

3 July 2018

Dear Olympia Planning Commission:

I am writing in support of allowing triplexes and fourplexes anywhere within 600 feet of transit corridors with optional off-street parking, but particularly within 600 feet of our premier urban transit corridors.

The rest of this statement explains what I mean by premier urban transit corridors, the important transportation-land use connection this reflects, parking matters, and how this action you are considering aligns with broader community objectives.

Urban Transit Corridors

Intercity Transit (IT) provides a wide range of transit services throughout our region. Olympia enjoys a mix of 30- and 60-minute routes as well as the downtown Dash circulator and inter-regional service between Olympia and central Puget Sound. Innovative and efficient service design over the years means that we have 15-minute or better service on many of our key corridors: 4th and State; Martin Way; Pacific Avenue; Harrison; Capitol Way; and Division; as well as the Courthouse Hill out to South Puget Sound Community College. These 15-minute corridors are the ones I think of as our “premium” transit corridors.

It is unusual for a community our size to have this kind of service frequency. 15-minute “headways” as they are called are something that larger and more urbanized communities aim for. Innovation and careful attention to performance measures by IT over the years enables our small region to enjoy premier urban transit options along many miles of our primary transportation corridors. This matters because once transit service gets into the realm of 15-minute or less headways, transit can be a truly viable alternative to driving and provide access to a wide range of services and opportunities within a short, single-seat transit ride. People aren’t bound to a schedule in the same way as when service is every 30 minutes or hour. It’s convenient. It’s easy to combine walking and biking and transit.

The Transportation-Land Use Connection

It takes more than transit service, though, for people to have viable alternatives to driving. The other piece of this equation that matters is the character of land use along transit corridors. Land use is key to transit’s ability to compete with driving because to be truly competitive with cars, transit not only has to be frequent but it also has to connect people efficiently with lots of different kinds of destinations. Being able to shop, work, dine, and play within a direct, 5 to 10 minute bus ride opens up a world of opportunities for people who want – or need – to live a car-lite lifestyle. This mix of uses not only makes transit an attractive travel option it also makes walking and biking convenient alternatives to driving because so many destinations are so close.

Many of our best candidate corridors for the type of gentle densification envisioned by the Missing Middle initiative are our old street car neighborhoods that today enjoy 15-minute urban transit service. They experienced arrested development when the streetcars gave way to Highway 99 in the 1930s, and residential development patterns became much more auto-oriented after World War II. However, those four decades when the federal interstate highway ran down Martin Way, 4th Avenue, and Capitol Way – before the new interstate bypass of Olympia was completed in 1958 and began transforming the pattern and scale of development – those four decades shaped the character of these corridors as much or more than the streetcars did. More auto traffic created more local business opportunities located immediately adjacent to existing neighborhoods. We enjoy many of them today, places like Ralph’s (1956), Bayview (1952), the 1938 Wildwood Center that today houses Spuds and other local businesses, Eagan’s and Big Tom’s (the first in 1949), and the Dairy Queen on Capitol (1949). Many more of those older highway storefronts today support new entrepreneurs and established mom-and-pop businesses that make our urban corridors different than other parts of the city.

These corridors were – and remain – an organic part of our urban fabric. There’s a permeability between the surrounding neighborhoods and the commercial uses on the corridors that are not just good for business but also increase walkability and opportunities for people to do more while driving less. There’s a reason why these neighborhoods have higher Walk Scores than other neighborhoods in Olympia, and why they have lower rates of driving than elsewhere. Interestingly, a lot of it has to do with land use patterns established when these corridors were interstate highways.

When we think about walkability and transit access that allows people to drive less we typically think in terms of ¼ mile distances or about a five-ten minute walk for most people. The Commission proposal to allow triplex and fourplex infill within 600 feet is much less than I think is appropriate but far better than the alternate 300 feet some suggest. The proposal would allow this type of infill within about two blocks of our best transit routes. That’s less than a three minute walk for most people, with an increasing number of destinations within an easy 5-10 minute walk.

Parking Matters

While I believe that off-street parking should be optional and not required, this is particularly true along our urban transit corridors. These are the places where we have the very best opportunities to create more lifestyles that are not car-dependent. The typical parking stall requires a minimum of 200 square feet of land. That is 200 square feet better used for a garden, a patio, a pathway, or a greenhouse. It’s larger than many tiny homes. Requiring an off-street stall means carving a minimum of 200 square feet out of this transportation-efficient land solely for the purpose of storing a car whether or not the person living there even has a car. This contradicts almost everything else we’re trying to do with our plans and policies.

