



# Home In Tacoma Project Frequently Asked Questions

March 31, 2021

As directed by the City Council, Tacoma’s Planning Commission has developed policy recommendations to help meet Tacoma’s housing needs and aspirations for our neighborhoods. The recommendations were informed by extensive stakeholder engagement and technical analysis. They include a new housing growth vision, updated policies, an environmental analysis, near-term code changes, and an action plan to be implemented over time.

**The Commission is currently seeking public input on the recommendations as well as on two housing growth scenarios through April 9, 2021. Share your ideas on how to improve these proposals!**

After the Public Hearing process, the Commission will finalize and forward its recommendations to the City Council. City Council action on the proposed new housing vision and policies will initiate a second phase of public discussion and analysis in support of zoning changes, standards updates, and other actions.

## Key dates:

**Wednesday, April 7, 2021 starting at 5:30 p.m. – Planning Commission Public Hearing on ZOOM**

Link: <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/82197923401>

Dial: +1 253 215 8782

Webinar ID: 821 9792 3401

**Friday, April 9<sup>th</sup> – written and map comments are due**

**May to July 2021 (tentative) – City Council review and Public Hearing**

We are seeking to respond to frequently asked questions (FAQs) received to date through the public comment process—particularly at the [March 18, 2021 Information Session](#). For more information, review the complete proposals at [www.cityoftacoma.org/homeintacoma](http://www.cityoftacoma.org/homeintacoma).

The FAQ is organized into three sections with questions on:

- Project background, process and timeline
- Missing Middle Housing and proposed housing growth scenarios
- Affordability and displacement

There is often overlap between these topics, but we hope this structure helps find information you are seeking.

Contact us with further questions at [planning@cityoftacoma.org](mailto:planning@cityoftacoma.org), or (253) 591-5030 (option 4).

# Project timeline, engagement and background

## What is the current status and how did we get to this point?

### Current status:

The Commission is currently seeking public input on the recommendations as well as on two housing growth scenarios through April 9, 2021.

### Project milestones:

This effort has now spanned about three years from its inception as part of the City's [Affordable Housing Action Strategy](#) (AHAS). Ongoing policy and implementation will likely continue for several more years. Each of these steps was conducted as a public process informed by community input.

- 2018 – The City's Affordable Housing Action Strategy (AHAS) was completed, including Diverse Housing Types and Inclusionary Zoning actions
- 2019 – The City Council adopted the AHAS into the City's Housing Element as an implementation strategy, and added policies calling for Diverse (Missing Middle) Housing actions
- January to May 2020 – The Planning Commission conducted a public hearing on the Home In Tacoma Project draft scope of work, and finalized the scope in May 2020
- September 2020 to February 2021 – The Home In Tacoma Project ideas generation and collaboration phase included analysis and engagement to inform the current preliminary proposals
- March to April 9<sup>th</sup> – Public comment period for the Planning Commission's preliminary draft recommendations and housing growth scenarios maps

## What comes next in this process?

- After the April 7<sup>th</sup> Public Hearing, the Planning Commission will finalize recommendations and send them to City Council in May 2021
- The City Council is scheduled to hold a Public Hearing and take action June to July 2021
- City Council action would initiate another round of public engagement to develop the standards, zoning and other implementation steps, currently scheduled to conclude in December 2021

## What engagement efforts have been used so far?

Over the past year, Tacoma's [Planning Commission](#) has engaged the community in a discussion about housing needs, development trends, zoning, and neighborhood change. The Commission has directed that their efforts be informed by both broad community engagement, and targeted engagement with key stakeholder groups. For more information, see the Home In Tacoma staff report.

