

The Seattle Planning Commission's short guide to planning in Seattle

Role of the Seattle Planning Commission

The Planning Commission

A 16-member Commission, we advise the Mayor, City Council and City departments on broad planning goals, policies and plans for the physical development of the City. Each Commissioner serves a three year term and can only serve two consecutive terms. Commissioners are appointed by the Mayor and City Council, and serve of the Commission as unpaid volunteers.

The Commission receives requests for their expert opinions from the Mayor, City Council or City Departments. The Commission also engages in independent analysis and promotes issues that are vital to livability.

The Commission holds meetings that are open to the public twice a month, as well as hosting and attending community events on occasion. Visit our website to learn more about the Commission and how to participate in our work.

<https://www.seattle.gov/planningcommission>

How planning manages growth

Comprehensive Planning

Cities in Washington State are required to adopt updated Comprehensive Plans every seven years. These plans describe high level goals and contain information about how and where development will happen in the city. They also describe how the City will support current and future residents through open space, utilities, human services, etc.

Every update of the Comprehensive Plan involves soliciting feedback and guidance from community members about how goals and policies can better reflect the current conditions and community values.

The Comprehensive Plan can also be amended annually, and anyone can submit an amendment proposal.

How planning manages growth (cont.)

Other Plans

The City and King County also generate additional plans that focus on certain kinds of infrastructure, or on a smaller geographic area (typically neighborhood scale). The community is also engaged in the development of these kinds of plans, with a focus on working closely with the community being impacted by the plan.

Zoning

The land in the city is divided into zones. In some zones, the land can be used for apartments; other zones only allow industrial or manufacturing uses. In this way, zoning designates how land can be used for a given part of the city, and determines the shape and size of buildings that can be built in that zone.

Community members can work with City staff to make a request for re-zoning particular areas or properties.

Land Use (and land use code)

This is the term used to refer to any policies or legal decisions related to the way that land is used. There are land use planners that develop and update land use policies under the direction of the Mayor and City Council. Investors and developers rely on land use decisions to predict the value of their properties or investments. The City has a set of municipal codes, including land use codes that establish health and safety requirements (fire code, building and construction codes, etc).

Development Standards

These standards establish construction specifications. They include requirements for how far a building is set back from the edge of a property line, or limit a building's height. They can also define which materials are allowed, and prohibit materials that don't meet health and safety standards.

Design Review

Seattle has a Design Review Program that uses a set of guidelines to review most private development projects in Seattle. Design guidelines define the qualities of architecture, urban design, and outdoor space that make for successful projects and communities. Design review does not apply in single-family neighborhoods.

Community members can become a member of a design review board. If you don't have time to join a board, you can still give comments to your City Council member or City staff about projects and design. <http://www.seattle.gov/sdci/about-us/who-we-are/design-review>

Permits

Property owners apply for permits when they want to construct new buildings, or make changes to current buildings. This allows the City to review their plans and confirm that the building will comply with necessary health and safety standards.



Who makes planning decisions?

Community members

Community members are consulted, and participate in community engagement as the City develops policies, plans and projects. City residents also elect the Mayor and City Council members, and vote on levies and other city ballots and initiatives.

City staff

Staff are typically the first point of contact that community members have with the City regarding projects, policies or planning efforts.

<https://www.seattle.gov/directory/>

City Council

In Seattle the City Council is responsible for the city's legislative branch, developing laws and policies. They also approve the City's budget annually. Council is responsible for all legislation related to the city's libraries, parks, utilities, police and fire department.

<https://www.seattle.gov/council>

Mayor

The Seattle mayor is the head of the executive branch of the city, managing 25 departments. The Mayor's office creates a proposed annual budget, to be approved by City Council. The Mayor also proposes legislation, and enforces laws enacted by City Council.

<https://www.seattle.gov/mayor>

Private stakeholders with financial interests

Property owners are included in conversations about land use and zoning. Changes to zoning or land use code dictate what a property owner can build, and how buildings can be used.

Directors of departments & offices

Directors supervise and manage the budgets and operations of their office or department, and they are accountable to the Mayor and the City Council.

How you can get involved

You can make sure your voice is heard by:

- **Joining a City board or commission, or attending their meetings to weigh in on topics that impact your community**
<https://www.seattle.gov/boards-and-commissions>
- **Coming to community meetings and open house events and talk to city staff about your community**
<https://www.seattle.gov/opcd>
- **Using the City's directory to contact staff working on projects in your neighborhood**
<https://www.seattle.gov/directory/>
- **Contacting your City Council member**
<https://www.seattle.gov/council>
- **Talking with neighbors and joining community led organizations**
<https://www.seattle.gov/neighborhoods/>

Glossary

Environmentally Sustainable: Conserving an ecological balance by avoiding the depletion of natural resources.

Floor Area Ratio (F.A.R.): The gross floor area of a building divided by the total area of the site. For example, a 20,000 square foot building on a site with an area of 10,000 square feet has a floor area ratio of 2.0. This applies regardless of the building's height, so the building could have five stories of 4,000 square feet each or two stories of 10,000 square feet each.

Growth Management Act: An Act adopted in Washington State in 1990 that requires state and local governments to develop plans for managing their growth, and protecting natural resource lands and environmentally critical areas.

Racial Equity: A project, program or plan is racially equitable if it responds to racial disparities, ensuring that race, or other marginalized identities do not predict a community member's life outcomes (health, education, employment, wealth, etc).

Redlining: A Federal Housing Authority funded practice, implemented by the Homeowners Loan Corporation of America, denying loans and other financial services to neighborhoods with high populations of residents of color.

Urban Village: Areas designated in Seattle's Comprehensive Plan for future growth. These are generally areas that include long-standing neighborhood business districts along with zoning that can accommodate further development. The three types of urban villages in Seattle are urban centers, hub urban villages, and residential urban villages.

Accessory Dwelling Unit (ADU/DADU): A housing unit that is in addition to the primary residence on a site. An accessory unit may be attached to or detached from the primary residence.

Affordable Housing: Affordable housing is defined in the Seattle's Land Use Code as "a housing unit for which the occupant is paying no more than 30 percent of household income for gross housing costs, including an allowance for utility costs paid by the occupant."

AMI: The area median income (AMI) is the household income for the median — or middle — household in a region. Each year, the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) calculates the median income for every metropolitan region in the country for purposes of determining the eligibility of applicants for certain federal housing programs.

Buildable Land: Defined by the Washington Community, Trade and Economic Development department as, "both vacant land and land thought to be under-developed (more units could be added) and redevelopable (demolition and reconstruction)."

Displacement: The involuntary relocation of residents or businesses from their current residence. This is a different phenomenon than when property owners voluntarily sell their interests to capture an increase in value. Economic displacement occurs when residents and businesses can no longer afford rising rents or property taxes. Cultural displacement occurs when people choose to move because their neighbors and culturally related businesses have left the area.

Seattle Planning Commission,
600 4th Ave, Floor 5; PO Box 94788 Seattle, WA. 98124-7088
Tel: (206) 684-8694, TDD: (206) 684-8118
www.seattle.gov/planningcommission