

Multifamily Zoning Update



Concept Summary



*Working with the Community
to Update Seattle's Urban
Neighborhoods.*

Multifamily (MF) zones identify areas where buildings provide housing for two or more households on one parcel of land.

Multifamily zones:

- **Are important for providing needed housing supply. Over ½ of the city’s 268,000 existing households live in MF buildings, most of that in MF zones.**
- **Allow for a variety of housing types, particularly affordable alternatives to single family home ownership.**
- **Make up about 7% of the total land area in the city.**
- **Are key for our ability to accommodate future housing growth, which the Comprehensive Plan estimates is 47,000 households by 2024.**

Seattle’s multifamily zoning is complex and is often relied upon to accomplish many, often conflicting objectives.

Why change multifamily zoning?

- **MF zoning was originally adopted in 1982 and has been frequently amended.**
- **It predates the Comprehensive Plan and Design Review program, which were adopted in 1994.**
- **As a result of the amendments, objectives are obscured by added layers of requirements, which can be redundant and unnecessary.**
- **MF zoning is complex, some designers say the MF code does not work. This adds to the cost of housing and works against goals for increasing housing supply and quality design.**

The goals of the Multifamily Code update are to:

- **Help create high quality MF neighborhoods through development flexibility;**
- **Encourage new investment in a variety of housing types, including affordable housing;**
- **Make the code easier to use and complement the Mayor’s Neighborhood Business District Strategy and amendments to neighborhood commercial zoning; and**
- **Support comprehensive and neighborhood plan objectives.**

The Department of Planning and Development (DPD) is part way through the process of recommending new multifamily zones to the Mayor in 2007. To get to this point we have worked with focus groups, done research and prepared preliminary recommendations in the form of concepts for new multifamily zones. A public hearing was held in May 2006 to discuss the concepts. DPD staff are attending community meetings this summer, leading up to another public meeting, likely in November 2006.

This paper summarizes the concepts that are intended to accomplish these goals. These concepts will guide the work of developing code recommendations. For more detail please see the full report, Preliminary Recommendations for New Multifamily Zones, available from DPD’s website:

http://www.seattle.gov/DPD/Planning/Multifamily_Code_Update/Overview/

Mix of Multifamily Zones

A range of multifamily zones will continue to permit a mix of housing types that allow increasingly greater bulk and scale of new multifamily development. Multifamily zones will continue to act as a transition from single family and lower intensity multifamily zones to more intense multifamily and mixed-use commercial zones.

Five existing Lowrise zones (from LDT to L4) are believed to be more than is needed to accommodate current and likely future housing types. Housing types to be accommodated range from duplexes and triplexes to townhouses to moderate density 2, 3 and 4 story stacked flats (apartments and condominiums). Three zones are recommended to provide for the necessary variety of housing types: a new duplex/triplex zone and two zones that would result from combining the Lowrise 1 (L1) and Lowrise 2 (L2) zones, and combining the Lowrise 3 (L3) and Lowrise 4 (L4) zones.

The Lowrise Duplex, Triplex (LDT) zone was intended to allow for additional residential density in areas of smaller scale duplex and triplex structures that generally abut single family zones.

Consolidating the L1 and the L2 zones into a new zone, more like L2, will continue to ensure that townhouses and smaller scale flats will be available, while helping to simplify the code.

Consolidating the Lowrise 3 and 4 zones into a new zone, more like L4, will help to simplify the code and promote more housing production of 3 to 4 story apartments and condominiums, as well as townhouses.

The Lowrise 4 (L4) zone was adopted at the time the City Council enacted stricter development standards, in the 1980s limiting development in L3 zones by lowering height and density limits. Some areas that were previously zoned L3 and developed to once more generous L3 heights and densities, were mapped L4.

For a comparison of existing and proposed multifamily zones, see next page.



Multifamily zones accommodate a variety of housing types to serve today's smaller households, including singles, young couples and seniors.

Recommendation

Consolidate the Lowrise zones and maintain the Midrise and Highrise zones. The proposed new zones would be: Residential 1, 2 and 3 (R1, R2, R3), Midrise (MR) and Highrise (HR).