From September 2020 to February 2021, the following engagement approaches were employed to inform policy discussions:

- Project webpage with meeting information, background and regular updates
- Regular project email updates to about 1500 people
- Bilingual engagement tools in Spanish, Russian, Khmer and Vietnamese
- Virtual housing café discussion series: 60 to 80 people participated in each of the 3 sessions—recordings are on the project homepage
- Interactive online storymap
- Housing Choice Survey: 870 people shared their views about housing needs and preferences
- Over 40 consultations/briefings (most open to the public) so far with:
  - Planning Commission process (leading this effort)

- Housing Equity Taskforce
- City Commissions
- Neighborhood and community groups
- Housing development professionals
- Equity and social justice stakeholders
- City departments and partner agencies

**How was the community notified about this comment opportunity?**

City staff used the following approaches to get the word out, starting at the beginning of March 2021:

- Postcard notice mailed out to over 80,000 addressed of residents, property owners, interested parties, and addresses within 1000 feet of areas affected by the proposals
- Project email notice to about 1500 interested parties
- Project webpage, City webpage banner, social media postings and cross-postings with other City and community organizations online platforms
- [Information session](#) held online on March 18<sup>th</sup> attended by about 120 people, video posted on the webpage
- Press release to local media, Tacoma Daily Index posting, Tacoma Report
- Required notice sent to State Environmental Policy Act (SEPA) and planning reviewers and stakeholders and posted in the Tacoma Daily Index

**Is this a new initiative? How does it fit within prior work?**

Tacoma has been working on improving our capacity to meet housing needs for many years. The Affordable Housing Action Strategy demonstrated that efforts are falling short of meeting the need, and accelerated the pace of implementation. Recent changes have increased housing choice by allowing [Accessory Dwelling Units](#), establishing the [Infill Pilot Program](#), and established a range of affordable housing regulatory tools.

**What does community input reveal in terms of opportunities/support for these proposals?**

Over the past year, Tacoma’s Planning Commission has engaged the community in a discussion about housing needs, development trends, zoning, and neighborhood change. The Commission has directed that their efforts be informed by both broad community engagement, and targeted engagement with key stakeholder groups. There has been substantial support for these proposals from multiple stakeholder groups.

Opportunities/support:

- Many people support actions to address the current housing crisis
- There is broad interest in revisiting housing rules to increase supply, choice and affordability
- Developers would build more diverse (missing middle) housing if zoning rules allowed, particularly close to walkable urban areas
- Missing middle housing infill can support rental and ownership opportunities
- Overall, Tacoma has capacity to grow in terms of transportation choices, infrastructure, neighborhood amenities and public services
- Enabling missing middle housing is an essential step toward meeting equity and antiracism goals
- Enabling missing middle housing can help meet sustainability, transportation, economic growth and other goals

### **What does community input reveal in terms of questions/concerns about these proposals?**

The proposals represent a major change in Tacoma housing vision and rules, and have prompted questions and concerns that the Planning Commission is seeking to address in the proposals.

#### Questions/concerns:

- Loss of neighborhood character and defining features
- New buildings that are out of scale with existing ones
- Parking and traffic impacts
- Demolitions of viable structures
- Loss of green features and open space
- Potential impacts to infrastructure and services
- Potential increase in displacement of existing residents

### **How do the proposals reflect community input received so far?**

The proposals reflect community input about both opportunities and concerns. The basic idea is that Tacoma's housing rules are currently acting as a barrier to meeting community needs and should be revisited. In doing so, the City must take care to consider both the positive opportunities and potential negative outcomes. The project has been organized into two phases in order to better meet those objectives, with the current proposals being the first phase.

### **What is included in this first phase of the project?**

City Council action on this phase would modify Tacoma's housing policies and growth strategy, setting the vision for the desired housing types and scale citywide, including:

- Continue to grow and promote affordability in centers and corridors
- Allow more diverse housing types, such as duplexes, triplexes, cottage housing and small multifamily, in most currently single-family neighborhoods
- Allow medium-scale multifamily in areas near centers, corridors and transit
- Ensure new housing is well designed and complements the neighborhood
- Evolve our housing vision to be more inclusive of all members of the community
- Expand and strengthen Tacoma's affordability programs and policies
- Guide housing growth to support multiple community goals

### **What would be included in the second phase?**

City Council action on Phase 1 would initiate the next phase of public engagement and policy analysis, including:

- Zoning changes
- Design standards updates
- Actions to ensure that urban infrastructure and services are adequate to support growth
- Potential phasing of implementation, if directed by the City Council
- Actions to address the potential demolition of viable structures
- Actions to create green, sustainable and resilient housing
- Actions to promote physical accessibility
- Review of City permitting and processes
- Education and technical support for developers and the public

### **How do these proposals relate to other goals?**

Housing is a fundamental building block of community, and multiple related goals have informed this effort.

