



City of Seattle

Seattle Planning Commission

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April 29, 2014

Councilmember Mike O'Brien, Chair
Seattle City Council Planning, Land Use and Sustainability Committee
PO Box 34025
Seattle, WA 98124-4025

RE: Recommendations on micro-housing legislation

Dear Councilmember O'Brien,

The Planning Commission has been studying micro-housing development since the spring of 2013, when we were asked to provide our advice on potential code amendments.

In 2013, we received briefings from the Office of Housing and the Department of Planning & Development (DPD), including from DPD's Principal Engineer and Building Official; viewed community forums; talked with micro-housing tenants and property developers during a local tour; and discussed this form of development over the course of several committee and full Commission meetings.

Our earlier input

The Commission provided initial input last summer in a [letter to the City Council's Planning, Land Use and Sustainability \(PLUS\) Committee](#) and a [memorandum to DPD Director](#) Diane Sugimura offering our thoughts on DPD's preliminary recommendations. The Commission observed that micro-housing helps fill a unique market niche by providing relatively affordable housing to individuals who want to live near work, school, and other important destinations or services, and who prefer a degree of privacy.

The Commission recommended that the City embrace micro-housing as a meaningful strategy to help ensure that an economically diverse population can live in Seattle. The Commission also recommended that the City enact code refinements to make this form of development more livable for tenants and to enable it to fit in well within neighborhoods.

The recommendations we offered in the spring of 2013 included the following:

- Provide a clear definition for micro-housing form to facilitate the specification of appropriately tailored development standards and enable fair and consistent application of design review thresholds.
- Base design review requirements for micro-housing on building scale to provide for a more policy-neutral treatment of micro-housing relative to other forms of multifamily development types.
- Create bicycle parking standards appropriate to this development type.
- Provide standards for common spaces in micro-housing including requirements to ensure usability of shared spaces as areas of congregation.
- Allow development of micro-housing in all zones where multifamily housing is currently allowed.
- In hub urban villages, urban centers, and areas well served by transit, micro-housing, like other forms of multifamily housing, should be able to be built without parking. Outside of those areas, continue to require parking consistent with the Land Use Code.

Comments and recommendations on the proposed legislation

We understand that the Council's PLUS Committee has begun to review proposed legislation on micro-housing and congregate residences and we would like to offer additional comments and recommendations on the proposed legislation.

Elected officials had tasked DPD with designing and submitting to the Council code improvements that will both preserve the ability of these developments to offer affordable housing choices while ensuring that they also reflect the spirit of the City's land use laws. The Planning Commission believes that the proposed legislation generally does a good job on both of these fronts. Below are our additional comments:

- **We generally support the definitions that the proposed legislation contains for micro-housing and congregate residences, but suggest removing the overly prescriptive specification that a micro contain no more than one sink.** The proposed definitions provide needed clarity to facilitate consistent and predictable regulation of these forms of housing. The specification of formal definitions

for both micro-housing and micros (the latter being the constituent sleeping rooms clustered within a micro-housing unit) will make it easier for the City to monitor growth and development trends

We agree that the definitions should enable micros to be distinguished from small housing units such as small studio apartments. However, the specification that a micro may not include two sinks unnecessarily limits the options that developers may offer in response to evolving market preferences and plumbing products, including compact and water-saving options. The specification that the sink be located within the bathroom itself may also preclude designs that would use space more efficiently.

We believe that maximum square footage combined with the other characteristics specified in the proposed definition are sufficient to clearly distinguish micros as a form of housing. One of the specified characteristics is that the micro does not contain a food preparation area or kitchen. The DPD Director's Report notes that a key indicator of the presence of a food preparation area or kitchen is the presence of a stove or range, or the requisite wiring for a 220V electric service or gas supply line. The Commission believes that the lack of a sink outside the bathroom is not *additionally* necessary to indicate the lack of a kitchen.

