



Frequently Asked Questions

Answers pertain to the first draft of code amendments, issued in January 2025

1. What is middle housing?

Answer: Washington State defines middle housing in the Growth Management Act (GMA) as, "...buildings that are compatible in scale, form, and character with single-family houses and contain two or more attached, stacked, or clustered homes including duplexes, triplexes, fourplexes, fiveplexes, sixplexes, townhouses, stacked flats, courtyard apartments, and cottage housing."

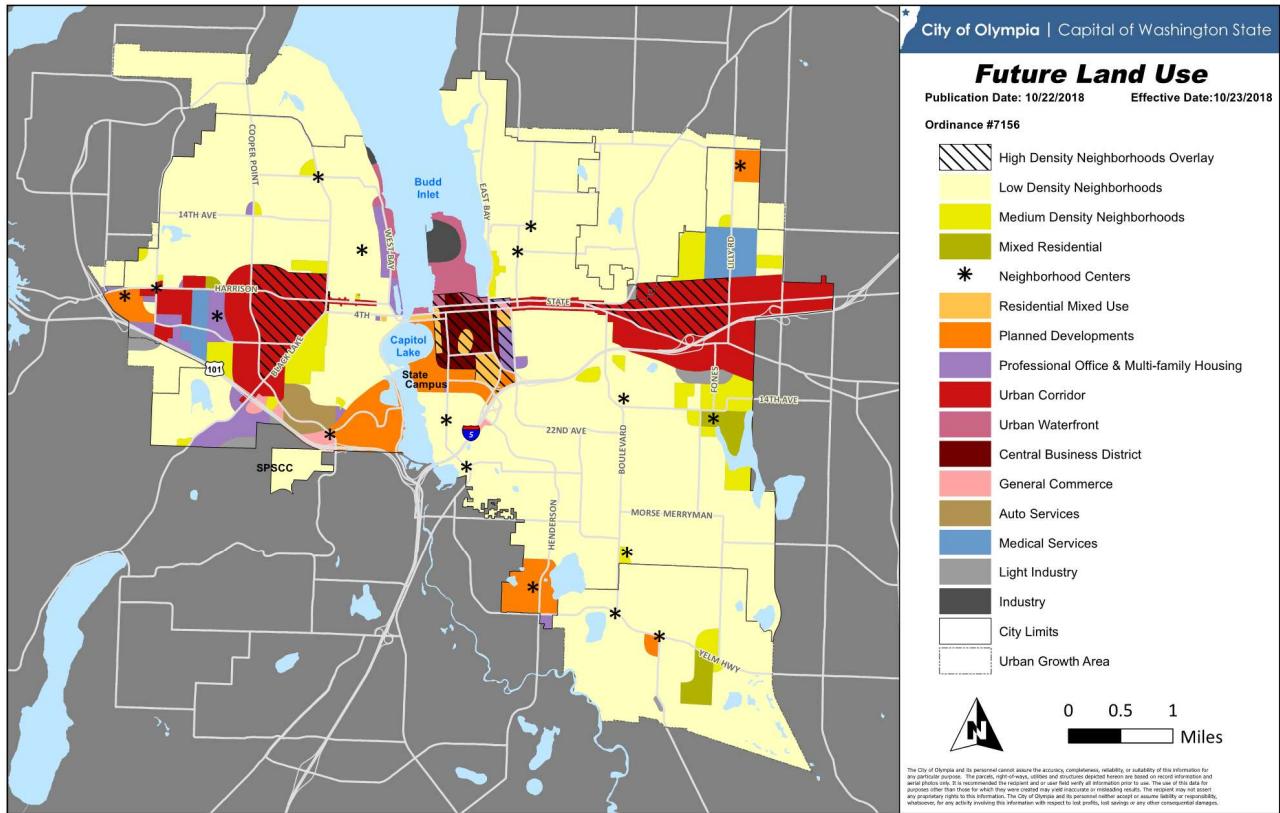
2. How will Olympia determine if middle housing is compatible in scale, form, and character?

Answer: The same provisions will apply to middle housing that apply to single family homes in the same areas. For example, some parts of the City are located in the Infill Design Review District. In those areas, Infill and Other Residential design review provisions apply to all residences, whether it is for a new single family detached home, a duplex, a triplex, or other type of residences. Additionally, the zoning standards of the applicable zoning district will also apply.

In other areas, there may not be design review required for single family homes, which means there would not be design review for middle housing either. However, the same provisions for all lots within the same zoning district will apply – such as lot coverage, building height, setbacks, and minimum tree density.

3. Where are cities required to allow middle housing?

Cities must require a certain number of units per lot on all lots zoned predominantly for residential uses. In Olympia there are several zoning districts that are predominantly for residential uses (see OMC 18.04). State law defines "single-family zones" as those zones where single-family detached housing is the predominant land use. Like many cities, most of Olympia is designated for residential uses and single family detached housing is the predominant land use in the areas shown in pale yellow on the Future Land Use Map:



The number of units required per lot is based on the City's population. For more information about this, please see question 9 below.