#### **POLICY DIRECTION:**

The City Council has adopted multiple policies that guide this effort, including:

- [Affordable Housing Action Strategy](#)
- [One Tacoma Comprehensive Plan](#) – Housing Element
- [Tacoma 2025 Strategic Plan](#)
- [Antiracism Transformation](#) (Resolution No. 40622)
- [Equity and Empowerment Framework](#) and [Equity Index](#)

#### **Key considerations:**

- Equity, empowerment and antiracism
- Healthy, resilient and climate-friendly development
- Walkable and transit-supportive neighborhoods
- Urban design, historic preservation, fit with neighborhood patterns
- Support growth with appropriate infrastructure and urban services
- Market feasibility
- Avoid unintended consequences
- Reflect community input

### **How are these proposals related to race and equity?**

Housing meets a basic human need for shelter. Housing location can either connect or it can isolate us from family, community, education, employment, recreation, health and other opportunities that fundamentally affect the course of our lives. For many years, people of color were excluded from desirable neighborhoods by systemic racist actions including redlining and restrictive covenants. This longstanding systemic racism prevented many people from building family wealth. As a result, today people of color earn substantially less than white households, are under-represented in high opportunity neighborhoods, and are disproportionately impacted by the housing crisis.

City Council direction to make antiracism a priority for all City policies and programs (through Resolution 40622) is one of the policies that inform this project. The Housing Equity Taskforce was formed to advise the Planning Commission on how to achieve antiracism goals in housing. The [Housing Equity Taskforce recommendations](#) have been integrated into the Home In Tacoma Project proposals.

### **How can we be sure we are making changes equitably?**

The proposals are based on the assumption that changes should be made using a consistent logic citywide, rather than only in certain neighborhoods. Moving forward, achieving equity will require close monitoring of the strategy—where new units are developed, affordability of the units, marketing of the units. The strategy may require interventions—a community preference policy, city incentives to incorporate affordable housing, or a requirement that units carry a deed restriction for a period of time—if the outcomes are not equitable.

# Missing Middle Housing growth strategy changes

## Where do the Home In Tacoma Project proposals apply?

The proposed Missing Middle Housing actions apply within Tacoma’s primarily single-family neighborhoods citywide (see the [Housing Growth Scenarios map](#)). They do not apply in designated Mixed-Use Centers, or in areas set aside for commercial, industrial, parks and open space, shorelines, and major institutions, or in the Airport Compatibility Overlay District.

## How can we ensure that infill will be well designed and fit the scale of the neighborhood?

The proposals include the following Missing Middle Housing design principles:

- Located in a walkable context with a strong pedestrian orientation
- Consistent massing and scale of neighboring structures, compatible design language
- Smooth transitions from Low-scale to higher scale areas, prevent abrupt scale changes
- Reduce appearance of density through breaking up building footprint, setbacks, height limits
- Build a strong sense of community through integration of shared spaces
- Minimize vehicular orientation through moderate onsite parking, alley access
- Maintain a sense of continuity by encouraging reuse of existing structures
- Develop design standards for individual housing types

These principles will guide the development of design standards as part of Phase 2 of this project.

## What does the proposed Low-Scale Residential designation look and feel like?

The proposed Low-scale Residential Land Use designation is intended to support diverse housing types in structures that are compatible in scale with houses. Low-scale Residential areas are modeled after traditional patterns reflected in many pre-zoning neighborhoods. New housing in these areas would reflect design features including:

- Building height and scale similar to houses
- Accessory structures in rear yards
- Usable open space/yards
- Moderate onsite parking

The proposals would allow missing middle housing types such as the following in Low-scale Residential areas (some would only be allowed in certain circumstances such as on large lots):



**What does the proposed Mid-Scale Residential designation look and feel like?**

The proposed Mid-scale Residential Land Use designation is intended to support diverse housing types, including mid-scale multifamily housing in areas close to shopping and transit. These areas are modeled on close-in areas of many pre-zoning neighborhoods built to enable walking and transit as primary ways to get around. New housing built in these areas will reflect design features including:

