



# Issue-specific thoughts on the major update to the Comprehensive Plan

## Updating the Growth Strategy

February 2022

The Seattle Planning Commission advises City of Seattle elected officials and staff on policies and programs related to land use, housing, transportation and related issues. As stewards of the Comprehensive Plan, the Commission actively engages in the annual review of amendments to the Plan and a robust and iterative review of the major updates to the Plan that occur every seven or so years.

Last summer, the Commission offered [recommended overarching themes to guide the next major update](#). As a follow up to those recommendations, we are preparing a series of issue specific briefs, the first of which centers around the need to evolve Seattle's growth strategy to accommodate rapid growth in a more equitable way.

# A vision for a growing Seattle

Members of the Seattle Planning Commission – collectively and as individuals – engage with people and organizations from all areas and backgrounds to talk and think together about the future Seattle we'd like to live in together. Our shared values and vision most often come down to something like this:

*Imagine a vibrant, equitable, and compassionate Seattle, where we dismantle and repair systems of harm, and provide opportunity and affordable housing for all. Imagine a resilient and carbon-negative Seattle, where streets are for people and where everyone has access to parks, open spaces, clean air and water.*

The next Comprehensive Plan Major Update will engage still more current and hopeful Seattleites in developing the City's collective vision and will outline the policies and plans to get there. For our part, as the Seattle Office of Planning and Community Development begins to devise and analyze future scenarios, the Planning Commission would like to offer our suggestions for evolving Seattle's Growth Strategy.

## Summary of Recommendations

We recommend the City consider the following strategies as it constructs the alternatives that will be tested in the Comprehensive Plan Environmental Impact Statement:

- **Become a 15-Minute City.** The 15-Minute City concept advances complete, walkable neighborhoods integrating a mix of housing types and commercial spaces with transit and other mobility options, jobs, education, health care, and parks and open space – places where most of residents' daily needs are within a 15-minute walk or bike ride. The Planning Commission recognizes the potential for all residential areas to include a mix of neighborhood-based commercial and residential activity that can grow over time. These areas could include cafes and corner stores, live-work units, light manufacturing, and other appropriate uses that foster complete and resilient neighborhoods.
- **Expand the Urban Villages concept to embrace a network of complete and connected neighborhoods.** Beyond previously designated Urban Villages, the City's Future Land Use Map should be updated to reflect the potential for complete, 15-minute neighborhoods within the quarter-mile walksheds around existing frequent transit and expanded to a half-mile walkshed around existing and planned high-capacity light rail and rapid bus stations. The Urban Village map should be updated to reflect the resulting network of complete, 15-minute neighborhoods.
- **Actively address displacement.** Strong housing and commercial anti-displacement practices and policies should be a key focus for the next evolution of the Growth Strategy. Every zoning and land use policy change made in support of addressing the affordable housing crisis and commercial affordability must consider the potential for displacement of BIPOC and low-income communities and small businesses.

