



Snohomish County Council

Committee: Planning & Community Development

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Topic: Summary and Council Discussion of Ideas from the “Opening Doors to Home Ownership” Panel Series

Background

County Councilmember Nehring hosted a series of three earlier panel discussions titled “Opening Doors to Home Ownership.” Different experts shared their perspectives on housing affordability and actions that the County Council could take to make housing more affordable in general. Questions asked of panelists included a special focus on what the Council could do to help make home ownership more attainable for county residents. The first panel discussion on January 17, 2023, including housing industry experts. The second panel on February 21 had discussion from representatives of different planning departments. The third panel on March 21 included elected officials from three cities in Snohomish County. The fourth discussion on April 18 will include a summary by staff of ideas heard in the first three panels followed by discussion among the Councilmembers.

Timing and Authorities

The County Council could adopt some of the panel ideas as code amendments at any time. Other ideas require plan amendments where the Council can only act once per year. Successful implementation of some code and plan amendment ideas would likely involve parallel changes to the Engineering Design and Development Standards (EDDS) adopted by the County Engineer. Other ideas would require enactment of changes to state law by the Washington State Legislature and could be areas of increased legislative or other types of advocacies by Snohomish County.

Summary of Ideas from Panels 1-3

This list groups ideas from the panel discussions. It omits several suggestions for things that Snohomish County has already implemented for unincorporated areas, but which could still help address affordability in some cities.

- **Allow higher densities in urban areas.** This general approach is within County control for unincorporated areas and would allow more housing and be supportive of transit goals. Implementation could have a large impact on

producing more housing overall. Some of these changes would primarily benefit affordability in the rental market until industry and the Legislature further address condo liability issues. Examples:

- Building heights. Raise maximum building heights in areas where likely to result in more housing
 - Single-family infill. Allow more accessory dwellings, triplexes and fourplexes on existing lots
 - Smaller lots. Allow smaller lots / more lots per acre for new development
 - Townhomes. Allow more fee simple townhomes (and other types of housing) by redesignating from low- to medium-density during plan updates
- **Encourage greater use of existing density provisions.** New development does not always maximize the densities already allowed. The County could address things that discourage applicants from building to the maximum. This could have a medium impact. Examples:
 - Cottage housing. Identify and address reasons why developers do not use existing County codes that allow cottage housing
 - Fee simple duplexes. Change subdivisions codes to allow sale of each duplex half as a separate fee simple lot in situations where sales of those same units can only happen only as condos today
 - Implementing zoning. Encourage smaller lots and more townhomes by using County initiated rezones (instead of applicant initiated rezones) to R-7,200 to fully implement urban low density areas (this is also a process improvement)
- **Process and Operational Improvements.** This category includes actions by executive departments to reduce time and expense involved in obtaining development approvals. Examples:
 - 120-day clock. Use data to inform process changes and priorities to meet project review timeline guidance in WAC 365-196-845
 - Customer service. Do more to help applicants understand and navigate the permit process
 - Permit intake. Reduce administrative delays and associated billing by consultants during the permit intake process
 - Train staff. Increase consistency in review comments about what corrections are necessary and when they need to happen
 - Retain staff. Stay competitive as an employer to keep good staff
- **Advocacy.** These ideas require actions by parties outside County government to address but are also topics where increased advocacy could help. Examples:

- Building code revisions. Advocate for fewer new expensive mandates or removal of targeted existing mandates from the state building code
- Buyer financing help. Encourage state and industry level programs that assist with down payments, closing costs, and monthly installments
- Condo liability reform. It appears that the costs of insuring condominium construction remain prohibitive despite recent changes giving more leeway for a developer to cure defects before litigation
- **Other County Involved Actions.** These ideas for action by the County do not fit in the categories above but still reduce costs and delays in housing production. Examples:
 - Coordination. Harmonize design standards, processes, and infrastructure with neighboring jurisdictions
 - Encourage variety of housing stock. Too little variety in new housing means that some kinds of demand are unmet
 - Design flexibility. Use pilot programs to test new standards and types of development and allow more flexibility via variances
 - Parking. Update parking code and EDDS standards to encourage use of on-street parking, shared parking, to reduce overall parking and associated costs
 - Reduce paving to save land. Change EDDS standards to reduce amount of paving required for roads and other uses
- **To Be Determined.** These ideas came from panelists but did not have enough discussion to determine scope and responsibilities. Examples:
 - Empty house tax. Create a tax on vacant buildings to encourage sale or rental of units that could be providing housing
 - Landlord protections. Address regulations that are causing small landlords to sell their properties (thus taking those units out of the rental market)
 - Multifamily tax exemptions. RCW 84.14 allows temporary tax exemptions to encourage new or rehabilitated housing in urban centers but would be very complicated for the County to use
 - Displacement. Develop tools to address people displaced economically or by redevelopment
 - Impact fees. Revise how impact fees are charged (or allowed to be charged) to make fee more associated with the expense of the unit