

Middle Housing Quick Guide

This quick guide provides an overview for the public and elected and appointed officials about what middle housing is and how it may be regulated. For a more detailed overview of middle housing requirements, see Commerce’s [User Guide](#) and [Model Ordinances](#). Middle housing laws are codified as RCW [36.70A.635](#), [36.70A.636](#), [36.70A.637](#), and [36.70A.638](#).

Middle housing is a type of moderate density housing required to be addressed in policies for all cities and counties fully planning under the Growth Management Act (RCW 36.70A.070(2)(2)(b)). Additionally, seventy-seven cities are required to adopt middle housing regulations consistent with RCW 36.70A.635. Many other cities are choosing to allow various middle housing options in support of their moderate density policies and as a tool to increasing housing affordability to all economic segments.



Duplex



Fourplex



Courtyard Apartments



Cottage Housing



Townhouses

Middle housing is defined as “buildings that are compatible in scale, form, and character with single-family houses and contain two or more attached, stacked, or clustered homes including duplexes, triplexes, fourplexes, fiveplexes, sixplexes, townhouses, stacked flats, courtyard apartments, and cottage housing”¹.

Middle housing key concepts

Middle housing refers to housing types with forms and densities that fall “between” single family homes and multi-family buildings. Middle housing may be comprised of 2-6 units per lot, regardless of lot size or of any adopted dwelling per acre standards. RCW 36.70A.635 requires that applicable cities regulate density in applicable residential zones in a way that has not commonly been done in the past.

Depending on a city’s location and population², middle housing is required to be allowed on all lots zoned predominantly for residential use, in the following ways:

- Tier 1 cities (over 75,000 population) are required to allow at least four units per lot. This increases to at least six units per lot when within one-quarter mile walking distance of a major transit stop or when at least two units are affordable housing
- Tier 2 cities (25,000 – 75,000) are required to allow at least two units per lot. This increase to at least four units per lot when within one-quarter mile walking distance of a major transit stop or when at least one unit is affordable housing
- Tier 3 cities (under 25,000) are required to allow two units per lot.

Middle housing types

Middle housing is defined as duplexes, triplexes, fourplexes, fiveplexes, sixplexes, townhouses, stacked flats, courtyard apartments, and cottage housing.

- Tier 1 and 2 cities are required to allow at least six of the nine middle housing types
- Tier 3 cities should allow duplexes, stacked flats, courtyard apartments, and cottage housing

¹ RCW 36.70A.030(21)

² Page 8 of the Middle Housing [User Guide](#) outlines how cities are tiered by population

Development review

State statute, [RCW 36.70A.635\(6\)\(b\)](#), requires that dimensional, infrastructure and other standards (including setback, lot coverage, stormwater, clearing, and tree canopy and retention requirements) for middle housing be **no more restrictive** than standards applied to detached single-family residences. If applying design review for middle housing, only administrative design review may be required.

Additionally, middle housing must be processed using the same development permit and environmental review processes that apply to detached single-family residences, unless otherwise required by state law. Middle housing requirements do not apply to portions of a lot, parcel, or tract designated with critical areas or their buffers.

Parking standards

Parking standards are established for middle housing to encourage use of alternative transportation and support infill development.

- No off-street parking may be required for middle housing units within one-half mile walking distance of a major transit stop, as defined in RCW 36.70A.030
- On lots greater than 6,000 square feet, a maximum of two off-street parking spaces may be required
- Lots less than 6,000 square feet, a maximum of one off-street parking space may be required

These parking requirements may be waived if an empirical parking study is submitted to Commerce shows that the application of the parking requirements will be significantly less safe for vehicle drivers or passengers, pedestrians, or bicyclists. The empirical parking study guidance and checklist are on the [Planning for Middle Housing](#) webpage.

Accessory dwelling unit (ADU)

Cities have the policy choice of whether or not to count accessory dwelling units towards middle housing unit density. By excluding ADUs to count toward middle housing unit density, a property owner could develop both middle housing (such as a duplex) and up to two ADUs, pursuant to RCW 36.70A.681.

Zero lot line short subdivision – unit lot subdivision

All cities, towns, and counties shall include in their short plat regulations procedures for unit lot subdivisions allowing division of a parent lot into separately owned unit lots. Portions of the parent lot not subdivided for individual unit lots shall be owned in common by the owners of the individual unit lots, or by a homeowners' association comprised of the owners of the individual unit lots.

The unit lot subdivision provides a tool for affordable home ownership while retaining the development standards of the parent lot.

Water and sewer

Water and sewer utility purveyors (cities, special districts, and private purveyors) should have flexible requirements for the design of water and sewer connections to middle housing lots and buildings. There are advantages and disadvantages to centralized and shared lateral connections and metering, and there may be different ownership arrangements, cost implications, and other reasons that require a variety of approaches.

For example, a sixplex developer should be able to choose between having a master meter maintained by a homeowner's association and having separate meters for each unit.

Commerce's resources and assistance is readily available to help navigate these requirements. If you have any questions or concerns, and/or require technical assistance, please contact me at (509) 606-3509 or Ethan.Porter@commerce.wa.gov.