



Seattle's Housing Choices

Seattle Planning Commission Report
Executive Summary
July 2003

SEATTLE PLANNING COMMISSION

HOUSING CHOICES REPORT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Comprehensive Plan

Seattle's Comprehensive Plan, adopted in 1994 to manage growth, acknowledges the increasing difficulty that many people have in finding housing that is affordable or of the type they need within their community. The Plan articulated the City's strong commitment to expand housing choices and to tackle affordability issues using a variety of tools. This includes exploring different housing types and changes in land use/zoning codes and development standards as tools to expand those choices.

Several policies in the Comprehensive Plan focus on expanding housing choices and opportunities within the community:

- × Promote and foster, where appropriate, innovative and non-traditional housing types such as co-housing, live/work housing and accessory dwelling units, as alternative means of accommodating residential growth and providing affordable housing options.
- × Increase opportunities for detached single family dwellings that are attractive to a variety of residents, including families with children.
- × Encourage development of ground related housing types including townhouses, duplexes, triplexes, ground-related apartments, small cottages, accessory units and single-family homes. (*Seattle's Comprehensive Plan: Toward a Sustainable Seattle*)

The Demonstration Program

In 1998, the City's Department of Design, Construction and Land Use (DCLU) initiated the Demonstration Program for Innovative Housing Design "to test housing concepts that could diversify Seattle's housing." The program focused on Cottage Housing, Detached Accessory Dwelling Units (Detached ADUs), and residential small lots—housing types that provide opportunities for smaller homes, either rented or owned, built within the existing single-family residential fabric. The Planning Commission advised and participated in that Demonstration Program for Innovative Housing Design.

The Commission has also played a key role in designing and implementing a public process to educate citizens and obtain citizen input on these proposals before they go to City Council. Finally, through this report the Planning Commission is making recommendations on the Housing Choices Initiative to DLCU, the Mayor, and the City Council based on public input and the Commission's own analysis.

Planning Commission Observations and Conclusions on Housing Choices Proposal

- × Generally people agree that Seattle is experiencing changing demographics and housing needs. An aging population, increasing numbers of extended families and single parent families require the City to look for innovative ways to provide housing options.
- × Balance and innovation will be needed in developing requirements and regulations of new housing types. New housing types must balance the desire to safeguard neighborhood quality and character and the desire to make regulations/requirements reasonable for homeowner-developers.
- × Many homeowners support allowing these housing types in single family zones and would welcome the opportunity to live in Cottage Housing and to develop or live in Detached ADUs.
- × Common concerns are parking, privacy, traffic, and neighborhood context and character. Both “carrots” and “sticks” were suggested to address these concerns.
- × A significant concern among some people is that these housing types or any code changes, might change the nature of Seattle single family communities.
- × Another strong theme is the need to ensure consistency and fairness in creating regulations guiding the development of these housing types. Such regulations should be similar to those applied to all housing types in the zones where they are allowed.

Planning Commission Findings and Recommendations for Detached Accessory Dwelling Units

Overall Findings

Detached Accessory Dwelling Units provide an important addition to housing choices for both homeowners and renters. They would allow for extended families to live together and for (new and older) homeowners to earn income to help meet rising homeownership costs. Detached ADUs also would increase the supply of affordable rental housing in single family areas with dwellings that fit into the scale and character of the neighborhood and where the landlord is on site.

Overall Recommendation

The Planning Commission supports and urges the City to move forward with legislation permitting Detached Accessory Dwelling Units in single family zones throughout the city.

Specific Issues and Recommendations

- 1. Inexperience of homeowner as developer and landlord**—Concerns that homeowners will not do a good job of developing Detached ADUs or of being landlords.

Recommendations

The Planning Commission recommends that the City consider several tools or measures to address lack of homeowner experience.

- × Create a Client Assistance Memo that provides a detailed, easy-to-use “how-to” guide on developing a Detached ADU and working with neighbors during the planning, design and construction of the project.
- × Provide access to technical assistance for homeowners interested in and going through the Detached ADU development process (ensure it is available to the full range of cultural/language groups).
- × Develop a plan book of pre-approved Detached ADU designs that can be used by homeowners developing Detached ADUs (See below).

2. Size/Fit of Detached ADUs in single family neighborhoods—Concerns about how Detached ADUs fit onto the site and with adjacent homes.

