



Building Missing Middle Density

Objective

Encourage development of moderate density (“missing middle”) housing types in residential areas throughout your city to increase housing choices.

WHAT IS MISSING MIDDLE HOUSING?

Middle density housing refers to a range of housing types — including duplexes, triplexes, townhomes, cottage housing, low-rise multifamily development, and others — that bridge a gap between single-family housing and more intense multifamily and commercial areas. Middle density housing can help promote housing suitable to a wide range of household types, provide more affordable housing options, and produce urban densities that support walkable communities, local retail and commercial services, and efficient public transit. Yet availability of these housing options is often few and far in between in many communities, hence the term “missing” middle housing.

Reducing land and infrastructure costs through small-lot housing alternatives and more compact development can translate into lower per-unit housing costs when compared with traditional single-family development or high-rise development.

In single-family zones

Single-family zones usually comprise the largest land area of a city, so the opportunities to augment housing density and choice can be substantial. The size and appearance of many missing middle housing types can be incorporated into existing neighborhoods without substantial changes to neighborhood form, and in most cases can be supported by existing infrastructure.

RELATED TOOLS

- [Accessory dwelling units](#)
- [Affordability covenants](#)
- [Cluster development](#)
- [Commercial linkage fees](#)
- [Community engagement plans](#)
- [Cottage housing](#)
- [Credit enhancement](#)
- [Density bonuses](#)
- [Design guidelines](#)
- [Development agreements](#)
- [Direct household assistance](#)
- [Fee waivers and reductions](#)
- [Flexible development regulations](#)
- [Form based zoning](#)
- [Incentive zoning](#)
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- [Infill development](#)
- [Interjurisdictional cooperation](#)
- [Local housing fund](#)
- [Lot size averaging](#)
- [Master planned communities](#)
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- [Specialized housing training for permitting officials](#)
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- [TDR for affordable housing](#)
- [Townhomes](#)
- [Upzones and rezones](#)
- [Zero lot line development](#)

Techniques to expand missing middle options in these neighborhoods can include expanding opportunities for [accessory dwelling units](#) and [townhomes](#), reducing minimum lot size requirements, and [flexible development regulations](#) to maximize available lot size more fully.

Adding this housing type can encourage housing options in both new and existing single-family neighborhoods. Some strategies can assist in creating affordable rental options, while maintaining the look of a single-family neighborhood. In newly developing single-family zones, jurisdictions can use zoning tools to encourage a broader range of housing options and affordability.

Missing middle housing can add to the visual appeal of a neighborhood by providing a variety of house and lot sizes and styles. Added density that arises from compact forms of development can also help a community achieve its broader housing, land use, capital facility, environmental and transportation planning goals.

In missing middle zones

Missing middle housing can also be used to bridge the gap between existing single-family zones and more intensive densities, such as high-rise buildings and mixed-use commercial centers. Establishing missing middle zones allows jurisdictions to promote new development that is moderate density, providing a variety of housing styles that capture the “missing” market. However, it is imperative that these zones include regulations that truly promote this type of housing. Parking minimums, open space requirements, and other regulations can inadvertently discourage moderate density housing by driving up land requirements and construction costs. These zones can also provide a transition or “step down” between more intensive development and traditional single-family neighborhoods. Tools in missing middle zones include [minimum densities](#) and permitting outright a broader variety of housing types ([mixed use development](#), [microunits](#), [townhomes](#), [mobile/manufactured housing](#) and modular housing).

Middle density housing can support neighborhoods that are pleasant to walk in and support varied types of transit infrastructure, including frequent bus service and streetcar.

WHERE SHOULD ADDING MISSING MIDDLE HOUSING BE CONSIDERED?

All communities can benefit from increased housing diversity. Since missing middle housing is often more affordable than other housing types, it should be considered widely in all jurisdictions. As the region continues to grow, accommodating more people in existing single-family areas and creating new zones for missing middle density housing can be effective ways to accommodate growth while providing housing types affordable to more income levels.

Limited development capacity

Communities experiencing growth pressure and a need for more affordable housing but lacking developable land are prime candidates for these measures because they increase the development capacity of existing land. This is particularly important for predominantly single-family neighborhoods close to job centers.



Newly developing communities

Incorporating innovative development approaches into traditional single-family subdivisions can contribute to the visual appeal, character and diversity of a neighborhood, as well as provide options for first-time and lower-income homebuyers.

