

Middle Housing in Portland

WHO, WHAT, WHEN, WHERE AND WHY?



Over the next 20 years, about a quarter million more people will join the roughly 620,000 Portlanders who are already here. But where will they live and work?

The City's new Comprehensive Plan directs most new residential and business growth into mixed use zones along bustling corridors (like Interstate and Barbur) and in vibrant centers (like Hollywood and Montavilla). Policies also encourage more housing choices to accommodate a greater diversity of family sizes, incomes and ages as well as the changing needs of households over time. Even in Portland's single-dwelling neighborhoods there will be redevelopment and change.

Giving Portlanders more options

Many close-in neighborhoods are rich with amenities, such as shops, cafes and services, as well parks, open space and tree-lined streets. People want to live in these places where they can walk, bike or roll to meet their daily needs, chat with a friend at a coffee shop, or visit with their neighbors as they shop.

But not everyone can afford to live in a single-family house or an apartment. So in addition to allowing new apartments that meet Portland's housing demand, we want to make homes in amenity-rich neighborhoods accessible to more people.

The Missing Middle

Portland used to have zoning that allowed for more types of housing in residential areas. Wander the streets around Hawthorne, Laurelhurst or Irvington, and you can see the reminders of earlier plans that allowed for duplexes, bungalow courtyards and small apartment buildings nestled comfortably alongside single-family homes.

Coined by urban planner Daniel Parolek, the term *middle housing* is defined as in-between housing — in-between single-family houses and larger multi-family buildings. Middle housing can include rowhouses, duplexes, apartment and bungalow courts, stacked flats, cottage clusters and ADUs. This type of housing is generally built at the same scale (size, height, setbacks) as single-family homes, so it feels integrated into the neighborhood (see illustration above).

Middle housing types are often attached, meaning that homes share a wall, floor or ceiling with at least one other household. Think brownstones (rowhouses) in New York City or flats (stacked duplexes) in London. Throughout the country and in Portland, however, zoning codes make it more difficult to build the smaller attached units that typify middle housing around the world in single-dwelling areas.

Did you know? Although it may not be readily apparent, middle housing is not new to Portland. In fact, this type of housing is prevalent in several of Portland's historic neighborhoods. However, in most cases, the current zoning code doesn't allow middle housing to be built in areas zoned for single dwellings today.

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Why is middle housing important?

The modern family or household doesn't look the same as it did 20 or 30 years ago. Aging baby boomers and young millennials are defining their households in new ways. Empty nesters may want to downsize or convert a single-family home into two units; young couples, single parents and non-traditional families are creating alternative types of living arrangements; and people with disabilities can now live more independently thanks to modern technology.

There is growing demand in Portland for greater housing supply and choice; residents are considering price, size, location, homeownership options and accessibility. In addition to accommodating growth and providing more housing diversity, middle housing offers more affordable options and helps us address goals for equity and diversity.

Benefits of Middle Housing

- **Affordability.** Generally, this type of housing can be built using wood frame construction methods, which is less expensive per square foot than four-to-six story mixed use buildings.
- **Chance to live in inner neighborhoods.** While much of the available land for additional single-family construction is in East and outer Southwest Portland, the demand is highest in the innermost neighborhoods, where land is scarce. Construction of land-efficient middle housing in inner ring neighborhoods could help meet this demand.
- **Access to complete communities.** The new Comprehensive Plan promotes compact development within walking distance of neighborhood hubs and town center locations. But many of these centers don't have the number of households needed to support locally serving shops and services that residents desire. Zoning for more attached housing options near centers could help us achieve that goal.
- **More housing choices.** Portlanders want more housing options for different life stages and multigenerational living. Surveys have also suggested that many apartment dwellers would prefer to live in their own house — if they can afford it.



These types of housing add to the neighborhood character of the inner eastside and residential areas around NW 23rd, for example.

Fact: The current demand for affordable small-footprint or attached housing in the U.S. exceeds supply by up to 35 million units, but most cities limit the types of housing that can be built.

