



NEIGHBORHOODS FOR ALL



Executive Summary

A high quality of life, natural beauty and a growing economy continue to attract new residents to Seattle. Since 2010, the city has added more than 105,000 residents, surpassing 700,000 in 2017. One implication of this growth has been a rise in housing prices, creating an increase in the exclusivity of single-family neighborhoods. Allowing more housing in single-family zones, especially in high-cost areas, is critical for stemming the rapid increase of displacement in Seattle's most vulnerable communities.

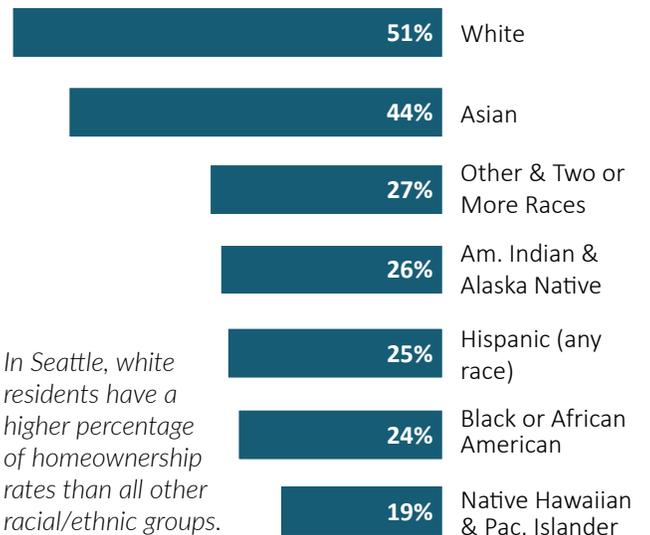
Opportunities for more people to attain places to live throughout Seattle will also help to remove the barriers that enabled institutionalized racial segregation in Seattle. Establishing flexible zoning that promotes diverse neighborhoods can:

- Bolster small businesses
- Increase environmental sustainability
- Promote the goals of the Race and Social Justice Initiative
- Increase transit access for more people
- Improve access to walkable neighborhoods
- Create opportunities for future generations, as well as for lower-income workers, to live in the city

The Seattle Planning Commission has approached this work with the hope of continuing this necessary and timely conversation about reexamining our land use policies.

Homeownership Rates by Race & Ethnicity

Source: 2016 American Community Survey 5 Year Estimates



In Seattle, white residents have a higher percentage of homeownership rates than all other racial/ethnic groups.

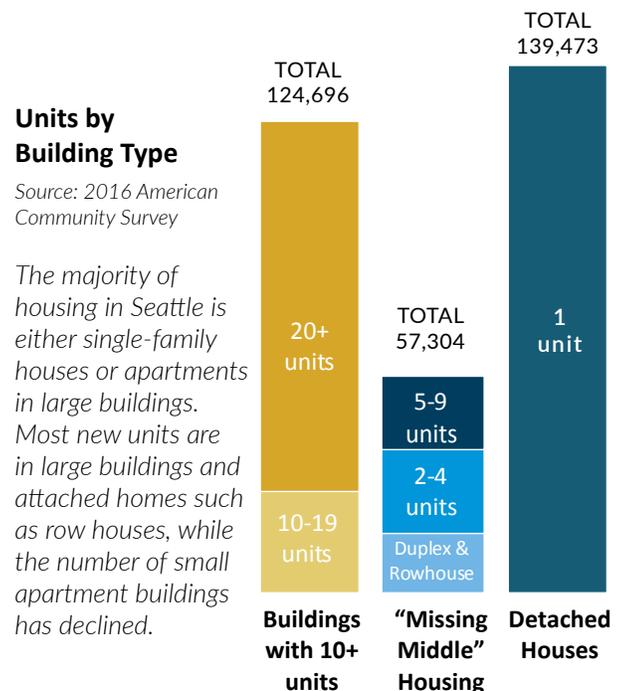
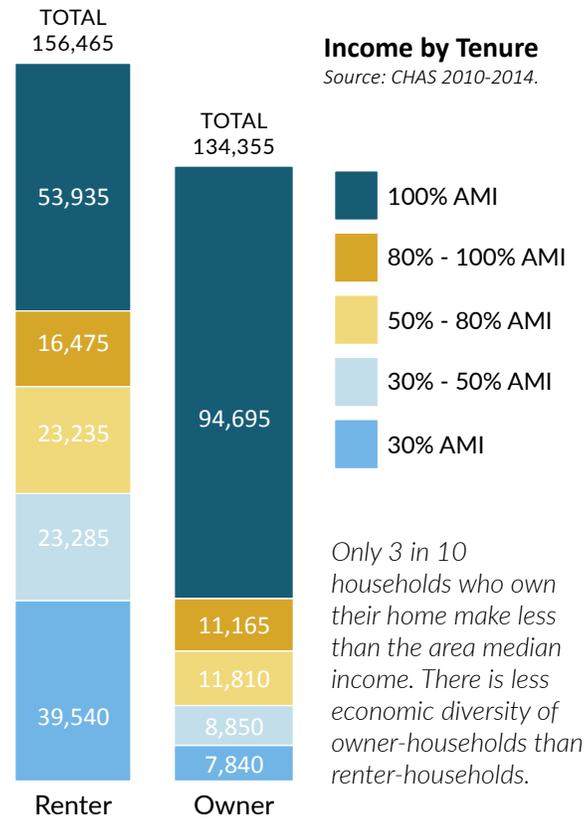
The fundamental goal of the report is to increase housing choices by returning to the mix of housing and development patterns found in many of Seattle's older and most walkable neighborhoods.