Current Multifamily Zones

The following chart summarizes the building types and allowed heights in the current Multifamily Zones. For more detailed summaries see the “Zoning Charts” under the “Publications” menu at DPD’s website: <http://www.cityofseattle.net/dpd/>

Zone	Intended Primary Building Type	Height Limit	with a Pitched Roof
Lowrise Duplex/Triplex (LDT)	Duplex or triplex houses and townhouses	25'	30' to 35'*
Lowrise 1 (L1)	Townhouses	25'	30' to 35'*
Lowrise 2 (L2)	2 to 3 story apartment buildings or townhouses	25'	30' to 35'*
Lowrise 3 (L3)	3 story apartment buildings or townhouses	30'	35'
Lowrise 4 (L4)	4 story apartment buildings or townhouses	37'	42'
Midrise (MR)	6 story apartment buildings, limited commercial uses permitted	60' or 85'	60' or 85'
Highrise (HR)	Residential towers up to 240' in height, limited commercial uses permitted	160'	240'+

*In LDT, L1 and L2 zones roofs with a 4:12 pitch (slope rises 4' for every 12' in length) may extend to 30' and to 35' with a 6:12 pitch.

+Height limit in HR zones when affordable housing or open space is provided or landmarks are preserved.

Proposed New Zones

New Zone	Intended Primary Building Type*
Residential 1 (R1) (replaces Lowrise Duplex/Triplex)	2 to 3 story duplexes, triplexes and townhouses
Residential 2 (R2) (replaces Lowrise 1&2)	2 to 3 story townhouses or apartment buildings
Residential 3 (R3) (replaces Lowrise 3&4)	3 to 4 story apartment buildings or townhouses
Midrise (MR)	6 story apartment buildings, limited commercial uses permitted
Highrise (HR)	Residential towers up to 240' in height, limited commercial uses permitted

*The stated building type is primarily what is intended, although other types are allowed.

Flexibility

Focus group participants recommended increased development flexibility, based on principles, within prescribed limits. This approach to zoning requirements is based on the idea that simpler, less prescriptive code requirements governing building bulk can allow for design creativity, while providing development standards that better relate to localized conditions and, thereby, help protect and enhance neighborhood character. Flexible standards should focus on the principles to be achieved.

At its core, the approach relies upon statements of policy intent as precursors to understanding applicable development standards. This more flexible approach can

vary by situation or circumstances to be more responsive to the major traits or unique conditions of different neighborhoods. Standards are based upon situations or characteristics of different development sites. For example, the regulation of density and bulk and scale on smaller, infill sites of 9,000 square feet or less would be accomplished with a floor area ratio (FAR) limit and requirements for yards or setbacks, while on larger sites, additional requirements may apply, including maximum limits on structure width.

See page 6 for more on FAR.

Summary Comparison of Current and Proposed Standards

Current Standards (Prescriptive)	Proposed Standards (Flexible)	General Intent
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Density limits (number of units allowed per lot area.) • Setbacks • Limits on width and depth of buildings • Lot coverage limits • Modulation 	<p style="text-align: center;">Floor Area Ratio (FAR) + Setbacks</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Set appropriate scale of development • Provide for transitions to zones of lesser intensity

Concept Proposal for FAR and Setbacks

Floor Area Ratio (FAR)	Setbacks in Residential 1, 2 & 3 Zones
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • FAR would vary across the new zones to reflect the scale of building currently allowed • A maximum of 3 units would be allowed per structure in the R1 zone 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 5' setbacks from all property lines when surrounded by commercial or multifamily zoning • Front and rear yards required for lots abutting single family zones • For lots larger than 9,000 sqft. additional standards may be required (e.g. limits on building width)

Flexibility Continued

Density in a residential project generally refers to the number of dwelling units that occupy a development. Currently in the lowrise zones the density limit is based on lot area. For example, in L3 zones one dwelling unit is allowed for every 800 square feet of lot area. However, this density limit is redundant as the number of units in a development is largely controlled by bulk and scale limits and other requirements, such as open space and parking. Therefore, the proposal is to replace the per lot area density limit with FAR to better relate the number of possible dwelling units to allowed bulk and scale and other standards.

The success of interpreting flexible standards depends upon a clearly stated purpose. For example:

The purpose of development standards is to help ensure that new development in established neighborhoods makes a positive contribution to the area's character.

Recommendation

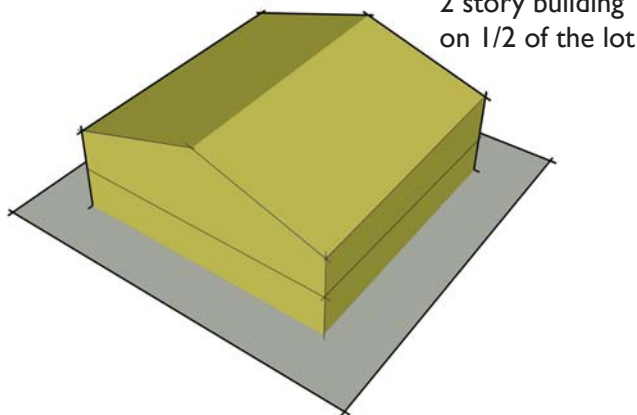
Include clear intent statements to aid in understanding the purpose and intent of development standards.

