geoff Wentlandt began an overview presentation using PowerPoint slides. Geoff discussed the city's Comprehensive Plan strategy for growth. Geoff noted that the process to create the 2035 Comprehensive Plan is ongoing and welcomed community members to participate. The presentation gave an overview of Lowrise zoning, including the policy intent of Lowrise zoning, and where it is located across the city. The presentation summarized the purpose and goals of the major 2010 update to Lowrise multi-family zones. The scope of the project at hand – to address unintended consequences and correct errors stemming from the 2010 major update – was summarized. The presentation continued by focusing on several built or under-construction examples of development in Lowrise zones permitted under the new code. Certain features of the developments were highlighted as being potential unintended consequences that could be addressed in the code correction. The features included factors contributing to the height of buildings, such as combinations of development incentives. The presentation concluded with a summary of the expected timeline for the Lowrise multi-family code corrections. (See presentation posted on website for details.)

Clarifying Questions

Mike Podowski opened the meeting up for comments and questions. Mike explained that staff hoped to begin by taking clarifying questions on the presentation topics. Several participants preferred to begin by making comments or suggestions. For the purposes of this summary clarifying questions are grouped first, and all general comments, suggestions and observations by community members are summarized later below.

- Can you provide information on what has been produced, and what green building incentives and other incentives were used?
OK. DPD can gather information on the amount of development projects that have used green building and other incentives. This information would be included in the Director's Report along with the department's recommendations.
- Why isn't there more time for comments?
We're holding this meeting to hear comments from you. We also encourage you to e-mail any comments to staff or fill out a written comment form. Your written comments are just as good as the ones we have time for in the comment period tonight. (Note a document summarizing written comments received following the meeting is attached at the end of this summary.)
- Please provide stats on the housing types built.
We have some of that information but didn't bring it tonight. We can provide in later reports and on the website.
- Why isn't micro-housing within the scope of this project? Some of the buildings you are referring to are micro-housing.

The City is monitoring and evaluating micro-housing, and DPD has proposed improved regulations for micro-housing. Improved regulations for micro-housing (including adding a design review) are in progress as a separate but related effort.

- Does micro-housing count as an apartment?
Micro-housing is a form of housing where a group of up to 8 sleeping rooms or “micros” are grouped together within a single dwelling unit with shared common spaces and a shared kitchen. Micro-housing could occur within an apartment type dwelling unit, or within a townhouse or rowhouse type dwelling unit.
- Are changes to the 40’ height limit under consideration? Is lowering the LR3 height limit for apartments to 30’ or 35’ on the table?
Yes. Apartment type developments in urban villages and urban centers are currently allowed a height limit of 40’. DPD is evaluating a range of options to address tall buildings that may have more than 4 stories, including lowering the height limit to 35’ or lower.
- Do the numbers in the terms LR1, LR2, and LR3 zone correlate to the number of stories that are allowed in a building? Did it used to?
No. The numbers are just a naming convention. The higher number represents a higher level of development intensity and scale that is allowed in the zone. Before the 2010 major update, L3 roughly matched an allowance of 3 stories. However, even before the 2010 major code update the numbers in the zone names did not have an explicit regulatory connection to the number of stories that were allowed. For instance an L1 building was allowed to have more than one story.
- What are the requirements for public notice? When did the rules change? Why wasn’t there a formal notice 30 days in advance of this meeting?
There has been no change to notice requirements. This is not a formal public hearing. It is a citywide community meeting that DPD organized to get your input before any formal code change is proposed. There will be a formal 30-day public notice issued before a public hearing with City Council that must be held on any proposed legislation.
- How many meetings will involve developers? Is the builder meeting open to the public?
DPD is seeking to hold one meeting with a developer group to discuss this topic. The meeting would be during a monthly meeting that is held with a building trade organization and a variety of city departments, which is regularly convened to discuss permitting and utilities issues. It is not an open public meeting.
- Are we still issuing permits for construction during this study period?
Yes. Permits for construction are reviewed against the regulations that are currently in place at the time.

Community Member Comments and Suggestions

Mike Podowski concluded the clarifying question portion of the meeting, and opened the meeting up for general comments and suggestions on lowrise multi-family zoning code corrections. A line was formed in the center aisle of the room. Community members wishing to comment queued up waiting to speak into the microphone. Mike requested that each commenter keep comments to 3 minutes. Mike also suggested that if the content of a comment was already said by another person, it wouldn't be necessary to repeat the same content, which could allow a broader range of comments during the available time. The topics of comments are summarized below. This summary makes a best attempt to paraphrase comments, and is not intended to transcribe the comments word for word.

