

John Lombard, Candidate for City Council, District 5: Position Statement on Affordable Housing

Housing affordability is the issue before the City Council that most profoundly affects Seattle residents as a whole. If elected, I am committed to pursuing City action to address it—going well beyond the two proposals that have dominated public debate for years now: Mandatory Housing Affordability (MHA) and expansion of Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs).

Any additional major actions that I would support, though, should follow a public dialog about alternatives involving City neighborhoods and the City residents most affected by the affordability crisis: people of color, renters, young families, and the elderly and other homeowners burdened by rising property taxes. If the “Grand Bargain” negotiated by Mayor Murray had not excluded so many of these parties, the City Council might have acted on MHA and ADU (or better versions of them) much faster.

District 5 Councilmember Debora Juarez has shown that she cannot lead or foster public dialog with her constituents on any controversial issue, such as homelessness, public safety and affordable housing. In contrast, I would look forward to leading a dialog in District 5 about additional actions that the City can take to help increase affordable housing in Seattle—and to championing the best ideas that come out of it.

Context

Before getting into policy details, though, it’s important to put these debates in context. First and foremost, Seattle’s population rose by 105,000 people from 2010 to 2017. That’s more people, and almost the same percentage increase, as the City’s population rose in the 20 years before that. Seattle added 87,600 jobs just between 2010 and 2015, many of them high-paying technology jobs, which goes a very long way to explain the population increase. Amazon, in particular, expanded its headquarters employment at an unprecedented rate, starting around 2010.

Seattle’s housing market could not keep pace. No housing market could have. However, for three years now Seattle has led the country in the number of construction cranes at work—often more than New York and Chicago combined. The resulting units have begun to come onto the market. That has moderated rent increases and has probably contributed to a moderation in housing prices—with both rents and housing prices even decreasing at times recently.

For the moment, then, the years when Seattle led the nation in housing price increases are over. But the intense anxiety brought about by those increases (which I, as a renter and a father of a 12- and a 14-year-old, have felt keenly myself), hasn’t lulled much. Many, many people still wonder: Will I be able to continue to live in Seattle? Will my children be able to afford to live here, when the time comes? And how about those less well off than me?

Inequality has definitely grown in our city. From 2000 to 2013, Seattle gained a total of 28,000 households—but that is a net number. We lost 5,000 households across all income levels below 120% of median income, while gaining 33,000 above that. Looking closer, the number of the poorest households, below 60% of the median, actually increased. But the working poor, defined as between 60% and 80% of the median, declined the most of any income category, by more than 12,000 households. The whole “missing middle” of income levels—between 60% and 120% of the median—declined.

Inequality is growing worse in Seattle faster than it is across the nation as a whole—which is saying a lot.

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So what should we do? First, MHA and ADU

The City Council passed MHA in March 2019 and expects to act on the ADU legislation later this year, before the upcoming election. Although I most likely will not have a chance to vote on the ADU legislation, District 5 voters deserve to know where I stand on it, as well as MHA. Very briefly: I support both, with some significant qualifications with respect to MHA.

At bottom, MHA is a type of a well-established trade: government offers developers the opportunity to build more on a given plot of land (in this case, in urban villages and centers); in return, government requires that the developer contribute toward some public need that relates to the development (in this case, affordable housing). The key questions for the public are always: is the government giving too much away, or asking too little in return?

My big concern on the first of these questions is that, except for the Aurora-Licton Urban Village, affected communities in District 5 (the others are Bitter Lake, Lake City, and Northgate) had essentially no involvement in shaping the increases in density that are being offered to developers. The City says it held community meetings and open houses and accepted comments on-line. But few of the meetings were in District 5, and Councilmember Juarez made no effort to supplement them with her own outreach.

The exception of Aurora-Licton proves the rule. There, the community group ALUV (Aurora Licton Urban Village) took the initiative to make very clear what it wanted from the new zoning (especially Neighborhood Commercial zoning along Aurora, allowing dense residential development with retail on the first floor). To Councilmember Juarez's credit, she supported this. But that passive approach didn't work elsewhere in the District.