Recommendation

Specify which development standards should be flexible within established limits, such as height or building bulk, and how to be responsive to differing site and neighborhood contexts.



This development in a Lowrise 3 zone, was possible only through the flexibility afforded by the Design Review process.



For example: on a 9,000 square foot site where the building allowance is an FAR of 1 or 1:1, a building with 9,000 square feet could be built.

What is FAR?

- **Floor Area Ratio (FAR) is a way to regulate the density and bulk and scale of buildings.**
- **FAR is the ratio of floor area in a building to the area of the land on which it is built.**

FAR is the ratio of gross floor area in a building to the total area of the land on which it is built. If a one story building takes up the entire lot, the FAR is 1:1 or 1.0. A two story building on half of the lot also has a FAR of 1:1 or 1.0. If the building has two stories and occupies the entire lot, the FAR is 2:1 or 2.0. FAR is used extensively in downtown and is proposed in commercial zones to regulate density and/or bulk of new structures.

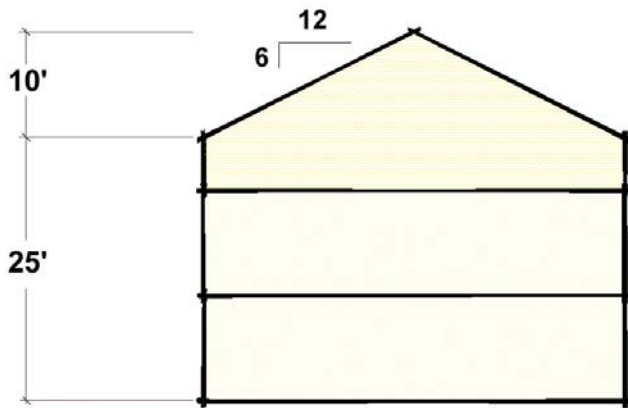
Height Limits in the New R1, R2 and R3 Zones

Development standards provide a transition in allowed density and bulk and scale of structures from zones of greater to lesser intensity. Height limits are key in this equation and may offer the greatest challenge.

An inconsistency currently exists in height limits among the Lowrise zones (see the chart in appendix A for a summary of MF zone height limits), particularly when compared to single family zones. In single family zones, a structure may be built up to 30 feet in height, however, in LDT, L1 and L2 zones, structures may only achieve a height of 25 feet. Lowrise 3 and 4 zones have height limits of 30 and 37 feet, respectively. Additional height is allowed for pitched roofs in all zones. For example, in single family and L3 zones an additional 5 feet is allowed for a roof that has a pitch of at least 4:12 (the slope of the roof rises four feet for every 12 feet in length). In the LDT, L1 and L2 zones, roofs with a 4:12 pitch may extend to 30 feet and a roof with a 6:12 pitch may extend to 35 feet.

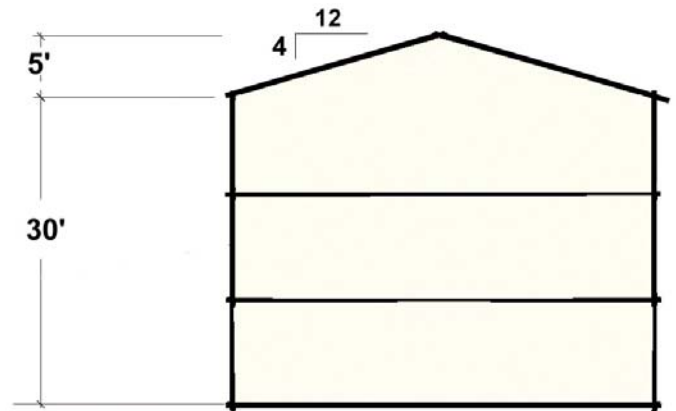
To restore consistency and a rational scale relationship among zones, it is proposed that the same height as permitted for single family structures in single family zones, be permitted for structures in the new R1 and R2 zones. 30' to 35' feet is generally needed to accommodate structures with three floors, which is common for single family, townhouse and other multifamily structures with parking in garages at ground level. In order to accommodate multifamily units with tall floor to ceiling heights or a fourth floor the recommendation is to allow a height of 35' (40' with a pitched roof) in the new R3 zone.