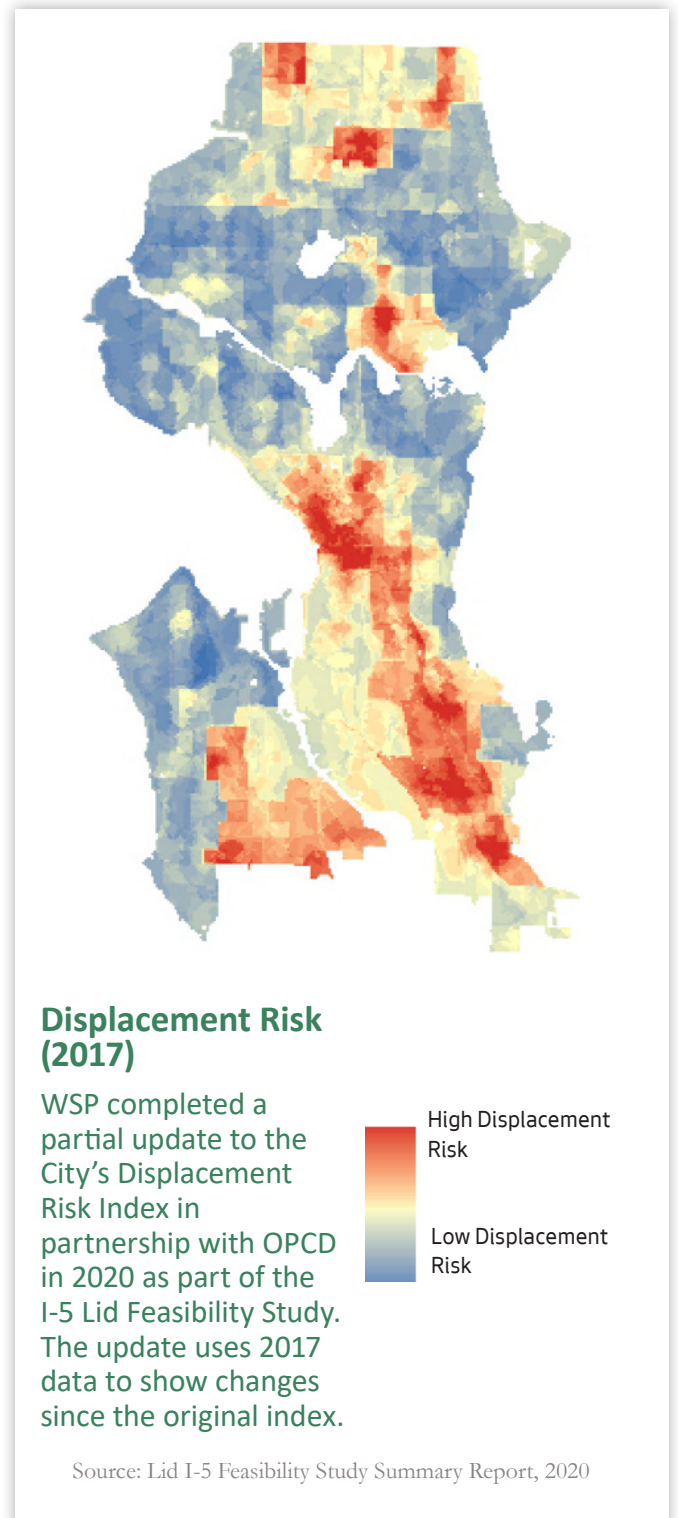
## Background

Over the last few years, the Planning Commission has produced several papers that inform our view of an updated Growth Strategy for the next Comprehensive Plan Major Update: [Neighborhoods for All \(2018\)](#), [Evolving Seattle's Growth Strategy \(2020\)](#), and [A Racially Equitable and Resilient Recovery \(2020\)](#).

In *Neighborhoods for All*, the Commission recommended that city policies and plans:

- **Evolve Seattle's Growth Strategy to grow more walkable neighborhoods within residential areas across the city.**
- **Create a zoning designation that promotes the intended physical form and scale of buildings while being more equitable and inclusive.**
- **Foster a broader range of housing types in areas with access to essential components of livability, such as shops, parks, and schools.**
- **Retain existing houses while adding housing types that allow more people of varying means to live in every neighborhood.**
- **Encourage more compact development on all lots.**
- **Ensure development of housing that supports greater household diversity.**

*Evolving Seattle's Growth Strategy* called for racial equity to serve as the guiding impulse of the Comprehensive Plan update while identifying three factors critical to the city's future: housing affordability, the climate crisis, and livability. The Commission noted that the Urban Village Growth Strategy of the 1990s had some success in steering development to areas served by transit but had left the legacy of redlining and social exclusion largely intact. Meanwhile, the prodigious infusion of technology jobs and wealth and ensuing rapid growth and displacement, coupled with startlingly rapid onset of



climate-driven disruptions, present a profoundly different set of circumstances. *"The Comprehensive Plan is a timely opportunity to envision a Growth Strategy designed to advance racial equity, end housing disparities by race, repair harms caused by racially biased policies and ensure that the existential threat of climate change not contribute to racial inequities."*