The large portions of Seattle that are restricted to one house per lot are quickly becoming more expensive, excluding many people.

- **The cost of housing in areas zoned single-family continues to rise.** As of August 2018, the median home price in Seattle is \$753,600--an increase of over \$100,000 from February 2017.
- **Rising housing costs impact existing and future residents.** Rising property taxes may force low-income home owners out of their homes, while children raised in Seattle may not be able to afford to live in the city as adults.
- **As larger, more expensive houses replace smaller ones, neighborhood character is changing despite single-family zoning.** The average size of detached houses in Seattle has grown over 1,000 sq. ft. from the early 1900's when the Craftsman-style bungalow was in its heyday. Only 3 in 10 households who own their home make less than area median income. There is less economic diversity of owner-households than renter-households.
- **Despite Seattle's growth, some areas of the city have fewer residents than in 1970.** Although the city has added more than 180,000 residents since the 1970's, some areas of the city have actually declined in population. Those areas primarily consist of single-family zoning on large lots.

The range of housing types is constrained by the amount of single-family zoning.

- **Seattle lacks a range of housing types that can accommodate a broad spectrum of households.** The majority of housing in Seattle is in either single-family houses or apartments in large buildings.
- **A small amount of Seattle's land allows multifamily residential.** Three-quarters of all the land that Seattleites can live on is zoned for single-family. This means that households with the economic resources to afford a detached house can choose to live in a much wider range of locations than those who cannot afford a single-family house or prefer a different housing type.



Single-family zoning limits opportunities for housing types that are inclusive to people of different ages and life stages.

- **Seattle has a changing population with a wide range of housing needs, yet housing policies preserve almost half of Seattle’s land for one housing type.** The total number of households with children has grown since 2010. The number of households with adults over 65 is also growing. This includes empty nesters who may be looking to downsize from a house but want to stay in the neighborhood.
- **Expanding housing choice in single-family zones requires more than accessory dwelling units and backyard cottages.** Even with the adoption of more relaxed regulations, a City study estimated that only up to 3,330 accessory dwelling units would be built citywide over the next 10 years.

Many of Seattle’s most walkable and sought-after neighborhoods were built before single-family zoning and minimum lot sizes existed.

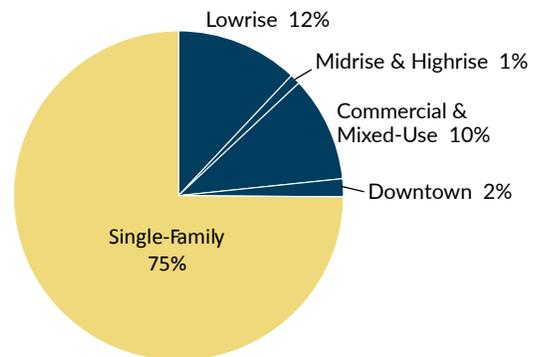
- **Standards established in the 1950’s are preventing new development from creating the diverse, walkable, and livable urban neighborhoods that once prevailed in Seattle.** Many areas within today’s single-family zones were zoned as “Second Residence District” in 1923, which allowed multifamily housing. Many of those buildings remain today, but could no longer be built, even though small-scale multi-family housing fits seamlessly into single-family zones.

Current zoning does not promote equitable access to public amenities and assets.