- Building height, width and depth mid-scale between houses and buildings in Centers
- Maximum building heights would be limited to between 3 and 4 stories
- Building frontage along the street and side property lines would be limited
- Building height and scale would transition down to abutting low-scale areas
- Yards and open space onsite would be moderate to small and include shared spaces
- Moderate to low onsite parking

In addition to the housing types allowed in Low-scale Residential areas, Mid-scale Residential areas would also support multifamily buildings such as the following examples:



**Will taller buildings be allowed next to houses?**

The proposed Mid-scale Residential Land Use designation is intended to provide a transition in height and scale from taller buildings in Centers down to low-scale structures (such as houses). Moderately taller buildings (up to 3 or 4 stories) would be allowed next to houses (up to 2 or 3 stories) and other lower-scale structures in these areas. However, where Mid-scale transitions to Low-scale Residential, additional standards would apply to prevent abrupt scale changes. For example, height may be capped at the same height allowed in Low-scale Residential areas.

**Housing growth scenarios – is it one or the other?**

The Planning Commission released 2 scenarios with the intent of generating input and discussion. The expectation is that a hybrid version will result from public comments. The Commission hopes to hear additional criteria that should be considered in determining where low-scale and mid-scale housing is appropriate.

**Will these proposals lead to an increase in building demolitions?**

By allowing more flexibility in what can be built, the proposals could increase the pace of housing development and thus lead to more demolitions. Since the city is mostly already built, some demolitions may be inevitable in order to accommodate more housing. However, there are actions that the City can take to protect historic structures and to reduce the likelihood that viable structures will be demolished. One important tool is to restrict demolitions for historically significant structures. Another approach is to craft regulatory standards to encourage retaining and reusing existing viable structures. The proposals call for a focused effort in Phase 2 to reduce the occurrence of demolitions of viable structures.

**How will proposals affect parking and transportation?**

Increasing the number of people living in a neighborhood means more trips, and inevitably some of those will be by car leading to more parking and traffic. However, the proposals locate more housing within walking distance from transit, shopping and other destinations in order to reduce car dependence along with reduced transportation costs. The proposals also call for a review of parking requirements to balance the added expense of onsite parking while recognizing that many people rely on cars to get around. Finally, the City is engaging with transportation infrastructure and service providers on how to support transportation choices.

**Will the proposals impact green features, trees and open space?**

By increasing housing options, there will likely be some loss of existing trees, yards and open space. The proposals call for actions to minimize how much that happens and compensate for green features that are lost. Actions in Phase 2 would include updates to landscaping and tree planting requirements to meet the City’s urban forestry goals, standards to require yards and open spaces with housing development, and other urban forestry and open space actions.

**How will the proposals affect the pace of housing development?**

Increasing flexibility will likely spur development to some degree, but it is difficult to determine how these changes will affect the pace of growth and change. Ultimately, development of housing will be a response to perceived demand. A likely scenario is that as missing middle products are added to the market, multifamily development may slow slightly in response.

A September 2018 study conducted by the Montgomery County Planning Department (The Missing Middle Housing Study, September 2018) concluded that “it takes time to build momentum...” as with any developing market. “The market’s ability and willingness to pay for these housing types over alternative market substitutes remains uncertain. As the number of successful Missing Middle development grows, supply chains will become more efficient and demand for these housing types will become more robust.”

**Will the proposals result in more rental or ownership housing?**

It is difficult to tell and will ultimately depend on demand. The strategies will most likely create rentals initially due to the strength of the rental market. An infusion of rentals into the market should help temper rental cost increases. However, the new housing options could be either rentals or ownership opportunities. The proposals also strengthen policies calling for City actions to help people, particularly people of color, to become homeowners.

**Will proposed changes affect property values/taxes?**

Regional growth will likely ensure that property values (and taxes) continue to rise, irrespective of potential changes to housing rules. Isolating the effects of the addition of diverse product types on property values, and property taxes, is a complicated exercise. Research has found that affordable housing does not lower property values. Demand to live in Tacoma has already increased property values and these changes will continue as long as the city is perceived as a desirable place to live. These strategies alone are not as important as the market in determining future property values.