The Commission's *Racially Equitable and Resilient Recovery* white paper sought to draw lessons for the future from the responses to the pandemic and the police killing of George Floyd, recommending that city leaders adopt plans to:

- Work in collaboration with communities of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) to create a planning process that shares power with them.
- Advance housing choices and security in response to COVID-19 while expanding homeownership opportunities for BIPOC communities.
- Maintain the critical transit network and ensure that City rights-of-way meet safety and open space needs, especially for BIPOC communities.
- Ensure public spaces work for everyone by centering and implementing BIPOC visions for the public realm.
- Invest equitably in healthy and climate-resilient communities.

## The need for an updated Growth Strategy

The Major Update to the City's Comprehensive Plan comes during a time of both unprecedented crisis and opportunity. Seattle has benefitted from a robust economy fueled by the technology sector, adding tens of thousands of high-salary jobs and more than 100,000 residents in the last decade. The economic projections are bright, with baseline expectations for at least another 112,000 housing units and 169,500 jobs.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, we are experiencing escalating housing costs and homelessness, worsening impacts from climate change, growing racial and social inequities, and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Comprehensive Plan's Growth Strategy should communicate a vision for how Seattle will accommodate new residents and jobs in a sustainable manner that allows people of all races and backgrounds to thrive together. We must adopt a Growth Strategy that prevents Seattle from becoming an increasingly exclusive city, where only the wealthy can afford to live while middle- to low-income residents are displaced.<sup>2</sup>

---

1 2021 King County Urban Growth Capacity Report. Exhibit 55: DRAFT King County Jurisdiction Growth Targets, 2019-2044, p. 78. <https://kingcounty.gov/depts/executive/performance-strategy-budget/regional-planning/UrbanGrowthCapacityReport.aspx>

2 City of Seattle Market Rate Housing Needs and Supply Analysis. Exhibit 50. Scenario 1: Projected Households by Income Level, p. 55. <https://www.seattle.gov/Documents/Departments/OPCD/OngoingInitiatives/HousingChoices/SeattleMarketRateHousingNeedsAndSupplyAnalysis2021.pdf>

## Projected Households by Income Level

	2020	2025	2030	2035	2040	2045	Net Change 2020-2045
Total Households	348,257	369,605	390,952	412,299	433,646	454,993	106,736
≤ 50% AMI	85,665	90,096	94,528	98,959	103,390	107,822	22,157
>50% to ≤80% AMI	30,213	27,370	24,527	21,685	18,842	16,000	(14,213)
>80% to ≤100% AMI	27,702	27,593	27,485	27,376	27,268	27,159	(543)
>100% AMI	204,678	224,545	244,412	264,279	284,146	304,013	99,335

Source: Seattle Market Rate Housing Needs and Supply Analysis, 2021. Exhibit 50.

### The equity gap in housing and jobs

Indicators of the existing economic disparities show how great a challenge we face. The City's most recent housing needs and supply analysis identified a 21,000-unit gap of needed housing for households making 80% or less of area median income.<sup>3</sup> Housing scarcity results in more Seattleites experiencing housing instability and homelessness and fuels the displacement of low-income and BIPOC communities as many residents and businesses are priced out and forced to relocate. Lower-wage workers who serve our community cannot afford to live in Seattle and must commute long distances to their jobs in the city.<sup>4</sup>