- **Single-family zoning limits the number of households within walking distance to parks and schools.** The high cost of buying in to a single-family zoned area restricts access to cultural and essential services on the basis of income.
- **Current zoning perpetuates the legacy of redlining, racial covenants, and disparities in homeownership.** In Seattle, white residents have a higher percentage of homeownership rates than all other racial/ethnic groups. The racial disparities in homeownership that are present today are a consequence of discriminatory housing policies that put households of color at an immediate and enduring disadvantage because they were denied opportunities to gain equity through homeownership.

Distribution of Zoning that Allows Residential Uses

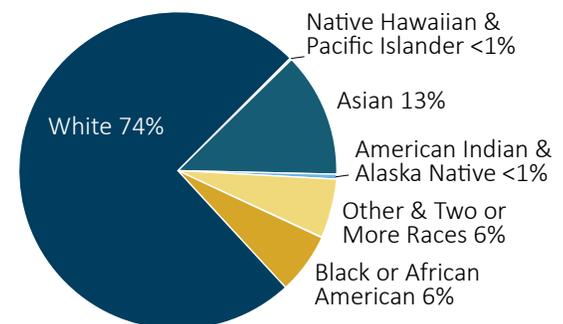
Data: City of Seattle



Three-quarters of all the land that Seattleites can live on is zoned for single-family.

Distribution of Owner Households by Race

Source: 2016 ACS 5 Year Estimates



The vast majority of homeowners in Seattle are white, while less than a third of owners are of households of color.

“Seattle has been shaped by its history of racial segregation and the economic displacement of communities of color.”

- Seattle Comprehensive Plan

The benefits and burdens of growth have not been distributed equitably throughout Seattle.

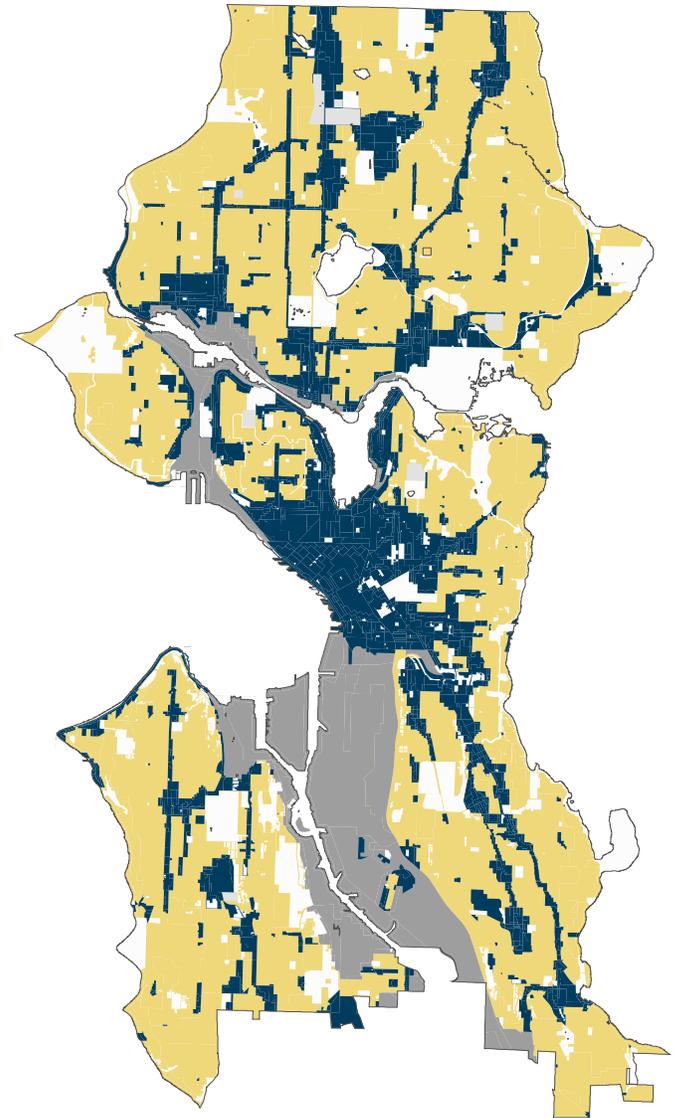
- **Most growth has been concentrated in a small portion of Seattle.** Since 2006, over 80% of Seattle's growth has occurred in urban villages and centers that make up less than a quarter of Seattle's land.
- **Areas zoned single-family are shielded from accommodating new households.** Only 5% of all new net units in Seattle from 2010 - 2017 were built in areas zoned single-family, even though almost half of Seattle's parcel acres are zoned single-family. Many of those areas are near transit, and have benefited from public investments such as sidewalks, parks, and schools; however, strict zoning has precluded them from absorbing growth through more housing.
- **Restricting housing in areas where property values are high shifts development pressure to areas already threatened by displacement.** Potential home buyers who are priced out of high-cost, single-family areas seek options in neighborhoods with more attainable prices, spurring displacement of existing residents, small businesses, and cultural anchors. This system gives clear political advantage to a portion of the population--more affluent, mostly white homeowners--in having more power to decide what Seattle looks like, how it grows, and where residents can live.