Source: Daniel Parolek

Fact: Only 25 percent of Portland's households are families with children. And as the population ages, more households will be made up of one or two people.

Who benefits from middle housing?

With housing prices on the rise and baby boomers getting older, the demand for an in-between type of housing is growing. More people are looking for alternatives to the single-family home or apartment living.

Single parents with children: Many families are single head of household, which means resources are stretched thin. Coming up with a down payment and paying a monthly mortgage can be too much for some of these families. So more modest housing types like fourplexes provide the structure of a single-family home at a more affordable price.



Aging-in-community folks: Mature adults who have retired and are still active may want to downsize and cut their expenses but remain in their neighborhood to be near friends and familiar services. Courtyard cottages offer cozy, community-oriented living at a lower price, thereby stretching their dollars into old age.



Young adults and/or couples entering the housing market: While townhouses share a wall with their neighbor, they are typically less expensive than fully detached homes. Young couples planning to start a family or families with children already may find the lower price point attractive, especially if one parent wants to take time off work while their kids are young.



Recent college grads/renters: These days, college graduates acquire their degrees along with tens of thousands of dollars in debt. What could have been a down payment must go to paying off student loans. But before they can buy a house, they still may want to rent one. So stacked flats can provide a home-like experience, including a backyard, for much less money, near the amenities they still love.



Adults with disabilities living near caretakers: Accessory dwelling units can be the perfect fit for someone with a disability who wants to live independently but needs to be close to those who can help, if needed.

Definitions and Zoning

Middle housing has more and usually smaller units than typical detached single-family development and can take different forms, such as:



Row houses: Attached houses where each home is on its own *fee-simple* lot, i.e., individual lot that can be bought or sold.



Townhouses: Attached houses where there are no platted lot lines (either rented or sold as condominiums). Townhouses come in groups of three or more.



Duplexes: A pair of attached units, either side-by-side (semi-detached) or one above the other (stacked).



Triplex, fourplex, etc: A multi-dwelling structure that contains three or four primary dwelling units on one lot. Each unit must share a common wall or common floor/ceiling with at least one other unit.



Courtyard housing: Bungalows, townhouses or apartments oriented around a shared courtyard or common green.



Accessory dwelling unit (ADU): A second dwelling unit created on a lot with a house, attached house or manufactured home. The second unit is created auxiliary to and is always smaller than the house, attached house or manufactured home. ADUs are currently limited in size to no more than 800 square feet or 75 percent the size of the house, whichever is less.

Middle housing forms are now generally allowed in R1, R2 and R2.5 zones. Limited forms of middle housing are also allowed in R5, R7, R10 and R20 (ADUs, duplexes or attached homes on corners).

Next Steps

City Council is now considering what areas in Portland could accommodate middle housing options in the future. No rezoning is being proposed at this time, but Council may direct staff to begin studying potential areas to broaden opportunities for middle housing development. The scope of this work is yet to be determined.

To learn more, you can follow these projects:

- **Residential Zoning Map Update.** Currently, the Planning and Sustainability Commission is considering whether to change some R5 zoning to R2.5, where the 1980 Comp Plan envisioned this as the appropriate future pattern. This is significant because R2.5 allows more middle housing than R5 zoning.
- **Residential Infill Project.** This project will address the scale and design of new infill development in single-dwelling zones, and whether these zones should allow more types of middle housing.
- **Multi-dwelling Code Project.** This project will look at expanding the geography of multi-family residential zones and refining design standards for new development in them.
- **New Comprehensive Plan Policy on Middle Housing.** City Council is currently considering adding policies to the new Comprehensive Plan to address the need for middle housing. The draft policy expresses general support for increased middle housing options in single-family neighborhoods. It also directs the Bureau of Planning and Sustainability to undertake a future project, after adoption of the Comprehensive Plan, to study ways this policy could be put into action. Any changes resulting from this study would be subject to a full public process and hearings.