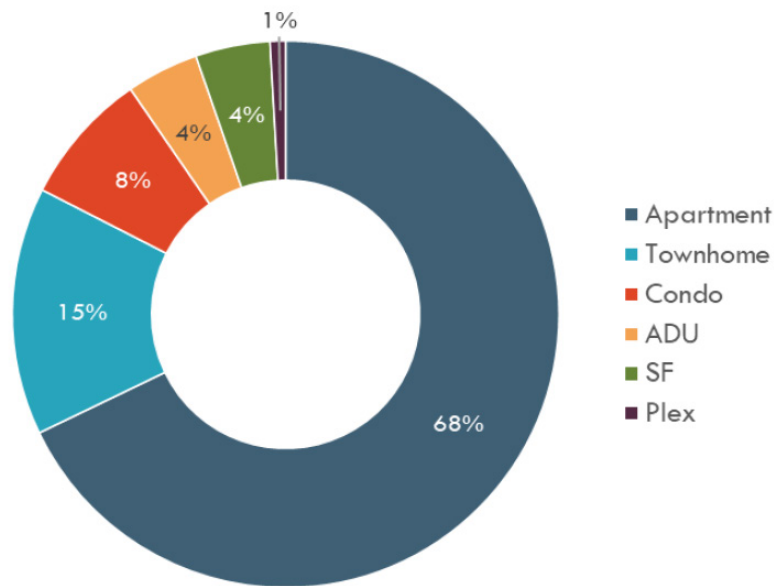
The 1990s Growth Strategy was adopted under a banner of maintaining "neighborhood character", a vague phrase that has seemed to give special status to detached, single-family dwellings over all other housing types. Whether or not that was the principal motivation, the result is that multifamily homes have been steered to the relatively small portion of land area designated as urban villages - mostly along busy, dangerous arterial roads - and away from areas of the city with ample parks and schools. Maintaining large swaths of "single-family" areas while constraining multifamily housing growth to Urban Villages perpetuated the effects of redlining and restrictive covenants and limited where many BIPOC households could afford to live and thrive. The subsequent redevelopment in neighborhoods where more residential growth was allowed, and City investments promised, unintentionally led to the dramatic levels of displacement of BIPOC communities that Seattle has seen in the ensuing 25 years. Some Urban Village neighborhoods, waiting for City investment, have also experienced displacement due to loss of cultural anchors and community-related businesses in addition to residential displacement. The City's recent racial equity analysis of the Urban Village Growth Strategy echoed this conclusion and found that "many BIPOC communities have suffered from insufficient housing supply, choice, and affordability." Outside urban village boundaries, current zoning allows very little capacity for future growth.<sup>5</sup>

3 *ibid.* Executive Summary, p. iii.

4 *ibid.* Low-Wage Long-Distance Commuters, p. 50.

5 *ibid.* Exhibit 58. Scenario 1: Forecasted Shares of Net New Units by Housing Type, 2020-2045, p. 63.

## Forecasted Shares of Net New Units by Housing Type, 2020-2045



Source: Seattle Market Rate Housing Needs and Supply Analysis, 2021. Exhibit 58.

### Achieving climate readiness

The urgent need to slow, mitigate, and adapt to climate change must guide our decisions regarding land use patterns, transportation networks, and building construction. We must address the fact that most of Seattle's residentially zoned land continues to be overly reliant on travel by automobile. Vehicle emissions are the city's largest source of carbon emissions, despite pre-pandemic increases in transit ridership. As the Planning Commission has noted previously, the next iteration of Seattle's Growth Strategy must "explicitly abandon the car-centric focus that has held sway since the middle of the last century," recognizing that the shift will occur over the life of the 20-year plan.

Seattle has made progress in building light rail and bus rapid transit and will continue to expand these networks to provide more access for its residents. However, the city cannot realize the full benefits of this massive investment without adopting zoning and development policies to accommodate significantly more households in the walkshed of high-capacity transit. At the same time, we must overcome the previous Growth Strategy's approach of maintaining large areas of the city in a state of automobile dependency by allowing a wider variety of residential and commercial uses in Neighborhood Residential zones, thereby making increasingly frequent transit possible citywide.