Seattle needs strategies to grow more complete & walkable neighborhoods.

- **Seattle's current single-family zoning allows one type of development which does not offer the variety and density to grow walkable, transit-friendly neighborhoods.** Single-family zoning precludes the ability to incrementally add a mix of uses and density necessary to support walkability and transit across more areas of the city.

Allowed Residential Use By Type

Data: City of Seattle



Only 20% of single-family units are renter occupied, and renters tend to have lower incomes than owners. Source: 2016 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates.

1 in 5 single-family houses are renter occupied.



Evolve Seattle's growth strategy to include residential areas across the city.

- **Expand all established urban villages to 15-minute walksheds from frequent transit.** Currently, several of Seattle's urban villages have very narrow boundaries, which limits the number of households with access to these services and amenities.
- **Promote the evolution of Seattle's growth strategy to grow complete neighborhoods outside of urban villages.** Seattle's growth strategy creates a chicken-and-egg situation: an area generally needs to meet the definition of a frequent transit node to become or expand an urban village and add density, yet the density necessary to support frequent transit is challenging to achieve without establishing or expanding an urban village.
- **Establish new criteria for designating and growing new residential urban villages shaped around existing and planned essential services.** A strategy of allowing more homes near parks and schools would ensure that communities can grow around public investments that contribute to livability.



Photo: Seattle Dream Homes

A corner duplex in Seattle.

Create a zoning designation that promotes the intended physical form and scale of buildings while being more equitable and inclusive.

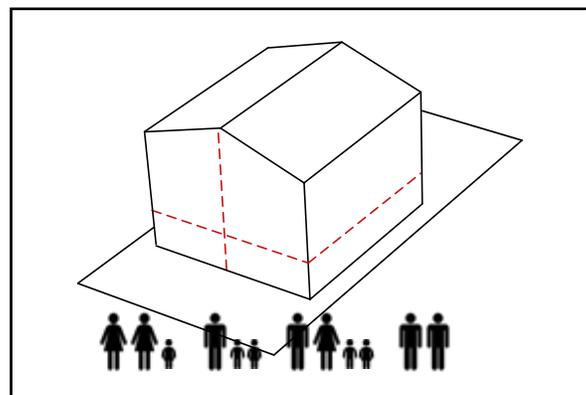
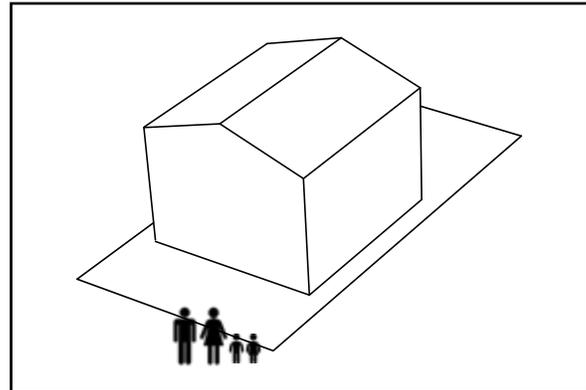
- **Rename 'Single-Family' zoning to 'Neighborhood Residential.'** The label of 'Single Family Zone' is a misnomer, as individuals and roommates can live in a house together without being a family. Changing the name of the zone to Neighborhood Residential would more accurately reflect the character of the zone, while not suggesting only families can live there.

Foster a broader range of housing types in areas with access to essential components of livability.

- **Establish a designation that allows more housing types within single-family zoned areas near parks, schools, and other services.** Allowing incremental infill of "missing middle" housing types in these areas will allow more households to access these services, build support for business districts and improved transit, all while maintaining desired residential scale.
- **Develop design standards for a variety of housing types to allow development that is compatible in scale with existing housing.** Ensuring that new development is compatible in scale requires creating development and design standards for specific allowable housing types.
- **Revise parking regulations to prioritize housing and public space for people over car storage.** Requiring parking on site takes away space that could be used for additional housing or open space. Prioritizing the automobile in this way is counter to our sustainability and climate goals. While driveways and garages could still be allowed, people would not be required to provide space for cars over housing or space for trees--especially if they choose not to own a car.