4. What is co-living housing?

Answer: Co-living housing is where people have their own private rooms but share common areas, like kitchens. The state defines it as, "... a residential development with sleeping units that are independently rented and lockable and provide living and sleeping space, and residents share kitchen facilities with other sleeping units in the building. Local governments may use other names to refer to co-living housing including, but not limited to, congregate living facilities, single room occupancy, rooming house, boarding house, lodging house, and residential suites."

It is a type of housing that can provide rental homes affordable to people with moderate to low incomes without requiring any public funding. Co-Living provides for more social interactions among the occupants.

Cities planning under the Growth Management Act must allow co-living housing as a permitted use on any lot located within an urban growth area that allows at least six multifamily residential units, including on a lot zoned for mixed use development. This means that the City will need to allow co-living housing in the R 6-12 zoning district, and all districts that allow apartments or higher densities.

5. How is Accessory Dwelling Unit (ADU) defined in state law?

Answer: The state defines an ADU as, "...a dwelling unit located on the same lot as a single-family housing unit, duplex, triplex, townhome, or other housing unit." Cities must allow at least two ADUs on all lots that meet the minimum lot size in zoning districts that allow for single-family homes (RCW 36.70A.681).

6. Why is the City proposing to increase the size of ADUs?

Answer: Cities must allow a gross floor area of at least 1,000 square feet for any ADU (RCW 36.70A.681). "Gross floor area" means the interior habitable area of a dwelling unit including basements and attics but not including a garage or accessory structure.

Olympia's current maximum size of an ADU is limited to 850 square feet. It must be increased to 1,000 square feet in order to be consistent with state law.

7. Did the City consider just eliminating the maximum size limit for ADUs?

Answer: Yes, staff considered eliminating the maximum size limit for ADUs, since 1,000 square feet is larger than many dwelling units in Olympia. However, because there are new requirements for impact fees for ADUs, and because more units are allowed on most lots within the city, staff proposed to keep a size limit but to increase it to 1,000 square feet to meet the new requirements.

8. Why is the City proposing changes to the code now?

Answer: The new housing requirements must be adopted by June of 2026, or, in most cases the state's model ordinance will apply instead. The City plans to issue a public hearing draft in June of 2025, to allow time for public hearing(s) and going through the adoption process. It is likely the final version of these code amendments will be adopted near the end of 2025 or early in 2026.

The draft code amendments are intended to address HB 1110, HB 2321, HB 1337, and HB 1998. These bills are primarily codified in the Growth Management Act (RCW 36.70A) but also amend or add to other statutes. (Learn more at olympiawa.gov/middlehousing).

9. What are the differences between Tier 1 and Tier 2 cities?

Answer: The middle housing requirements are different for cities of different sizes (by population). Olympia is categorized as a Tier 2 City because our population of 57,450 is greater than 25,000 but less than 75,000. If the population of the City is considered along with the population of those living in Olympia's urban growth boundary (13,410), we are close to the population of a Tier 1 City. When looking at the amount of population growth expected in the City and urban growth area (UGA), we would exceed the population threshold of a Tier 1 City by 2030.

Because the City considers planning for the City and the UGA, and because the City could annex areas with the UGA which would result in the City population increasing, and because the population growth projections show the City and its UGA will likely reach the Tier 1 City population threshold by 2030, the Council's Land Use and Environment Committee recommended that staff issue the draft to satisfy the requirements for a Tier 1 City.

	<i>Tier 1 City (population of 75,000+)</i>	<i>Tier 2 City (25,000-75,000)</i>
<i>Number of units allowed per lot</i>	4	2
<i>Number of units allowed per lot if within $\frac{1}{4}$ mile of Major Transit Stop*</i>	6	4
<i>Number of units allowed per lot related to affordable housing</i>	<i>6, if at least 2 units are for affordable housing for at least 50 years</i>	<i>4, if at least 1 unit is for affordable housing for at least 50 years</i>

**There are no transit stops in Thurston County that meet the state's definition of a Major Transit Stop at this time.*

10. What is a Major Transit Stop?

Answer: As defined in the GMA (RCW 36.70A.030), "Major transit stop" means:

- (a) A stop on a high capacity transportation system funded or expanded under the provisions of chapter 81.104 RCW;
- (b) Commuter rail stops;
- (c) Stops on rail or fixed guideway systems; or
- (d) Stops on bus rapid transit routes.

Intercity Transit confirmed there are no transit stops in their system that meet this definition.