**How will the City ensure infrastructure and services will be adequate to support growth?**

The City has received input from infrastructure stakeholders. Through that conversation, there is a recognition that additional study is needed to identify potential impacts and initiate steps to address them. The preliminary environmental determination calls for further study of this topic to ensure that the City can provide appropriate infrastructure and services to support housing growth, as part of phase 2 of the project.

**Will parks, schools and transit service be impacted?**

The City has reached out to partner agencies and received comments from Metro Parks Tacoma and Pierce Transit to date. Both agencies support the proposals, and are working to help identify concerns and actions that should be taken to ensure that services will not be impacted. The City has also met with Tacoma Public Schools but not yet received comments.

**Does the proposal reflect differences between various Corridors and transit routes?**

The housing growth scenarios propose to locate Mid-scale Residential areas near designated Corridors and transit routes. The proposals do not currently distinguish between the level of transit service or identify other distinctions between these routes/corridors, though these factors could be used to refine the proposals moving forward. Planning staff is working with Pierce Transit staff to ensure that Pierce Transit long range plans are considered. For example, Pierce Transit has plans to add Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) lines in certain areas, making them particularly appropriate for Mid-scale Residential.

**Why is the City applying a residential land use designation to parks, schools and churches?**

Designation as residential does not indicate that parks, schools or churches are intended to be replaced by housing. Rather, the City’s land use and zoning generally allow and support these uses in residential areas, and there is not currently a zoning district dedicated to parks and recreation, civic, or institutional uses.

**Will this lead to eminent domain or taking of property?**

No. There is not an anticipation that anything directly relating to this proposal would trigger the need for any such actions.

## Affordability and anti-displacement

### **Will missing middle proposals solve Tacoma's affordability challenges?**

The Home In Tacoma Project proposals are among the most effective steps the City can take to help meet affordability goals. Tacoma's affordability challenges have been characterized as a crisis. This is the result of long-term trends, including regional growth and the slower growth of incomes as compared to housing costs. For more analysis on housing needs, see the [Affordable Housing Action Strategy](#) (AHAS) and the Home In Tacoma Existing Conditions Report.

The missing middle housing changes are expected to increase housing supply, increase the range of housing types built in Tacoma neighborhoods, and increase the number of relatively affordable housing units citywide. Overall, adding to supply will respond to demand for housing and help stabilize housing prices. Currently, today's more affordable housing can be demolished and replaced with luxury units. This strategy provides more incentives for those replacement units to be relatively affordable.

However, by themselves the proposed missing middle housing changes are not expected to be enough to meet housing needs, particularly for people with lower incomes. Therefore, the Home In Tacoma proposals include a call to develop additional tools to achieve housing affordable at these income levels.

### **What else can the City do to support affordability?**

The Home In Tacoma Project calls for expansion of the City's affordable housing regulatory incentives and requirements to create affordable housing. These types of programs enable the City to partner with housing developers to create affordable units as growth occurs. The City offers a bonus to housing developers, such as the ability to build a taller structure, in exchange for including some dedicated affordable units in the project.

There are multiple policy options allowing the City to develop an approach that works for our market and community goals. For example, an inclusionary requirement would build affordable units into luxury developments, and those units can be price-restricted for a set time period. Another example, the City can offer a temporary property tax exemption in exchange for including moderately affordable units. These policy options will be examined and implemented as part of Phase 2 of the Home In Tacoma Project.

### **Are affordability regulatory tools feasible in Tacoma's housing market?**

Our analysis of Tacoma's housing market shows that the market is strong enough to support expanded use of these types of tools. The City gathered input from local developers about these ideas. Also, economic feasibility modeling (see the Housing Action Plan) was completed to test the economic feasibility for seven development prototypes under several affordability scenarios and for low/moderate and high market rent areas. These feasibility tests found the following:

- Mandatory inclusionary zoning requirements are not feasible in low to moderate rent areas without the Multifamily Property Tax Exemption (MFTE)—but are feasible in high rent areas like downtown. High rent areas can absorb this requirement without compromising financial feasibility.
- In low and moderate rent markets, the value of the MFTE allows developments to reach deeper levels of affordability with a 10 percent unit contribution—including the AHAS goal of 10 percent of units at 50 percent Area Median Income (AMI). However, state law requires a 20 percent unit contribution, which is not feasible in low and moderate rent areas.
- Use of the MFTE in downtown Tacoma—and other high rent markets as they develop—provides the ability to take AMI levels lower to 20 percent of units affordable at 50 percent AMI.