Retain existing houses while adding housing types that allow more people to live in every neighborhood.

- **Allow the conversion of existing houses into multiple units.** Accommodating more people within existing houses is an effective strategy that makes neighborhoods more accessible and uses existing resources more sustainably.
- **Allow additional units on corner lots, lots along alleys and arterials, and lots on zone edges.** Increased capacity along zone edges can provide more and varied housing while yielding better urban design outcomes because it can provide a transition between larger multifamily buildings and detached houses.
- **Incentivize the retention of existing houses by making development standards more flexible when additional units are added.** Allowing for flexible setbacks and lot coverage would make it easier to add additional units on a lot or to subdivide without requiring demolition of the existing house.
- **Provide technical and design resources for landowners and communities to redevelop and maintain ownership.** These may include: using geographic information system (GIS) databases to inform homeowners that their parcels are particularly suitable for expanded development, creating pre-approved plans, expediting the permitting process, and educating homeowners regarding potential financing strategies.



The same size building that accommodates a household of four could accommodate four households of varying sizes. Source: Carolyn McGunagle

Encourage more compact development on all lots.

- **Reduce or remove minimum lot size requirements.** Until 1957, Seattle did not have minimum lot sizes for single-family zones, and many older neighborhoods had more houses built on smaller lots. Those houses of a smaller scale have more porches and front doors facing the street, thus enhancing the pedestrian experience.
- **Create incentives for building more than one unit on larger than average lots.** Requiring or incentivizing more than one unit on large lots will ensure that land is used more efficiently while supporting walkable neighborhoods.
- **Limit the size of new single-unit structures, especially on larger than average lots.** Reducing the allowed size and scale could reduce the incentive to replace existing houses with larger, more expensive houses while ensuring that moderate, family-sized units are provided.

Ensure new housing supports greater household diversity.

- **Retain and increase family-sized and family-friendly housing.** To ensure that changes to single-family zoning do not reduce family-sized units, infill strategies should be designed to encourage a range of housing sizes and features that readily accommodate a family.
- **Remove the occupancy limit for unrelated persons in single-family zones.** An occupancy limit for unrelated persons (with no associated limit for related persons) penalizes roommates or non-nuclear families, and makes it challenging to repurpose large, old houses as apartments. Zoning should only regulate the density and building form, not the relation of the inhabitants.

These strategies would allow for a gradual, incremental reintroduction of historic building patterns while helping to preserve them even as we welcome more residents of all incomes, ages, and races.

The Seattle Planning Commission recognizes that many residents will regard the recommendations in this report as controversial and some will find them unwelcome. We do not make them lightly. A number of Commission members are themselves residents of neighborhoods currently zoned single-family and well understand the appeal of the traditional form, particularly of older neighborhoods.

The intent of this report is to draw from and maintain the pattern and scale of these neighborhoods while creating more options for current and future owners and renters.



Photo: NWMMLS

A duplex in Seattle, showing the variety in scale of multifamily structures.



Photo: NWMMLS

A single-story quadplex is compatible in scale with the surrounding houses, and activates the street with multiple stoops and entries.



Photo: PCRI

A modern, small-scale triplex building.

About the Commission

The Seattle Planning Commission advises the Mayor, City Council and City departments on broad planning goals, policies and plans for the physical development of the City. The Commission's work is framed by the Comprehensive Plan and its vision for Seattle in the 21st Century. Our work is also focused by a commitment to engage citizens in planning efforts that work towards Comprehensive Plan goals.

The Seattle Planning Commission is an independent, 16-member advisory body appointed by the Mayor, City Council, and the Commission itself. The members of the Commission are volunteers who bring a wide array of expertise and a diversity of perspectives to these roles.

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Michael Austin,
Pioneer Square



Eileen Canola,
Victory Heights



Sandra Fried,
Columbia City



David Goldberg,
Wallingford



Veronica Guenther,
Capitol Hill



Grace Kim,
Capitol Hill



Ellen Lohe,
Mt. Baker



Rick Mohler,
Tangletown



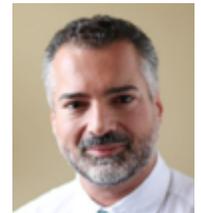
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Othello



Marj Press,
Wallingford



Kelly Rider,
Whittier Heights



Julio Sánchez,
Central District



Amy Shumann,
Hilman City



Lauren Squires,
Othello



Jamie Stroble,
130th station area



Patti Wilma,
Wedgewood