

Background Material on “Neighborhood Character” Proposal

The amendment application ([click link to download](#)) states that the change, if approved, would “Remove “neighborhood character/character of the neighborhood/established neighborhoods” and replace it with “accessible, sustainable, and culturally inclusive neighborhoods”. You can also learn more about the development of this proposal by clicking on the links in the “Timeline” below.

As the city is still open to comments on the amendment, it is hoped that we can learn about what the implications are for neighborhoods from the proposed change. This is not just a language use change, it is, as the City staff has described, a “substantive” change.

The Amendment

From the Comp Plan application about the text, the City states that:

“The intent is to:

*Include more descriptive language. **Remove “neighborhood character/character of the neighborhood/established neighborhoods” and replace with “accessible, sustainable, and culturally inclusive neighborhoods”.** Define these terms within the glossary.”*

The proposal then defines “neighborhood character” in changes under “Land Use and Urban Design” as:

Our community defines “neighborhood character” as accessible, sustainable, and culturally inclusive neighborhoods. These are defined as:

- *Accessible: Includes ADA compliancy, multi-mobility, and housing affordability.*
- *Sustainable: Promotes a healthy environment, a diverse and resilient local economy, and historic preservation, including, reuse, and adaptability of existing buildings.*
- *Culturally inclusive: Recognizes, supports and promotes diverse housing types, strong arts and historic preservation, and the various contributions of diverse Olympians to the built environment and to our cultural heritage past and present.”*

From the Comp Plan draft application materials the city responded to the checklist question: **“A statement regarding what issue is addressed or problem solved by the proposed amendment.**

*The proposed amendments will expand comprehensive plan language to apply more broadly to all who live, work, or recreate in the City of Olympia regardless of citizenship status or gender. The plan will document that Olympia values equity as a core value. Additional amendments will remove reference to neighborhood character or identify that is not a stagnant quality. **Which measures the city uses in its consideration of neighborhood character will be better clarified.**” [Bolted emphasis added].*

Understanding the Changes

The CNA hopes to learn how replacing the commonly used phrase of “neighborhood character” with a new meaning works with the goals and provisions in the current Comp Plan that reference attributes and concepts of neighborhood character.

Further, the use by the City of the new meaning of “neighborhood character” as a measure in the city’s consideration of neighborhoods needs more explanation. A key question is whether this would limit the grounds on which a neighborhood could object or support changes that affect aspects of their neighborhood that create a unique “sense of place” and is currently supported within the existing Comp Plan.

We also hope to learn more about the amendment materials statement about additional amendments being made to “remove reference to neighborhood character” or “identify that neighborhood character is not a stagnant quality”. It is not clear what or when or if these changes will be made.

Finally, what was intended by the amendment’s removal of all references of the word “established” in regard to “established neighborhoods”?

Amendment Timeline

Although it was submitted after the deadline for preliminary Comp Plan amendment applications, the Council allowed the amendment to go forward after discussion determined it was allowed under ([OMC 18.59](#)). The record, as you can watch from the video links provided below, makes clear that the amendment was not fully written nor reviewed at the time of introduction but that the opportunity for input from the community on the proposal, when finalized, would be ample.

January 19th – The amendment is raised at the end of the Council meeting by Councilmember Huynh. She reports on a Comprehensive Plan text change that she had been working on with Councilmembers Madrone and Cooper. The Mayor and the City Manager discuss whether the amendment missed the timetable/process for amendments. [Click here to download and watch](#) or [click here to stream](#) it and go to 2:49:00 on the progress bar (approximately 18 minutes)

February 9th - The changes were presented to the City Council. [Click here to see the presentation](#) (approx. 1 minute)

April 13th – Updated language and review of outreach activities were presented to the City Council by Councilmember Yen Huynh. [Click here to see the presentation](#) (approx. 2 minutes)

April 24th - RNAs were sent an email with the subject line, “Olympia - Proposed Comprehensive Plan Amendment”. The part that defined “neighborhood character” read as follows: *“Part C: Text amendments requested by Council to improve language around equity and inclusion”*.

June 21st - [Joyce Phillips’ presentation on the topic to the Planning Commission](#) followed up by a neighborhood character question from [Planning Commissioner Tracey Carlos](#) and response by Joyce Phillips. (The two clips total about two minutes in length)

What the Current Comp Plan Says about the Concept of Neighborhood Character

The extract from the current Comp Plan (below) speaks to the concept of “neighborhood character”. It describes how Olympians value our city’s “special features” that create a “sense of place”. It also discusses the balance between preserving our sense of place and accepting growth. In short, it states that Olympians know and care about what they like about their neighborhoods and what changes we might want or not want to see:

“Preserving our Sense of Place and Connections

(Page 18, existing language from Comp Plan package)

The City embraces our Comprehensive Plan as an opportunity to enhance the things Olympians care about. As we grow and face change, Olympians want to preserve the unique qualities and familiarity of our community. We draw a sense of place from the special features of our city: walk-able neighborhoods, historic buildings, views of the mountains, Capitol and Puget Sound, and our connected social fabric. These features help us identify with our community, enrich us, and make us want to invest here socially, economically and emotionally.

During development of this Plan, many people expressed a desire to maintain a “small town feel.” Olympians want to feel connected to each other and to our built and natural environment. We want to live in a friendly and safe community where we know our neighbors and shopkeepers, and run into friends along the sidewalk. We value harmony with nature, thriving small businesses, places to gather and celebrate, and an inclusive local government.

Olympians expressed that they are willing to accept growth as long as our environment and sense of place is preserved. That means protecting the places and culture that we recognize as “Olympia,” even if those things are a little different for each of us. It also means focusing on our community values and vision as we grow.”

The current Comp Plan on Housing says,

“The strategies of this chapter depend on well-formulated design standards to promote flexibility and stimulate innovation while preserving and enhancing the character of neighborhoods. We seek to establish and encourage diversity in housing opportunities and link diverse neighborhoods. With a strong foundation in preserving our heritage, our community can incorporate new housing and other developments in a manner that continues our legacy of well-planned neighborhoods. The housing goals and policies below provide a framework for residential land uses in Olympia’s area.”

There are many references in the Plan that use a form of “neighborhood character” whose meaning would be affected by reference. In fact, the amendment materials do not callout all the areas of the Comp Plan whose meanings would likely be changed or confounded by reference to the proposed definition. Examples are:

- Neighborhood Centers, PL21.4 - Require that signage be consistent with neighborhood character,
- Future Land Use, Low Density Neighborhoods, Appendix A - specific zoning and densities are to be based on the unique characteristics of each area,
- Villages and Planned Developments PL24 - “character of the surrounding neighborhood”,
- Design Review - character and livability of each area or neighborhood,
- Housing Choices, PL 14.3: the character of existing established Low-density Neighborhoods
- Development, GL20 - Development maintains and improves neighborhood character and livability,

- Development P L20 1.4 - Require development in established neighborhoods to be of a type, scale, orientation, and design that maintains or improves the character, aesthetic quality, and livability of the neighborhood,
- Street Connections, PT5.2 - Consideration will be given to the unique neighborhood character and context, particularly any direct impacts of a street connection on established neighborhoods.

Note: I have attempted to capture the relevant elements of the topic and sent it out for review. If I hear that I got the facts or analysis wrong, I apologize and reserve the right to correct and edit.