Recommendation
 Allow structures up to 30' in height in the R1 and R2 zones; and a height of 35' in R3 zones. Additional height would continue to be allowed for a pitched roof.



Current

Duplex/triplex and Lowrise 1&2 Zones: 25' + 10' for pitched roof



Proposed

- R 1&2: 30' + 5' for pitched roof (same as single family zones)
- R3: 35' + 5' for a pitched roof

Design Quality

Current multifamily zones often layer conflicting or redundant development standards that can diminish quality design in multifamily neighborhoods. Further, the overly prescriptive development standards can result in development that, by simply obeying inflexible standards, is not responsive to neighborhood context or character. An example is required façade modulation, which is dictated by the current code without regard for overall composition of the façade design, articulation of uses or different units within a building.

The Design Review Program has generally resulted in improved design of subject structures in Seattle's neighborhoods. Applicants may also volunteer for design review. Design review allows for departures from development standards when a design solution is proposed that better meets the intent of the zone.

Design Review does have costs. The cost to applicants, the City, and future owners or tenants, is largely the result of the time involved in the process, including community meetings, before one of the City's seven Design Review Boards.

For more information about the Design Review program, see DPD's website:

http://www.cityofseattle.net/dpd/Planning/Design_Review_Program/Applicant's_Toolbox/Design_Guidelines/



Well designed townhouses in a lowrise zone can create interesting streetscapes and multifamily neighborhoods.

For smaller projects that are not subject to design review, design related standards are recommended to provide for a minimum level of design quality and architectural interest. Basic standards will require architectural features as a relatively low cost way to provide visual interest without prescribing specific architectural styles. These types of standards do not impact development potential in the way that other prescriptive standards such as setbacks or modulation do. Other U.S. cities, such as Portland, Oregon, successfully include these types of requirements in their multifamily zoning.

Recommendation

Use design related development standards to provide for visual interest in multifamily projects that are not subject to Design Review.

Design Review (DR)

- DR has resulted in improved design
- Not all projects go through DR:
 - LDT, L1, L2 - No DR
 - L3, L4 - 9 or more units
 - MR, HR - More than 20 units

Proposal for non-Design Review Projects

- Architectural features required to provide visual interest without prescribing specific styles
- Won't impact development potential like current requirements
- Approach used in other cities, like Portland, Oregon

Open Space, Yards and Landscaping



Landscaping can help buildings of different styles blend in a neighborhood.

Current requirements for open space, setbacks (from property lines) and screening and landscaping are complicated. Standards stipulate minimum required areas, dimensions and percentages of allowed overlap (for example, a portion of required open space can, in some cases, count toward required landscaping). These standards vary by MF zone and then again by building type.

Further, the open space requirements do not necessarily serve the needs of residents either in amount or type. It is important to set requirements to meet the needs of residents for whom the open space is intended. Open space is often cited, second only to required parking, as adding unnecessary expense to the cost of housing development.

The intent of what is to be achieved by setback and open space standards is confusing. Some believe that landscaped setbacks reinforce a residential appearance; plants and trees offset the environmental impacts of development; and separation between buildings preserves privacy.

The proposal is to focus standards on the intended primary result: amenity requirements are recommended to provide for recreational needs and landscaped setbacks for residential appearance. This approach is more straight forward and would correct the redundancy and confusion in the current MF zone requirements. It is also proposed to continue to allow outdoor space to be provided to meet the needs of residents, but to also expand the list of permitted amenities. Interior spaces, or residential amenities, such as shared exercise rooms and community entertainment rooms are also desired by residents, particularly during the winter.

Residential amenity requirements should be aligned with those used in other zones. Such as in downtown, South Lake Union, and the current proposal in the Neighborhood Business District Strategy. For MF zones, the proposal is to require amenity space in an amount equal to ten percent of the total gross floor area of residential use within a structure; half of the amenity area would be required to be outside. The list of eligible amenities could include rooftop decks and interior common spaces as well as ground level open spaces.

The residential appearance afforded by landscaped setbacks is an important way that multifamily development can be made more compatible with surrounding development, particularly when abutting single family areas. This is proposed to be maintained. However, there are MF zoned areas closer to commercially zoned business areas and effectively separated from single family zones by other MF zoned land. In these situations setbacks are not needed for transition from property lines. This would allow for a smoother transition from the MF zoned areas near neighborhood business districts while maintaining transitions from the MF zoned areas to single family zones.