**Where would proposed affordability strategies apply?**

Proposed affordability and anti-displacement strategies have not been delimited to specific areas as of now. Affordability incentives and bonuses are currently available primarily in areas where dense housing is allowed, such as Downtown and Centers. As part of Phase 2, affordability tools would be updated to be more effective in achieving their objective of creating affordable housing. The area where they would apply could also expand to along corridors, in Mid-scale Residential areas, or potentially citywide.

**How will these proposals help combat displacement (gentrification)?**

Lower income Tacoma residents are already experiencing displacement, and displacement risk will continue to increase as the city and region grow. As demonstrated in the Existing Conditions analysis, between 2016 and 2019, rental units priced between \$625 and \$875 per month, serving households with incomes between \$20,000 and \$35,000, declined by 5,300 units. The Housing Equity Taskforce recommendations emphasize the importance of combating displacement, which disproportionately affects people of color.

The Home In Tacoma Project would establish an anti-displacement strategy to help lower-income residents stay in growing neighborhoods. This effort has identified tools that the City can bring to bear, including affordable housing production, to help people, businesses and institutions to remain in their neighborhoods (see page 37 of the staff report).

Allowing missing middle housing is one central anti-displacement action. People sometimes worry that allowing missing middle housing will lead to the loss of some of the less expensive housing available today. While it is true that existing, lower-cost housing is more likely to be replaced, allowing missing middle housing means it could be replaced by more, smaller housing units at lower price points, resulting in more options to relocate within the neighborhood. In contrast, if the City does not allow missing middle housing, existing low-cost housing would eventually be converted to more luxurious, higher cost single-family housing.

Other anti-displacement actions include providing resources to people facing evictions, putting in place affirmative marketing tools (developers market housing units to people in the neighborhood), and resident preference policies (people at risk of displacement get first dibs on new housing units).

**What other actions is the City pursuing to support affordability goals?**

The City of Tacoma's [Affordable Housing Action Strategy](#) (AHAS), developed in 2018, is a strategic response to a changing housing market, increasing displacement pressure, and a widespread need for high-quality, affordable housing opportunities for all. The AHAS focuses on how to enhance existing policies and programs to serve more people; identify and deploy additional funding; and establish strong anti-displacement measures to stabilize existing residents over the next 10 years. The following are the AHAS objectives:

1. Create more homes for more people
2. Keep housing affordable and in good repair
3. Help people stay in their homes and communities
4. Reduce barriers for people who often encounter them

The AHAS contains 27 recommended actions that are being implemented by multiple city departments and other partners. The City has made significant progress on implementing the AHAS through such actions as renter protections and increased funding for affordable housing. Visit the AHAS webpage for the latest information.

**Is the strategy the same, or different, for higher and lower opportunity areas?**

Unfortunately, opportunities available to residents (such as housing costs, recreation, education, transportation choices, jobs and more) vary substantially across neighborhoods. The proposed land use changes do not focus growth in lower opportunity/lower incomes/more racially diverse neighborhoods, but instead apply them consistently across the City. By doing so, all neighborhoods can benefit from increased housing choices. This can mean more investment in lower opportunity areas, and an increase in affordable housing in high opportunity areas.

The proposed affordable housing incentives and requirements likely would differ between low/moderate and high rent market areas (which align with opportunity areas). High rent areas have the ability to absorb an affordable unit contribution in taller buildings and remain economically feasible; this is not the case in low/moderate rent market areas.

**Does the City have resources or support for people who want to build affordable housing?**

The City currently has a range of programs and resources to support affordable housing. Contact the Housing Division and Planning and Development Services Departments for information. The Home In Tacoma Project calls for more resources and tools to be added to the City's toolkit for supporting affordable housing.

*Thank you for participating in the Home In Tacoma Project!*

*We may add to or update the FAQs in the future.*