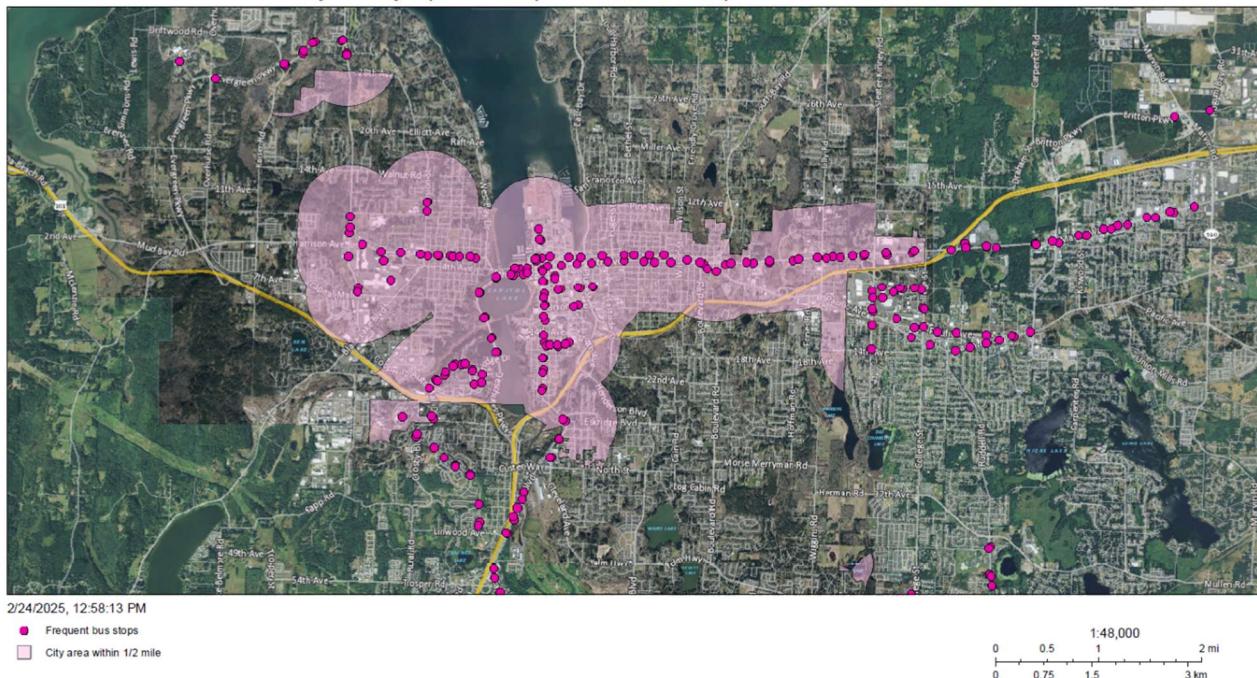
11. What is a frequent transit stop/route?

Answer: In Olympia's parking code, some provisions are tied to "frequent transit routes" which were identified as routes with transit service 4 times per hour for 12 or more hours per day.

Early direction from Council's Land Use and Environment Committee was to use frequent transit routes instead of major transit stops, so any new code provisions would be coordinated with our parking code. Because staff used the local frequent transit routes instead of major transit stops, an additional change is that the distance from the stops was increased from $\frac{1}{4}$ -mile to $\frac{1}{2}$ -mile.

Because frequent transit routes was only described in the parking chapter (OMC 18.38), staff is now proposing this term be defined in OMC 18.02.180, Definitions.

City of Olympia - Frequent Transit Stops and 1/2 Mile Buffer



12. What is unit lot density?

Answer: Unit lot density is the number of units allowed on a lot. This is a new way of looking at density because it does not factor in the size of the lot. However, just because a certain number of units are allowed on a lot, it does not mean the maximum number of units will actually fit on each lot.

Other factors, such as lot coverage, setbacks from property lines, minimum tree density requirements, and others will also apply. Additionally, many people will choose not to build more than one residential unit on their lot, or may choose to build only some of the units that may be allowed. Decisions are based on several factors, including preferences, costs of construction, and other factors.

13. Under the City's first draft, do ADUs count toward unit lot density?

Answer: Yes. Currently, the state's definition of middle housing types does not include ADUs. In the current draft, City staff propose language to clarify that for the purpose of calculating unit lot density, ADUs will count toward the total number of units allowed.

Guidance from the Washington State Department of Commerce encourages Cities to clarify whether or not ADUs will count toward the unit lot density. Because the City proposed meeting the Tier 1 requirements, staff chose to state that ADUs do count toward the total number of units allowed per lot in the draft. It is possible that the City Council may choose to meet the Tier 2 requirements instead, or that it may choose to allow ADUs in addition to the unit lot density allowed. It is possible that in the final adopted version of this proposal, the City Council would meet the Tier 1 requirements and allow 2 ADUs per lot in addition to the unit lot density.

14. What is a unit lot subdivision?

Answer: A unit lot subdivision is a type of land division, which allows flexible application of zoning dimensional standards. If development is approved on a “parent” lot, and therefore all of the zoning and development standards are met, it allows for the individual units to be sold independently of each other as individual, legal lots of record with their own tax or parcel number. In a unit lot subdivision, each individual unit does not have to meet the lot requirements as long as the parent lot does. It is way to allow for the individual ownership of the units.

Utility providers should have flexible requirements for the design of water, sewer, electrical, and other connections to buildings in unit lot subdivisions. There are advantages and disadvantages to centralized and shared lateral connections and metering, and there may be different ownership arrangements, cost implications, and other reasons that require a variety of approaches.

Graphic illustration of what this could look like (from WA State Dept. of Commerce Fact Sheet):

