

Growth Management Fact Sheet: Encouraging Urban Growth in Urban Growth Areas

Understanding the Growth Management Act’s requirement to encourage urban growth in the urban growth area and the four single-family homes per net acre safe harbor.

- 1. The four single-family homes per net acre safe harbor improves housing choices and affordability.**
- 2. The four single-family homes per net acre safe harbor protects rural areas.**
- 3. The four single-family homes per net acre safe harbor is a carefully crafted rule that protects neighborhoods.**

Background

The Growth Management Act includes goals to encourage development within urban growth areas (UGAs) and to reduce sprawling low density development.¹ The Legislature also adopted a requirement that urban growth must be encouraged in UGAs.²

The Central Growth Management Hearings Board has interpreted these goals and requirements to mean that that counties and cities in Central Puget Sound region are required to zone properties within the urban growth area at densities of no less than four housing units per net acre. (“Net acre” means minus the land used for streets, public facilities, critical areas, buffers, and other land that cannot be built on.) Exceptions include areas with extensive, high value critical areas, equestrian areas, and plans for phasing public facilities and services.

The Four Homes Per Net Acre Safe Harbor Improves Housing Choices and Affordability

- Washington has a housing crisis. Between 2000 and 2003 the percentage of Washington State renters paying 35 percent or more of their incomes for gross rent increased from 34 percent to 40 percent. During the same three year period the number of home owners paying 35 percent or more of their incomes for their mortgage and monthly ownership costs increased from 22 percent to 26 percent. And this increase occurred during a period of historically low mortgage interest rates.
- The four housing units per acre safe harbor increases the supply of single family housing. For growth management to succeed over the long-term, we must provide housing choice in cities, including single family housing. King County cities can accommodate an additional 6,400 single family homes without changing the character of any neighborhoods just by achieving the very modest goal of four single-family homes per net acre on their vacant and redevelopable buildable lands that are currently zoned at less than four units per acre.

¹ RCW 36.70A.020(1) & (2).

² RCW 36.70A.110(1).

This is important because King County cities have limited capacity for single-family homes. The King County Buildable Lands Report shows that less than one third of the housing capacity on the King County Eastside is for single-family homes. For some cities the mismatch is extreme, Bellevue has capacity for 1,370 single-family housing units and 13,199 multi-family housing units.

Multi-family housing is absolutely essential to growth management. But it is important to use our single-family lands efficiently too. It is unrealistic to expect that Bellevue residents, or King County residents, will accept growth management if it means that they or their children cannot have the choice of living in a single-family home. So the 6,400 housing units we can create are very important to the future of growth management in King County and Washington State.

- In urban areas, houses on large lots are exceptionally expensive. *Large lot zoning is a de facto prohibition against affordable housing.* We need more affordable single-family homes. According to the Census Bureau's American Community Survey between 2000 and 2003, the value of Washington State's median priced owner-occupied home increased by over ten percent statewide. In some urban areas the costs have increased much faster.

The Four Single-Family Homes Per Net Acre Safe Harbor Protects Rural Areas

- If we do not provide housing affordable to regular families in cities, they will find homes in the rural area. King County cities can create 6,400 housing units by achieving the very modest four dwelling units per acre on just their buildable lands that are zoned at less than four units per acre. That housing would consume 32,000 acres at rural densities. This is 50 square miles.

The Four Single-Family Homes Per Net Acre Safe Harbor is a Carefully Crafted Rule that Protects Neighborhoods

- The safe harbor is a very modest standard that in no way threatens the character of existing neighborhoods. The changes required by the four single-family homes per net acre safe harbor are very minor -- just one, two, or three single-family homes per net acre. The city, if it chooses, can exclude the land in streets, storm water facilities, utilities, critical areas, and buffers from the land used to calculate the allowed density. There are also exceptions from the safe harbor for areas with extensive, high quality critical areas and equestrian properties.
- Because we are taking about thousands of acres this well thought-out rule will create the capacity for over 6,500 housing units in King County alone. All while protecting critical areas, 50 square miles of the rural area, and neighbors.
- The safe harbor also provides predictability for counties and cities as they prepare and update their plans.

Examples of Four Dwelling Units Per Net Acre Development



Redmond, Washington



Bellevue, Washington

Answers to Questions about the Four Dwelling Units Per Net Acre Safe Harbor

The four dwelling unit per acre rule is an unwarranted intrusion into city authority.

The Legislature enacted the Growth Management Act (GMA) to address a lack of tools to effectively manage growth and a lack of state policy on how Washington should grow. The Growth Management Act does include goals and requirements that cities and counties must comply with, including providing housing for all income groups, wisely using urban land, and protecting rural areas. While cities and counties must comply with these requirements, they have many choices on how to achieve them. For example, in complying with the four single-family homes per net acre safe harbor, cities can decide what land counts in determining the allowed density. The city can also decide which single family residential zones to apply to these areas.

This is not new to Washington State law with the Growth Management Act. The legislature has always had laws that cities and counties must comply with to enact zoning or to undertake other activities.

If a city meets its growth targets, why does it matter if they have zoning that requires low residential densities?

Low residential densities mean that we will have to expand urban growth areas into working farms, working forests, and rural areas more quickly and farther than if urban land is wisely used. It also means that single-family homes will be more expensive than if the four housing unit per acre safe harbor is met. It also increases costs for state and city taxpayers. Low density housing is more expensive to serve with public facilities and services than more compact residential development. These choices affect not just city taxpayers. Some of these costs are saddled on state taxpayers. For example, low density neighborhoods generate more car trips than higher density residential neighborhoods. State taxpayers have to pay some of these higher transportation costs.

As land costs increase or we get a new 20 year housing targets, cities will increase densities in low density residential neighborhoods.

They might, although cities are now working on their second, third, or fourth GMA population and employment targets. While all cities will see some redevelopment in already built up neighborhoods, once the vacant land is developed it is much more difficult and expensive to redevelop. It is much better to get it right the first time and we will get the benefits now, not in 20 years.

If a city complies with the safe harbor, the elected officials will be voted out of office.

Many counties and cities have rezoned land to comply with the four single-family homes per net acre safe harbor. Jurisdictions that have recently updated their plans and rezoned neighborhoods to comply with the safe harbor include Bremerton, Dupont, Duvall, and Pierce County. These jurisdictions and others have not seen an uproar over the requirement. Some property owners do object, but measures can be incorporated to address environmental and transportation impacts and the benefits are substantial. Educating the public why we need to undertake these steps is very important and Futurewise is committed to continue this work.

It is an arbitrary rule invented by the Growth Boards.

The safe harbor is based on the plain language of the Growth Management Act adopted by the legislature and signed by the Governor. These provisions include the adopted Growth Management Act goals to encourage development within the urban growth areas (UGAs) and to reduce sprawling low density development.³ The Legislature also adopted a requirement that urban growth must be encouraged in UGAs.⁴

If the zoning is changed to at least four dwelling units per net acre do I have to subdivide my property?

No. Property owners do not have to change their use of their property or subdivide their property. If they have a large lot and want to keep it they can, that is their right.

Does the rule require cities to allow existing homes to be subdivided into apartments or to allow apartments in single-family zones?

No. The safe harbor allows cities and counties to maintain exclusive single-family zoning in both existing and new single-family neighborhoods. Multi-family housing can be prohibited in these areas if cities and counties chose to do so. In fact the safe harbor increases the capacity for new single-family homes in the urban growth area.

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³ RCW 36.70A.020(1) & (2).

⁴ RCW 36.70A.110(1).