

Zoning Policy in the Puget Sound

Despite Progress, Much of the Region is Unwelcoming to Development

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Housing costs in the Puget Sound are rising, **in part due to local land-use regulations that limit the ability to construct adequate new housing.**

More than 70 percent of all residential land in Bellevue and Seattle is **reserved for single-family homes.** Many other communities have less room for apartments.

More than half of new housing in the region is being permitted in areas near transit, giving more people access to environmentally friendly transit in the future. The majority of these permits are for projects in multi-family zones, with **few permits in areas zoned for only single-family homes.**

But a **third of the land near transit remains off limits** to the construction of anything other than single-family homes.

New state legislation could help fill the gap by requiring municipalities throughout the region to zone for multi-family housing, which could make space for hundreds of thousands of new housing units.

Thanks to a thriving economy and high quality of life, the Puget Sound region is highly sought-after. But the metropolitan area suffers from elevated housing costs, in part due to limited housing availability. Local land-use rules, like zoning for large lots and single-family homes, restrict how much can be built, limiting construction. New regulations allowing affordable duplexes and fourplexes in single-family neighborhoods, plus high-density, mixed-use projects near transit, could help meet demand by creating space to construct hundreds of thousands of new homes.

ZONING POLICY IS LIMITING CONSTRUCTION NEAR TRANSIT

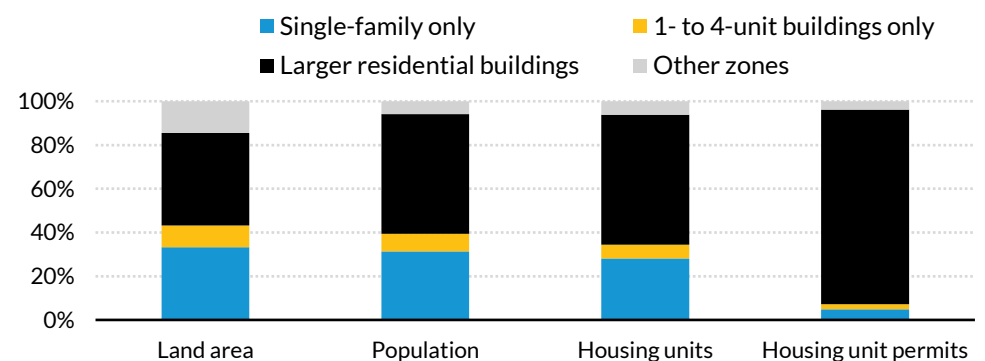
Building near transit provides residents access to affordable and environmentally sustainable transportation. In the Puget Sound, most new housing permits over the past 20 years were located near existing, under construction, or planned fixed-guideway transit lines, such as light rail and bus rapid transit services.

Permitting varies based on local government zoning policies. Near transit, about a third of the land is restricted to single-family home construction (figure 1). Yet less than 5 percent of housing permits are located in such zones—compared to almost 90 percent in zones that allow apartments. If the single-family zones allowed multi-family housing development, the region could add up to 65 percent more new housing permits—equivalent to 120,000 homes—depending on developer interest.

FIGURE 1

Permitting Occurs Disproportionately in Multi-Family Zones

Share of transit-adjacent areas, by type of buildings allowed by zoning district



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Source: Author calculations based on data from the US Census Bureau and Puget Sound Regional Council (PSRC) and zoning collected from jurisdictions in King, Pierce, and Snohomish Counties.

Notes: Includes data for land within a half-mile of existing and planned fixed-guideway transit.

SINGLE-FAMILY ZONING DOMINATES

Though localities allow multi-family housing development on about half the land near transit in the Puget Sound, conditions vary. Near transit in communities like Everett and unincorporated Snohomish County, regulations allow for multi-family housing construction. But Seattle and Tacoma allow only single-family homes on many transit-accessible properties, such as the majority of those in West Seattle and South Tacoma (figure 2).

Further from transit service, single-family zoning covers most municipal land (though accessory dwelling units can be built in many such areas). More than 70 percent of all residential land in Bellevue and Seattle is now reserved for single-family homes. Some suburban communities—including Lake Forest Park, Mercer Island, Newcastle, and Normandy Park—zone 90 percent or more of residential land for single-family units. These limits inhibit construction.

STATE LEGISLATION TO THE RESCUE?