Won’t people park on the street instead? Sure they will. They already do throughout most of our old streetcar neighborhoods. Ironically the place where on-street parking is at a premium is in the South Capitol Neighborhood where they already have triplexes and fourplexes intermingled with single family residential (and where there is virtually no opportunity for any more infill, fears notwithstanding). At the same time this remains one of Olympia’s most iconic neighborhoods, proof for some that intermixing housing types and allowing on-street parking does not diminish neighborhood vitality or economic value despite dire warnings to the contrary.

Alignment with Overall Community Objectives

One of the things that makes this so hard is the fact that we’re talking about infill, not big new tracts of greenfield development. That means we’re talking about what happens in existing neighborhoods. The Commission is torn between increasing housing choices and preserving neighborhood character. This does both.

These are cohesive neighborhoods that have been shaped over time by transportation, originally as street car neighborhoods then as commercial highway corridors and now more recently, within the last 20 years or so, by people looking for lifestyles that are not wholly dependent on driving. These neighborhoods have known nothing but change over the decades. And despite that change these neighborhoods are increasingly desirable places for people to live, not less.

More so than anywhere else in Olympia these areas already have a mix of housing types. There are miscellaneous vacant or under-utilized lots scattered throughout here and there, meaning the infill will be piecemeal over the next few decades, similar to the way many of these neighborhoods developed over the last century. For all of Olympia’s attractions this is not Ballard, or Portland, or L.A. The wholesale transformation of thriving neighborhoods that some fear is a fantasy with no basis in market reality. Not everyone with a vacant lot or dilapidated housing structure will want to develop and not all who want to develop their vacant lots will want to build a triplex or fourplex. Those who do will have to comply with the City’s design standards, development review and community engagement processes. It’s why the Commission has put so much time into those things over the years.

The City’s Comp Plan as well as Sustainable Thurston, the Regional Transportation Plan, and Thurston Thrives all envision more lifestyle opportunities where people don’t have to rely on a car to get around. These urban transit corridors with

their intermingled mix of housing types, occasional vacant lots, outstanding walkability and transit service, and wide range of services and destinations within close proximity offer the best opportunities for current and future generations to partake of a car-lite lifestyle in our predominately auto-dependent environs.

This proposal helps us to meet other objectives articulated in our plans and policies. Here are a few:

- ✓ Increase social equity
 - Increase housing affordability in part by reducing transportation costs (location efficiency)
 - Encourage more diversity in our neighborhoods
 - Increase mobility independence regardless of age, income, or ability

- ✓ Reduce our collective environmental footprint
 - Reduce single-occupancy vehicle demand
 - Support energy efficiency in the homes we build and the ways we travel. Triplexes and fourplexes are inherently more energy efficient than single family homes.
 - Reduce greenhouse gas emissions
 - Promote more active and healthy travel choices
 - Take development pressures off of our rural resource and agricultural lands and open space

- ✓ Support local businesses
 - Increase walk-up commerce opportunities between local businesses and adjacent neighborhoods. To not be completely reliant on drive-by traffic, small neighborhood scale businesses require about 3,500 households located within ½ mile. We have a ways to go.
 - The market reality is that the kind of infill opportunities we're referring to here – single lot, small scale – this is the domain of our local contractors, builders, tradesmen, and architects. In other words, our local businesses.
 - Most local businesses either need a lot of rooftops nearby to support them or large parking lots – increasing adjacent densities reduces the need for businesses to rely solely on drive-by traffic to thrive.

Yes, there will be impacts but there will also be benefits. Done right those benefits over time will far outweigh the impacts, most of which will be fairly temporary. And you're putting into place the very tools and processes to ensure it will be done right. Trust your processes.

Denying more housing opportunities here – where people can do more while driving less – will not eliminate impacts. It will just create different impacts over which these neighborhoods have no control as more growth goes to the perimeter where driving is the only viable option. It will also encourage cheap housing with high travel costs, which is not affordable housing. This is a responsible action with low impacts and high benefits for the long term.

Lest you think I'm advocating for something that won't affect me, I live within 600 feet of one of these corridors. Missing Middle opportunities – including the addition of triplexes and fourplexes in the mix of allowable housing types – are important. Those opportunities where people can live rich and fulfilling lives without having to depend on a car to get everywhere are particularly valuable and should be supported wherever possible.

Thank you for your thorough and inclusive efforts throughout this long process. Your thoughtful discussions and inquiries have been informative for all of us. This is complicated stuff under the best of circumstances and as soon as we're talking about existing neighborhoods it becomes personal as well. I appreciate your commitment to our wonderful community. You're doing good work that will serve us well long into the future.

Sincerely,



Thera Black
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