Single-family markets

Neighborhoods dominated by single-family homes can employ these tools to encourage other forms of housing accessible to a broader range of income levels. These tools can help provide housing options for workers who would not otherwise be able to afford a home in the community close to their jobs.

Empty-nesters and seniors

Jurisdictions looking to address an aging population can consider small-lot, shared common area and accessory dwelling unit strategies as demand increases for smaller and more accessibly located housing options with fewer maintenance requirements. These housing types provide a range of sizes and accessibility levels, making it easier for people to stay in their communities or close to relatives during different stages of life.

Rural lands and sensitive areas

Rural communities and urban areas located near agricultural or resource lands and critical areas can employ techniques to cluster development away from sensitive areas while maintaining appropriate rural development standards to provide additional housing choices.

Expensive housing markets

Rising home prices can increase the exclusivity of single-family neighborhoods, limiting who has access to these areas and the associated services, amenities, and schools. Allowing more housing in single-family neighborhoods, specifically ownership options, provides opportunities for a wider range of residents to live in these neighborhoods and can help to slow displacement.

WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW TO GET STARTED PLANNING FOR MISSING MIDDLE HOUSING?

Consider the neighborhoods in your community. Are residents satisfied with the housing choices available in your city? Is existing density far below the maximum allowed in any areas? Is there development pressure in a part of the city that is already largely developed? Which neighborhoods in your city would benefit from more housing choices, including affordable options? What are the most appropriate areas to encourage added density in the context of the greater community plan?

Legal requirements

Some housing strategies adaptable to single-family areas are either encouraged or required by state law. Comprehensive plans are encouraged to include “innovative land use management techniques” such as cluster housing and planned unit developments (RCW 36.70A.090). RCW 43.63A.215 requires cities with populations greater than 20,000 to allow accessory dwelling units within their single-family zones. RCW 35A.21.312 requires cities to permit siting of modular housing units in areas zoned residential to promote housing choices. Streamlined or consolidated permitting for projects with multiple permits is required by RCW 36.70B.210. Some developments may have adopted covenants that prevent the use of some housing strategies.



Development regulations

Many of the suggested strategies for encouraging missing middle housing involve amending development regulations. A good place to start is by assessing your jurisdiction's comprehensive plan, zoning code and other regulations. Goals in your comp plan may not be well implemented by current development regulations or may be precluded by restrictive zoning. Look for barriers in regulations that may unintentionally prohibit or discourage denser and more diverse forms of development in the single-family areas you have targeted (e.g., setback, lot area, lot dimension, density, offsite parking, and ownership requirements).

Development climate

It is important to understand the development climate of your community. Speaking with developers and homeowners could help gain insight into where the proposed changes might work, or where and under what conditions they would be willing to create more diverse and denser developments. Combining these tools with incentives like [density bonuses](#) or [fee waivers](#) for units accessible to moderate- and low-income households may induce builders to incorporate affordable units into their projects.

Community education and outreach

Consult with block and homeowner groups in the neighborhoods where you are considering implementing new regulations. Speaking with affordable housing advocates and potential new residents could help identify strategies that would work best in the community. Community opposition to affordable housing and increased densities in single-family areas is common. Techniques that encourage community acceptance partner well with strategies that preserve or introduce new forms of single-family development. Using educational and outreach efforts when implementing new regulations can enhance community buy-in. Researching community opinion through survey tools, public meetings, stakeholder interviews and focus groups are the initial components of a community outreach plan. Completing a comprehensive outreach and education plan can build support for and acceptance of new housing choices.

Addressing community opposition through [community engagement plans](#) can [build greater community understanding and support](#) of the regulations and create a smoother, more predictable process. Conflict may present itself at the time of development, rather than when the new regulations are created. If possible, proactively deploying an outreach and education plan before these types of projects begin can help diffuse conflict.

RESOURCES

The Alliance for Housing Solutions: [Missing Middle Housing](#) (2020)

Congress for the New Urbanism (CNU): [Missing Middle Housing](#) (2020)

Missing Middle Housing: [The Types](#) (2020)

MRSC: [Encouraging Neighborhood-Friendly, Residential Infill Development](#) (2018)

City of Olympia, WA: [Missing Middle Housing](#) (2020)

PSRC: [Missing Middle Housing in the Region](#) (2019)

Strong Towns: [5 Ways to Make the Missing Middle Less Missing](#) (2019)

