

KING COUNTY, WASHINGTON

ZONING CHANGES TO PROMOTE AFFORDABLE HOUSING

For over two decades, King County, Washington, has been using one of the most comprehensive sets of housing strategies in the country to anticipate and adjust to an ever-growing and ever-changing population. Between the county's rapidly rising house prices and the large geographic area it encompasses, progress has often been hard to come by, particularly in the affordable housing arena. The county nevertheless has been effective at developing strategies that address King County's specific needs and priorities.

- ✓ Changes in zoning to encourage affordable housing
 - Minimum density requirements
 - Elimination of minimum lot sizes
 - Cottage housing ordinance
- ✓ Cluster development
- ✓ Increased use of manufactured housing
- ✓ Accessory dwelling unit ordinances
- ✓ Mixed-use development
- ✓ Inclusionary zoning with density bonuses up to 100 percent
- ✓ Expedited permitting processes
- ✓ Impact fee waivers
- ✓ Performance zoning

In anticipating the region's significant growth of the 1980s, the county realized it would need to figure out a way to accommodate and manage the growth, particularly in the urban areas. At the same time, it would have to balance new housing with other priorities to mitigate sprawl, preserve open spaces, and reduce potential environmental damage from development.

Zoning changes are a piece of King County's solution

From this frame of reference, the county adopted a series of zoning-based strategies through the 1980s that included minimum density requirements in subdivisions; eliminating minimum lot sizes to encourage cluster development; and protections for green spaces.

In 1993, the county adopted a new zoning code, Title 21A, which allowed for a greater range of affordable housing choices and densities through expanded opportunities for townhouses, accessory dwelling units, manufactured housing, mixed-use development, and cottage housing.

More recently, King County has continued to make zoning changes to meet the rising demand for affordable housing. For example, in 2000, the county reduced restrictions in single-family-only zones to allow attached housing. This has resulted in a significant increase in townhouse and attached housing production throughout the county.

As a second example, a 2004 cottage housing ordinance allows units no greater than 1,200 square feet to be built in clusters around a common green space, permitting twice the density of normal small cottage housing developments. Similar ordinances have been used in a number of the 38 incorporated King County cities since 2004.

Affordable housing production remains a challenge

The area's rapidly growing population means that King County has faced a constant struggle to create sufficient incentives to promote affordable housing production without sacrificing the county's desire to limit urban sprawl and protect valued lands. According to Stephanie Warden, director of the King County Department of Development and Environmental Services, some of these strategies have worked much better than others. Under its inclusionary zoning law, the county has incorporated a 100 percent density bonus for projects that include units affordable to people with incomes ranging between 50 percent and 120 percent of AMI.

Expedited permitting processes have also fostered affordable housing production by shortening the approval period, thus saving the developer money. "Builders always

*"Builders always tell us
time is money,"*

-Stephanie Warden

tell us time is money," Warden said. Under King County's expedited permitting procedures, affordable housing proposals automatically move to the top of the pile. Furthermore, the county's residential BASICS permit program, which is designed for permit applicants who wish to build the same house design on a repetitive basis,³⁰ allows individual unit building permits to be issued for pre-approved master plans in an average of less than two days. Permitting services have been made available on Saturdays, and the average wait time for permit information has been reduced to under a minute.³¹

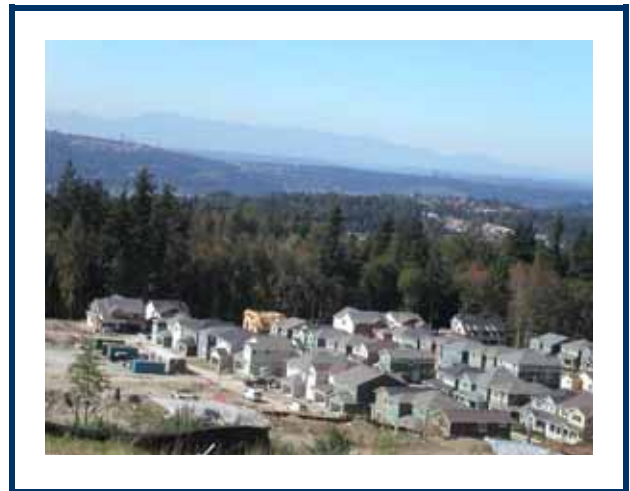
Other incentives to promote affordable housing production include impact fee waivers for approved income-based affordable housing projects, and local government aid through block grant money to help pay for high infrastructure costs, such as roads and wastewater management.

“Zoning tools are only a starting point,” said Warden. “Because of high land prices, affordable housing overall is really hard to pencil,” and therefore requires additional tools to be financially feasible.

Pilot project introduces promising new strategies

Despite the array of affordable housing strategies that have already been implemented in King County, one of the most promising developments currently underway has taken advantage of yet another series of zoning strategies that the county hopes to implement much more widely in the future.

Just south of Seattle, in the White Center area, the county’s housing authority is managing the redevelopment a 900-unit, HOPE VI site as one of three pilot projects currently underway that are using overlay zoning codes. At one point the largest public housing development in western Washington, the Greenbridge project will incorporate a range of affordable units, including some for seniors and first-time homebuyers.



Pre-existing zoning codes would not have allowed for many of the development strategies being used as part of Greenbridge. The county has rewritten the zoning codes for this valuable piece of land to maximize its density and greatly expand its uses, which will include a school, a food bank, retail stores, and other commercial uses. Warden says that by diversifying the community through mixed-use and mixed-income housing, the buying power of its residents will be substantially augmented so that it can remain a vibrant community over the long term.

In exchange, the developer is including affordable housing, meeting green building standards, and using low-impact development techniques. Warden describes this as performance-based zoning, which ignores traditional land-use rules in relation to development. This approach has enabled the county to allow the developers much greater flexibility and has, in turn, created new opportunities for affordable housing and other much-needed development activity in King County.

Over the next 18 months, the county is hoping to use the success of this project to continue rewriting zoning codes to allow for even greater overlay and performance zoning opportunities throughout the county. Warden says that in addition to the overlay and performance-based approaches, the overall flexibility the county has allowed in its zoning, particularly with high densities, mixed uses, mixed housing, and cluster development, has proved to developers that affordable housing production can be achieved without sacrificing financial success.

“We’re now in a place in the county where people can accept higher densities,” Warden said.

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