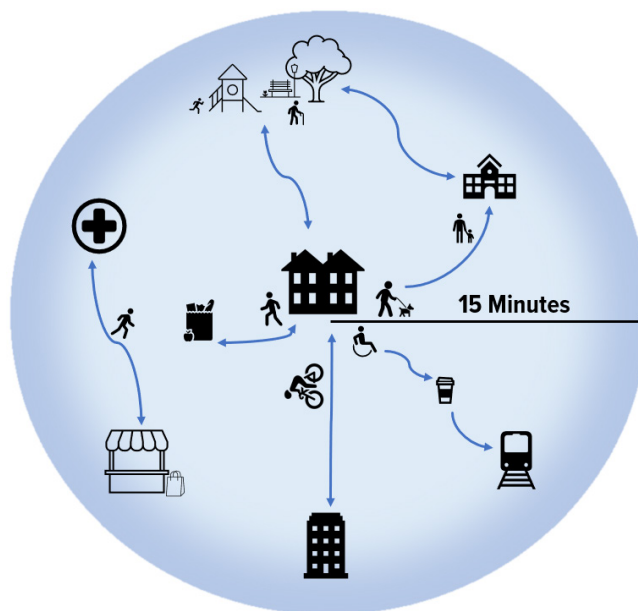
# Recommendations for an updated Growth Strategy

## A call for genuine, effective community engagement

To reverse existing inequities, the next Growth Strategy must lead to policies and plans that make the city better for everyone, especially those previously left behind. The framing and development of the Major Update to the Comprehensive Plan must evolve from robust and genuine outreach engaging all our communities, especially those who have benefited least from past practices and outcomes. To achieve this engagement, the process and materials used must be accessible to all in all parts of the city, regardless of language spoken or familiarity with the jargon of conventional city planning. City leaders must ensure robust engagement with BIPOC communities with a goal of community-focused “placekeeping” – the active care and maintenance of a place and its social fabric by the people who live, work, and recreate there – and resiliency to the effects of climate change and economic shocks. The Commission will be preparing additional correspondence regarding the need for a comprehensive community engagement strategy in the Comprehensive Plan Major Update.

## Become a 15-Minute City

[The 15-Minute City](#) concept advances complete, walkable communities integrating a mix of housing types and commercial spaces with transit and other mobility options, jobs, education, health care, and parks and open space – places where most of residents’ daily needs are within a 15-minute walk or bike ride. A central tenet of this concept is to engage residents of all backgrounds in identifying the services and features they deem essential for nearby access. The Planning Commission recognizes the potential for all residential areas to include a mix of neighborhood-based commercial and residential activity that can grow over time. Depending on local conditions, these areas could include features such as cafes and corner stores, live-work units, light manufacturing, and other appropriate uses that foster complete and resilient neighborhoods.