- Lowrise zones are appropriate area to build new multi-family housing.
- The community raised the issue of tall penthouses during the 2010 update and it was not addressed. The bulk of the rooftop penthouses is too much.
- Please consider averageing the grade plane height from the sidewalk or road elevation. Don't continue to allow the types of podiums that are resulting from the average grade plane measurement.
- The City should require something back from developers when a character building or affordable unit is removed.
- There should be a requirement for affordable rents when units are replaced.
- The cost of housing is the most important issue in city now. Don't make changes that would increase the cost of housing any further.
- When changes to code are proposed, the City should analyze changes to cost of housing.
- We are very concerned about new building that are 50 – 60' tall in an area with an existing patten of 30' tall buildings.
- Shading impacts are resulting from these new buildings. The height of new buildings blocks sunlight onto nearby properties.
- We need to consider trade-offs and implications of making changes to codes. We should be concerned about inclusiveness.
- Construction should be thoughtful and take into consideration the historic development pattern and context. I don't see that happening.

- We are very concerned about fire-safety in micro-housing. Some buildings are being built with no fire escape and only one stairwell.
- There is a lot of confusion about housing type. It is confusing that there are numerous terms including “apodments” and micro-housing. You are showing images of micro-housing in the presentation, but saying this is not the topic of the meeting. These issues are not separate to community members.
- The notices and signs for development are not prominent enough. Also, there was not enough notice for this meeting.
- The statements by staff sound like double talk at this meeting.
- I am excited about the new housing that’s been built in the Multi-family zones since 2011. I like the variety being tried. I supports some minor code corrections. But in general this new stuff is much better than the old “6-packs”, especially at street level, and we shouldn’t go back to that.
- I am concerned about houses that are next door to the new multi-family buildings. The setbacks are not adequate. I am concerned about construction in LR1, not just the issues in LR3. There are examples of row-houses inches from a side property line.
- I am really concerned about and old clay sewer lines. Developers should pay for new sewer lines. How can the old infrastructure handle these loads?
- I am concerned about existing residents, especially the elderly, poor, and disabled. New multi-family housing will impact these people.
- There is 30’+ new development in Ballard. The new buildings are blocking access to sky in backyards. Windows and rooftop balconies are privacy concern. The new development should fit in better with the existing homes.
- It is important to involve citizens in this process. The neighborhood plans should be considered. Regulatory reform put “upzone” overlay over neighborhoods without input by citizens.
- There should be a moratorium while the new rules are worked out.
- Do not allow the 40’ allowance in areas where the infrastructure is exceeded.
- This turn-out is good. However, pay attention to who is turning out. There should be outreach to renters and others who might be affected, but aren’t strongly represented by the people attending this meeting.

- Design is the key to good infill development. Sunlight is important. Think about setbacks and “wedding cake” forms. Clerestories that are setback from the roof edge are good. Consider using height measurement techniques that follows slope.
- Consider transit service and require builders to pay for transit. There should also be a consideration of loading and access spaces for micros-housing since resident turnover is likely to be high.
- We wants a 30’ height limit and Design Review for these projects. Also I Look at the average grade measurement technique. Average grade works OK for the uphill side, but the downhill side is too tall. We would like a moratorium.
- Based on what I’ve seen in Ballard the code allows unintended outcomes, circumventing Design Review. I embrace density, but communities should drive outcomes. I’m concerned about infrastructure, especially with micro-housing. We should also be concerned about potential cuts to transit. We’re adding density but the transit service is not adequate and could become worse.
- People feel like the desk is stacked against them. We don’t feel that DPD is following the law. Stop the FAR exemptions and other incentives. Please count the exterior stairwells and breezeways in chargeable FAR, and delete the FAR exemptions for the partially below grade basement.
- Infill development on Broadway or in the Pike/Pine corridor is good. Accommodate development in places like this. But we would like a moratorium on development in lowrise areas during the study period.
- I found out about this meeting through Seattle University. There should be better notice.
- I am concerned about the representation at this meeting not matching neighborhood demographics. Also consider future Seattleites who might want to live here in addition to the existing residents.
- Removing incentives for the partially below grade basements might reduce affordability.
- We want height limits lowered to the old standards. Please take into consideration the needs and concerns of existing residents.
- Apartment buildings are more appropriate in the Pike/Pine corridor and not along 12th, 13th Avenues, etc.

Closing and Next Steps

Mike Podowski concluded the meeting at about 8:15 PM. Mike reiterated that community members should e-mail further comments directly to DPD staff. Mike also pointed out that written comment forms were available and could be returned at the time, or mailed to DPD.

Follow-Up and Written Comments

Approximately 75 follow-up written e-mails and comment forms were returned. Many of the e-mails were extensive, and a large percentage relayed personal or neighborhood-based experiences related to lowrise development. DPD staff responded to each comment received. To summarize written comments received, a chart is attached. The chart identifies 14 themes that were recurring in multiple comment letters, and indicates the number of times the theme was mentioned by commenters.