I'm also concerned that redevelopment encouraged by MHA may displace many residents and businesses with currently affordable rents. Seattle Councilmember Lisa Herbold has proposed an ordinance to require one-for-one replacement of lost affordable units (up to 80% of median income), but it would apply in only five urban villages citywide (including Bitter Lake, but not Aurora-Licton, Lake City, or Northgate). This should be expanded to include at least all urban villages and centers with a high risk of displacement (which would apply across District 5), if not the entire city.

I also believe the City should be asking developers for impact fees: payments to reflect increased demand that the new developments are going to place on City schools, parks, and streets. State law allows this, and virtually every City around Seattle does it. But Seattle has resisted, largely over fears that the fees will increase the price of new housing.

Most likely, that fear is accurate. But *someone* must pay for the new infrastructure needed to serve new residents. If developers and the new residents themselves don't, then all of us will. Impact fees would not affect rents for required affordable housing—those are legally based on the income of tenants. Admittedly, impact fees are really a separate issue from MHA. But they shouldn't have been separate from the "Grand Bargain." And there's no good reason we have not acted on them by now.

As to Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs)—including both Attached Accessory Dwelling Units, also known as mother-in-law apartments, and Detached Accessory Dwelling Units, also known as backyard cottages—I think the proposed legislation is reasonable. Combined with other actions that the City is taking, it will make it easier to build a few extra thousand of these relatively affordable housing units in single-family residential zones over time. By allowing homeowners an additional revenue stream to

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meet their mortgage and tax payments, ADUs will also help some elderly or lower-income people stay in their homes.

I had concerns over the loss of tree canopy from these additional units, but the legislation now addresses this with a requirement that limits the amount of new floor area based on the size of the lot. I am uneasy over the legislation's removal of a requirement for owner-occupancy, but Portland and Vancouver, BC, do not require that, with no obvious damage to the character of their neighborhoods.

Additional actions

So what else can or should be done to make Seattle housing more affordable in the future? The Seattle Planning Commission has issued a report, Neighborhoods for All, with many intriguing recommendations. They are controversial, though, and will require political leadership for any action.

All of the Commission's recommendations concern the single-family residential zone—which makes up 75% of the residential land in the City, but which received only 6% of the City's housing growth from 2006 through 2017. The Commission wants to see more housing variety in Seattle, rather than just dense development in urban villages and detached homes across nearly all the rest of the City.

Cottages, courtyard apartments, duplexes, and triplexes are not uncommon in older neighborhoods like Wallingford and Queen Anne. But they were banned in the City's single-family zones in the 1950s. They do not exist in District 5 (annexed to the City in 1954). The Planning Commission recommends allowing them again, in select locations, with design guidelines to fit with surrounding neighborhoods.

District 5 has by far the City's biggest concentration of residential lots larger than 5,000 square feet (most here are a minimum of 7,200 square feet; some along the water are at least 9,600 square feet). Smaller lots do not mean a reduced quality of life for a neighborhood: 77% of lots in both Roosevelt and Wallingford are less than 5,000 square feet. The Planning Commission recommends allowing smaller lot sizes across the City. That could work most easily in District 5, with its large current lots. By providing the opportunity for current owners to subdivide and add a new house instead of selling, this would also help older adults and lower-income households stay in their homes.

The Commission makes many additional recommendations, including:

- modest expansions of urban villages near transit and schools; and
- creation of "urban hamlets," which would be less dense than urban villages but still allow denser housing near existing commercial cores, such as Wedgwood and North Greenwood.

The Commission's recommendations are worth a serious discussion. In trying to make room for the "missing middle" of housing types—between dense urban villages and detached single-family homes—the Commission's recommendations would also help make more room for the "missing middle" of incomes in the City.

Taking virtually any of these actions is sure to be controversial. The Seattle Times warns that any proposed change to the single-family residential zone is "radioactive." But I don't think that has to be the case. I think we need an open, honest, heartfelt, public discussion of what might be worth changing and why—and I believe responsible and effective action can follow.

Councilmembers need to lead and facilitate that discussion within their districts. Councilmember Juarez has demonstrated her incapacity to do that. I am ready, willing, and eager to take it on.

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