- **The proposed structure and graduated thresholds for design review generally make sense, yet the threshold for Streamlined Design Review may need to be somewhat lower.** The proposed legislation specifies design review thresholds for micro-housing based on building square footage, an approach that will better enable the City to apply design review requirements to micro-housing on a more level playing field with other forms of multifamily development.
 - The proposed GSF thresholds for Administrative Design Review and Full Design Review (at 12,000 GSF, and 20,000 GSF respectively) for micro-housing and congregate residences correlate closely with the scale at which more traditional types of multifamily housing developments are required to undergo design review based on the dwelling unit thresholds that apply to them.
 - We are, however, concerned that the proposed 6,000 GSF threshold for Streamlined Design Review (SDR) may be somewhat higher than the threshold needed to correlate with SDR thresholds for other forms of multifamily housing. One of the benchmarks that DPD used to arrive at the proposed SDR threshold was a three-unit townhouse. This is a reasonable benchmark for the SDR threshold given that SDR is currently required for developments

containing three to eight units. However, we think the assumed average gross square footage per townhouse of 2,000 may be an overestimate. We would recommend that the SDR threshold be reevaluated and potentially revised downward to a figure closer to the 5,000 GSF threshold that DPD had previously contemplated.

- **Proposed provisions for design review in micro-housing may help alleviate some of the broader design-related concerns with new development in Lowrise 3 Zones.** On April 11, the Planning Commission sent DPD's Director Diane Sugimura a memo conveying our thoughts on DPD's preliminary staff recommendations for Lowrise Multifamily Code Corrections. In addition to providing input on potential Lowrise Multifamily Code Corrections, we noted that design review provisions for micro-housing may help alleviate some of the design issues that prompted concern in Lowrise zones. We suggested that DPD keep this in mind in drafting legislation to modify Lowrise zoning, and we would similarly suggest that this be a consideration in Council's review of future legislation on that topic.
- **We support the development standards in the proposed legislation that add a minimum size requirement for shared kitchens and common areas, and that strengthen bicycle parking requirements.** Providing for adequate space for tenants to enjoy a meal with friends or neighborhoods, and suitable space for tenants to park their bicycles are important improvements necessary to the livability of this form of housing.
- **We support deepening the affordability levels that are required for micro-housing, congregate residences, and very small studio apartments to participate in incentive zoning.** Due to their small size, it is appropriate that the affordability levels required for participation in incentive zoning be deeper for very small studio apartments and for sleeping rooms in micro-housing and congregate residences, than for housing with larger living spaces. Ultimately, broader efforts are also needed to provide developers with effective incentives to include affordable units serving a broad spectrum of household sizes.

In conclusion, we would like to reiterate our belief that micro-housing is an innovative form of housing that broadens housing options in an important way, responds to contemporary lifestyle choices, and enables residents to save on housing costs. By providing attractive, relatively affordable in-city dwelling options for one-person households, micro-housing reduces the need for individuals to find roommate arrangements

and may free up some existing multi-bedroom housing for families. Furthermore, micro-housing enables tenants to make good use of local and regional transit investments, and supports the City's sustainability goals.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide you with our recommendations on micro-housing and congregate residences.

We are available to answer any questions and would be happy discuss these recommendations as your review at Council proceeds. Please feel free to contact either of us or call our Director, Vanessa Murdock, at (206) 733-9271.

Sincerely,



David Cutler, Co-Chair
Seattle Planning Commission



Amalia Leighton, Co-Chair
Seattle Planning Commission

cc: Mayor Ed Murray
Seattle City Councilmembers
Hyeok Kim, Andrea Riniker, Robert Feldstein, Kathy Nyland, Quinnie Tan, Mayor's Office
Diane Sugimura, Nathan Torgelson, Marshall Foster, Susan McLain, Mike Podowski, Geoff
Wentlandt, Laura Hewitt Walker, Brennon Staley, DPD
Steve Walker, Miriam Roskin, Office of Housing
Rebecca Herzfeld, Sara Belz, Eric McConaghy, Lish Whitson, Council Central Staff

SEATTLE PLANNING COMMISSION RECORD OF DISCLOSURES & RECUSALS:

None