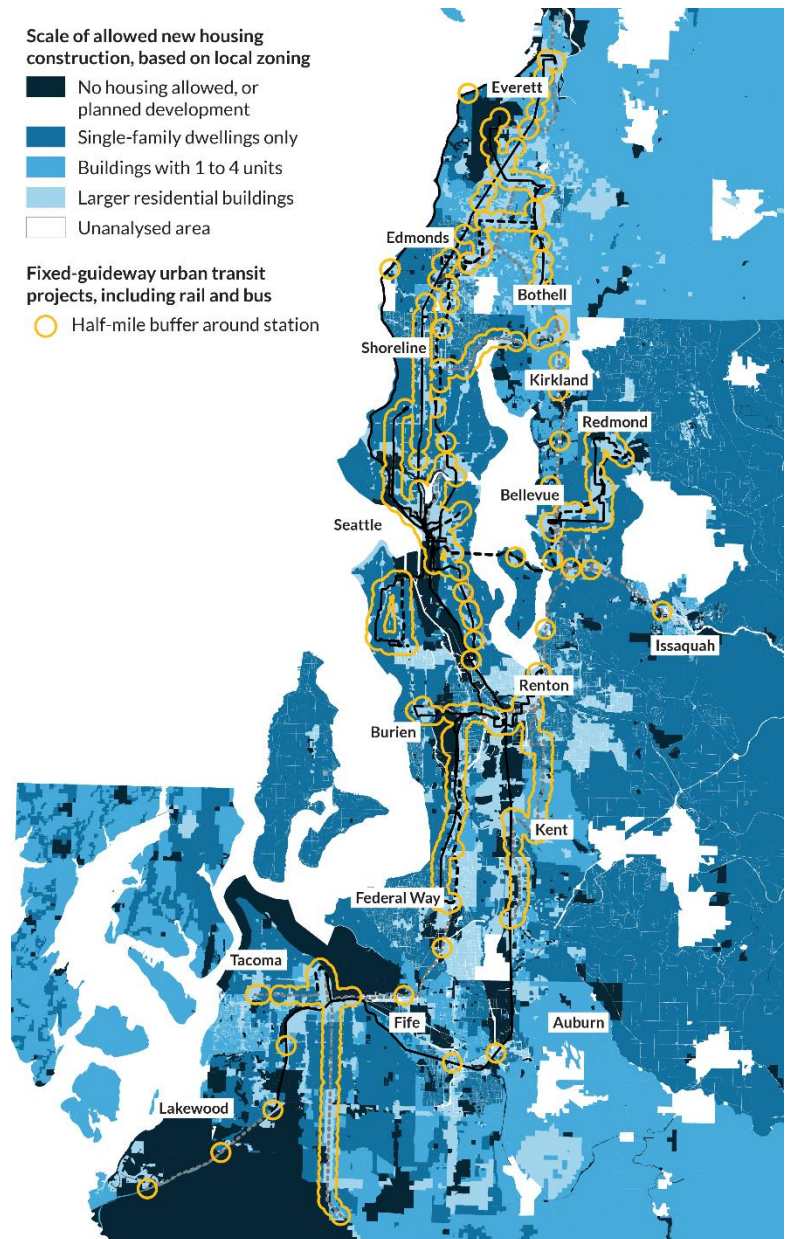
Recent bills introduced in Washington's legislature would have encouraged housing construction by overruling local obstacles to building. Similar legislation has passed in California and Oregon. But the most recent efforts have failed to garner adequate support in the previous legislative session.

House Bill 1782/Senate Bill 5670 would have legalized two- to six-flat apartments and reduced parking requirements statewide. House Bill 1880/Senate Bill 5861 would have created housing benefit districts, allowing municipalities to collect taxes, buy land near transit, and sell it to developers to build affordable housing. House Bill 1660 would have allowed accessory dwelling units in many cities.

If legislation with provisions that eliminate or reduce the potency of single-family zoning, like in these bills, were to pass, it could improve housing accessibility by encouraging modestly scaled and affordable infill housing construction, especially in suburban areas where such zoning rules are common. That may not be enough, though: High-density, mixed-use, and multi-family developments—not always allowed in even the most transit-connected communities like Bellevue, Seattle, and Tacoma—may also need zoning changes in order for housing to be constructed at an adequate scale and to create more livable, walkable urban neighborhoods that are popular and environmentally sustainable.

FIGURE 2

Zoning Near Transit in the Puget Sound



Source: Author analysis based on PSRC data, municipality and county zoning files, and Transit Explorer 2.

Notes: Analysis does not account for accessory dwelling units.