Recommendation

Replace open space requirements with residential amenities; focus amenity, yard and landscaping requirements on the intent of what is to be achieved by each, avoiding overlap and conflict. Provide for transition to abutting areas by the use standards for setbacks that are similar to those in abutting zones: with more yard-space required for MF zoned lots that abut single family areas and less when abutting commercial and other zones.

Parking

Seattle’s parking requirements for residential use are intended to anticipate the amount of parking needed. Parking requirements, in large part, are based on parking demand. Current requirements for parking in multifamily zones are based on estimates of parking demand established in the 1980s. Since parking requirements for residential use were established, new goals for parking have been adopted and several amendments have been made to parking requirements in recognition of the local demand and characteristics of different types of residents and neighborhoods.

Comprehensive Plan goals and policies for parking include direction that regulations should support Seattle’s transportation investments and should not create an over-supply of off-street parking. Appropriate off-street parking requirements, combined with more effective on-street parking space management, shared parking opportunities, and transit availability can help to make better use of parking and further our long-term goals for a more pedestrian-oriented city.

Parking Summary:

- **Often the code requires more parking than needed**
- **Local data shows lower demand in parts of the city**
- **Structured parking can be costly**
- **Shared parking and proximity to transit can reduce needed parking**

Recent studies of parking demand have shown that the Land Use Code often requires more parking than is needed in new development. This undermines the goals of the Comprehensive Plan and adds significantly to the cost of housing. A parking space in a garage can cost \$30,000 to build. The City Council recently reduced parking requirements for residential uses in several of the City’s urban center neighborhoods based on new information about parking demand in these areas.



Fitting parking and driveways onto a site can pose difficult design challenges.

To be consistent with Comprehensive Plan goals and policies, and with recent Council actions, local data will be examined to determine where parking requirements may exceed demand. Areas with similar characteristics may have similar parking demand, such as urban centers or high capacity transit areas. Other concepts to be explored are to allow wider opportunities for shared parking and to place a maximum limit on parking provided. These recommendations together can help to manage the parking supply better by allowing unused parking spaces to be rented to residents in other buildings without adequate parking, without overbuilding the supply of parking in ways that could run counter to transportation and environmental policies.

Recommendation

Lower parking requirements when supported by local demand and to support transit, to reduce the cost of housing, and meet growth management goals. Further explore ways to share parking and evaluate the effectiveness of maximum limits on parking.

Affordable Housing

Cities across the country share Seattle’s concern with the increased cost of housing and are looking for ways to make more housing available to lower income groups, including wage earners whose incomes are not keeping pace with housing prices. Seattle currently uses a number of approaches to increase housing affordability, including programs that provide subsidies for housing production.

Because of rapidly escalating housing prices, many cities are evaluating new developer incentive programs to produce workforce housing. In particular, an increasing number are linking density bonuses, greater code flexibility, reduced parking, and expedited permitting to production of affordable housing. Preliminary recommendations to amend Seattle’s multifamily zoning, including code flexibility, height limits, and changes to parking requirements, when combined with developer incentives, can ensure an increased supply of affordable housing, either on- or off-site.

Recommendation

Create and implement an incentive system that offers developers density bonuses and other code flexibility, or process incentives, in return for production of affordable housing.

Green Building

Green or sustainable building is an approach to construction that applies principles of resource and energy efficiency, healthy buildings and materials, and ecologically and socially sensitive land-use to achieve more environmentally friendly developments and ultimately better and safer neighborhoods.

For single family and multifamily projects, the City encourages the use of LEED™ or Built Green™. LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design Green Building Rating System™) is a nationally recognized green building standard developed by the US Green Building Council through a broad-based consensus process. Built Green™ is a green building program developed by the Master Builders Association of King and Snohomish Counties, in partnership with government agencies in Washington State. Adoption of LEED and Built Green in the marketplace will support many of the City’s housing and environmental goals by addressing the health of residents and the Northwest environment. The programs accomplish these goals by offering a menu of options that result in affordable, quality homes and multifamily projects. When compared to standard homes, green homes are more cost-effective to own and operate, healthier, safer, and more protective of the environment.

Recommendation

Implement a green building incentive system to encourage green buildings.



A green multifamily development.



For more information

on the Urban Neighborhoods project go to the website at: http://www.seattle.gov/dpd/planning/multifamily_code_update/ or contact Mike Podowski at (206) 386-1988 or mutlifamily@seattle.gov