Recommendations

- × Develop a plan book that has a series of “pre-approved” plans for Detached ADUs that homeowners can select for the design of the Detached ADU. The plan book could help ensure design fit and could simplify the process for the developer/homeowner. For those wanting more flexibility outside the plan book, the Planning Commission recommends a simple, administrative process to ensure key standards are met.
- × Develop and include in the Detached ADU legislation performance standards for minimum lot size, maximum unit size, parking standards, setback, and height requirements that are consistent with those for single family dwellings. The Commission recommends that Detached ADUs should be built with sensitivity to designs as reflected in the plan book.
- × SPC recommends that Detached ADUs be smaller than the primary residence, unless unusual circumstances exist.

3. Locational or Siting Criteria for Detached ADUs—Concerns about potential concentrations in particular areas.

Recommendation

- × The Planning Commission recommends that Detached ADUs be permitted in all single family zoned areas, with consistent siting and design standards, rather than limiting them to specific neighborhoods.

Planning Commission Findings and Recommendations for Cottage Housing

Overall Findings

Cottage Housing is a housing option for people who want to own a smaller home in a lower-density residential area. The demonstration Cottage Housing project and existing older cottage developments indicate the marketability of these small homes with shared common spaces.

This type of housing is likely to be less expensive than larger single family homes in the same area and presents a valuable addition to the types of housing options for the increasing number of small households living in Seattle.

Overall Recommendation

The Planning Commission recommends that the City move forward with development of Cottage Housing legislation. Additional analysis can help determine where there is potential for this type of development which will make Cottage Housing a more viable housing choice.

Specific Issues and Recommendations

1. Density, Dispersion, and Siting Criteria — Concerns about concentration and related parking and traffic impacts; concerns about bulk, scale and privacy impacts on adjacent homes; and site design impacts (the inward orientation of design). Dispersion criteria and siting criteria were suggested to address these issues.

Recommendations

- × The Commission recommends that minimum lot size, maximum total lot coverage, minimum open space, and off street parking requirements be used to address concerns about these issues. Such requirements should be fair and equitable and not unduly burden or encumber Cottage Housing development as compared with other development permitted by in single family zones.
- × The Commission recommends against including dispersion criteria for Cottage Housing. This is *not* an appropriate requirement because of the difficulty of applying it fairly.
- × The Commission recommends that similar to Detached ADUs, privacy concerns be addressed by looking at standards such as size, location, height and bulk.

- 2. Open Space and Site Design** — Concerns about how Cottage Housing developments provide both the internal open space and still fit into the broader neighborhood context in the way it relates to the street and surrounding neighbors.

Recommendation

- × The Planning Commission recommends careful consideration be given to the open space requirement, balancing the desire and advantages of shared open space with the need for some consistency with the general siting characteristics of the neighborhood.

- 3. Design/Design Review** — Concerns about how to ensure good design and quality workmanship in Cottage Housing.

Recommendations

- × The Planning Commission recommends a simple design review process for Cottage Housing projects. This could be accomplished through a special design review board/team, including a neighborhood representative, with expertise in Cottage Housing that would be responsible for reviewing all such projects.
- × The Planning Commission recommends that DCLU publish a guide to Cottage Housing to inform potential developers and community members about basic siting and design parameters of Cottage Housing projects.

Planning Commission Observations and Recommendations on the Public Involvement Process

Observations

The joint SPC/DCLU public process provided an opportunity for diverse citizen participation and allowed for a broad range of feedback that will ultimately inform public policy about Cottage Housing and Detached Accessory Dwelling Units. This included three focus groups, a public open house and forum and a survey on the demonstration program.

The Commission commends DCLU in its efforts to expand outreach efforts to solicit input from diverse interests through distribution of the housing choices brochure, a survey to targeted constituencies, and the creation a virtual forum and on-line survey on DCLU's website.

Participants were primarily from two groups: single family neighborhood activists and people wishing to develop Detached ADUs or Cottage Housing. While there was the expected tension between these different interests, there was also movement and coming together on some key points in these two processes.

Few people of color, elderly homeowners, those from immigrant communities and generally lower income people participated in the Housing Choices public process. Further outreach is particularly important to groups, such as these, who could benefit from developing Detached ADUs. In addition, the City should focus outreach in neighborhoods where community revitalization is occurring and where there are opportunities for these housing types.

Recommendations

The Planning Commission recommends that after adoption of Detached ADU and Cottage Housing legislation the City carry out more targeted outreach to communities of color, elderly homeowners, those from immigrant communities and lower income people. The City could work with housing advocacy stakeholders, housing and neighborhood interests and revitalization efforts throughout neighborhoods of the city.

The Planning Commission recommends that DCLU develop and employ a broad array of tools for public outreach, particularly using online tools. Access to these tools should be marketed through libraries and various community service programs providing free computer access.