

Effort to define neighborhood character reignites debate



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What does “neighborhood character” mean? Olympia’s Planning Commission got a lesson in the difficulties of language at the latest meeting that attempted, without much success, to settle on a definition.

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Anyone who has attended a public hearing about a new proposed development will be familiar with the phrase “neighborhood character.”

Appeals to the quality of a particular place — usually a neighborhood of single-family houses — tend to crop up whenever changes are proposed.

Take, for example, last December, when the Olympia City Council passed legislation legalizing duplexes, triplexes, and fourplexes across much of the city, in areas previously restricted to single-

family homes. The council did so over the objections of many homeowners who warned that it would destroy their neighborhood's character.

As opponents of adding so-called "missing middle" housing noted, the city's comprehensive plan, a document that guides land use decisions, contains numerous references to preserving "neighborhood character."

But what does "character" mean? And must it necessarily remain fixed in time? It depends on who you ask.

Olympia's Planning Commission got a lesson in the difficulties of language last week, at the latest in a series of meetings that attempted, without much success, to settle on a definition for the slippery term.

The war over words began with a proposed amendment submitted by the city council, who had initially sought to remove the term "neighborhood character" altogether, but decided to define it instead, because it appears in the state Growth Management Act and other engineering literature.

The council's amendment seeks to define neighborhood character as meaning "accessible, sustainable, and culturally inclusive," including such goals as ADA compliance, housing affordability, a healthy environment, diverse housing types, and "strong arts and historic preservation."

The proposal was welcomed by Planning Commissioners such as Tracey Carlos, who said the term has too often been used as a shorthand for homogenous neighborhoods that are white and affluent.

"As a child, as a mixed-race Asian-Indian girl, my family was, I won't say forced out, but made to feel very, very much that we were uncharacteristic to their neighborhood where I grew up. We had dogs put on us, we had, just — ostracization," Carlos said. "I was one of those people that suffered from the non-definition of neighborhood character that we currently have."

Homeowners, however, were not so happy with the city's attempted definition.

The Olympia Council of Neighborhood Associations (CNA), which represents dozens of neighborhood groups around the city, submitted their own, alternative definition.

In their view, neighborhood character should about the unique "identity" of each place, and the city should consider potential impacts to a neighborhood's "land use, urban design, visual resources, historic resources, socio-economics, traffic, and/or noise."

"The purpose here is that the people who live in neighborhoods today should have a voice in what they will live in in the future," said Larry Dzeiza, chair of the Council of Neighborhood Associations and a previous member of The Olympian's Board of Contributors.

While sustainability, accessibility, and inclusivity are laudable, Dzeiza said, defining neighborhood character would undermine its use as a "planning concept." He offered a hypothetical situation where a highway was proposed through a residential neighborhood — that would affect its character.

Those last three aspects of the CNA's definition — socio-economics, traffic, and noise — caught the attention of several planning commissioners, who saw it as an attempt to reinforce the very exclusionary policies they are trying to undo.

“I just want to remind everybody that the intention of redlining was to preserve the social and economic attributes of our neighborhoods,” said Commissioner Rad Cunningham. “The problem we are trying to solve is that neighborhood character is amorphous and can be used by people who currently hold power, the current homeowners, to keep other people from coming into their neighborhoods. And I think the way the CNA has defined it preserves that power.”

Traffic and noise, meanwhile are one of the most common arguments used against new development, said Commissioner Zainab Nejati. But those are just a few of many reasons given under the umbrella of neighborhood character.

“I feel like we have to really call out what neighborhood character has been historically used for: It’s become coded language for, ‘How can I keep my neighborhood the same and keep other people from moving in?’” said Janae Huber, founder of Olympians for People Oriented Places. “I would like to see it stop being used as a weapon to try to freeze our neighborhoods in time.”

Dzeiza rejected the idea that neighborhood character is aimed at excluding the poor and people of color.

“I don’t want to believe it’s a codeword, because I don’t believe that the city council that we have many members before us today and council’s past were really thinking of neighborhood as a racist term when they inserted it in 50 places inside the comp plan,” Dzeiza said. “That defies belief, because I know those people, and they are not, they would not be thinking in those ways.”

Restaging the fight over the Missing Middle

Other opponents of the city’s proposed definition were worried not about the unlikely threat of a new highway being built through Olympia, but about the more likely prospect of duplexes and other types of infill development that now can be built in neighborhoods that were previously restricted to single-family houses.

“I’m concerned too about the term ‘diverse housing types,’” said Harry Branch. “Are we talking about multiplexes that are owned by LLCs, or what exactly? I just don’t see how these things define neighborhood, and I see them as, if anything, nullifying neighborhood character.”

Jon Gilstrom gave a very specific example of what he believes neighborhood character is not: a “three-story duplex townhouse” on the 800 block of Olympia Avenue.

“That is in no way maintaining the character of this neighborhood,” Gilstrom said. “Those two little houses on either side got screwed.”

In the months since the original application was submitted in April, city staff attempted to merge the original definition (“accessible, sustainable, and culturally inclusive”) with the one proposed by the CNA. The compromise language essentially added a paragraph saying that “consideration of neighborhood character will be made for attributes such as design elements of buildings (mass, scale, materials, setting, and setbacks), parking, parks and open space, provision of city utilities, street grids and connections, and street trees.”

Who’s neighborhood?

That’s where the Planning Commission began last week, with three different definitions on the table.

Commissioner Carole Richmond brought the CNA definition up for a vote, which was voted down. The Commission then attempted to merge the various definitions, typing and retyping in an attempt to smooth over disagreements about particular language.

Richmond rejected city council's premise that the undefined use of neighborhood character leaves it open to being weaponized against any change, instead arguing that it is a "neutral term" that can be applied without bias.

"I think what's happening with this discussion is people are saying this is bad, neighborhood character is a bad thing because people abuse the term or they try to abuse it," Richmond said. "The times that the term neighborhood character has been used to not accept an apartment building, for example, I mean there are some times, but I don't think it's that widespread. ... I don't think that those instances justify eliminating the term."

As the meeting progressed, some of the commissioners who had most passionately supported the initial drive to define the term found themselves arguing against specific language added by successive revisions.

"Most things are covered somewhere else in the comprehensive plan," Cunningham said. "Traffic is covered somewhere else, historic preservation is covered somewhere else. It doesn't need to be part of this definition — the only value it adds is preserving that ability for people to use it as an exclusionary zoning practice."

After several hours of debate, no action was taken, and the Planning Commission decided to revisit the question at its next meeting. But some on the commission got the sense that naming what neighborhood character is might be backfiring.

"I've struggled a little bit with using the definition of neighborhood character to maybe accomplish trying to make sure it's not used to exclude people from neighborhoods," said Commissioner Gregory Quetin. "Any amount of definition we do may create the kind of outcomes we don't want."

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