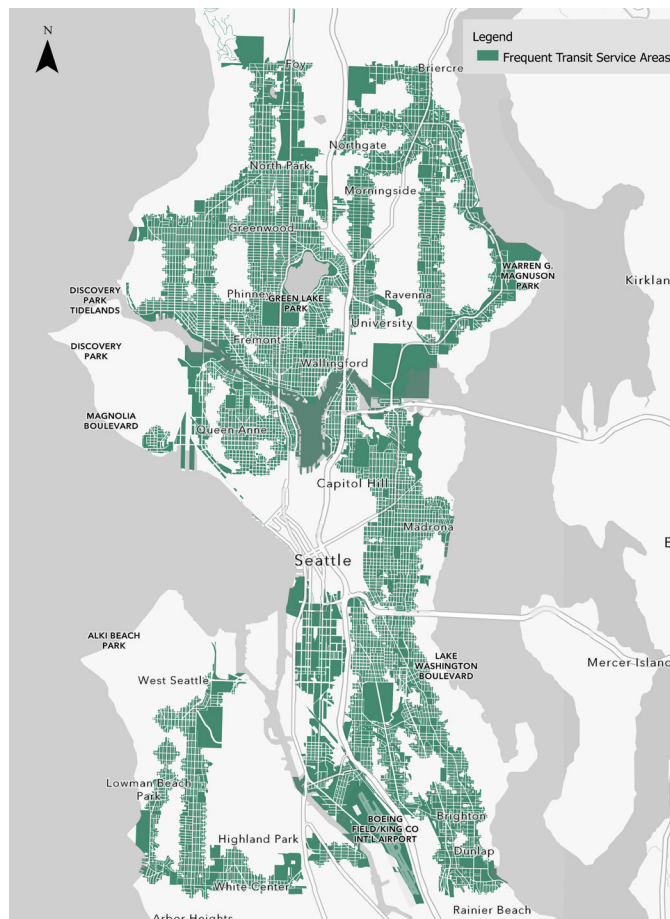


15-Minute City conceptual graphic. Source: Seattle Planning Commission

COVID-19 has clearly illustrated the need to better integrate residential, commercial, and social opportunities. By allowing a greater variety of uses, neighborhoods can expand opportunities for residents and businesses, reduce commutes, and enhance walkability. Prioritizing affordable commercial spaces in these neighborhoods will allow small businesses, non-profit organizations, and creative industries to thrive. By empowering communities that have been underserved and negatively impacted by top-down planning in the past, Seattle can leverage the concept of 15-minute neighborhoods to improve racial equity outcomes by supporting the expansion of neighborhood businesses and local jobs in these areas.

### From isolated Urban Villages to a network of complete and connected neighborhoods

From the perspective of zoning and land-use regulation, the Planning Commission recommends that the next Growth Strategy shift from a focus on a relative handful of Urban Villages toward a citywide, connected network of complete neighborhoods, each with a variety of housing and jobs and served by both frequent transit and a diversity of uses. To accomplish this, the City should use the Frequent Transit Service Area Map as a framework for a broader distribution of potential 15-minute neighborhoods. Land use designations on the City's Future Land Use Map should reflect this goal within the quarter-mile walkshed of frequent transit service. In the case of existing and planned high-capacity light rail and rapid bus stations, however, the walkshed should be expanded to a half-mile. The Urban Village map should be updated to reflect the resulting network of complete, 15-minute neighborhoods.



Map of Frequent Transit Network in Seattle. Source: City of Seattle GIS Program



## Actively addressing displacement

Strong housing and commercial anti-displacement practices and policies should be a key focus for the next evolution of the Growth Strategy. We intend to release an issue brief in 2022 addressing this critical issue. Every zoning and land use policy change made in support of addressing the affordable housing crisis and commercial affordability must consider the potential for displacement of BIPOC and low-income communities and small businesses. This should include prioritizing implementation of anti-displacement measures and ensuring growth in areas of high displacement risk, and also expanding growth opportunities in areas of high opportunity and low displacement risk. The City should develop measures to expand opportunities for homeownership and small businesses for members of our BIPOC communities. In addition, the City must commit to policies for the placement and expansion of affordable housing that increase access to jobs and transit, while improving protections for renters and vulnerable households. The City also should acquire property for housing and promote land trusts, shared equity or limited equity cooperatives, and other community ownership models. These strategies should be implemented in support of building wealth in BIPOC communities when land values are increased through changes to development standards and zoning regulations to allow the development of more housing types and community-owned spaces.

## Conclusion

With Seattle rapidly becoming unaffordable to all but the highest earners, the consequences of the current Growth Strategy are clear - a stark divide between those who can and cannot access housing in high opportunity areas, a limit on housing types like townhomes, duplexes, and accessory dwelling units, and an increasing gap in housing and job quality, diversity, and access. The next Growth Strategy must consider the whole city to ensure that Seattle welcomes people of all incomes - those already here, those yet to arrive, and those who have been priced out but continue to come to Seattle for work or cultural activities. The Growth Strategy must also develop policies and tools to prevent loss of residents and jobs from communities at high risk of displacement. In the future, Seattle must pursue bold and meaningful actions that address the scale of our current and future housing and employment needs.

The Planning Commission will be engaged throughout the process as the City develops the Growth Strategy for the Comprehensive Plan Major Update. We are looking forward to continuing and expanding conversations around the scope and direction of the Growth Strategy. The Commission welcomes input from communities and stakeholders throughout the city, acknowledging that we are not (and should not be) the sole creators of a vision for the next evolution of how Seattle manages its growth.