

Cowlitz County Housing Action Plan: Outreach Summary

Outreach Overview

The public input component of the Housing Action Plan included committee meetings, individual interviews, and online surveys. Through this outreach, a number of goals were identified by participants. Supporting market-rate projects, developing housing for seniors, and increasing the number of smaller units in urban areas were paths to support increased housing variety across cost levels.

Outreach Procedure

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Meetings

Outreach event	Location	Date	Participant #
Building and Planning Advisory Council	Virtual Meeting	12/17/21 1:30pm	9
Planning Commission	Virtual Meeting	1/20/21 7pm	9
Historic Preservation Committee	Virtual Meeting	1/14/21 10am	8
Housing and Homelessness Task Force	Virtual Meeting	1/28/21 2pm	13
Planning Commission	Virtual Meeting	3/17/21 7pm	9

Interviews with local professionals

Individual	Background	Date
Ted Sprague	Cowlitz Economic Development Council	1/21/21
Mark Smith	Planning Commission Chair, RV Park Owner	1/25/21
Bill Josh	Planning Commission, Multiple Local Committees, Realtor	1/27/21
Erica Rodman	Planning Commission, Realtor	1/28/21
Eric McCrandall	Housing-Homelessness Task Force, Community House on Broadway, Longview Chamber of Commerce	2/1/21
Kelli Sweet	Area Agency on Aging & Disabilities of Southwest Washington, Cowlitz Office	2/1/21
Christine Schott	Housing-Homelessness Task Force, Longview Councilmember	2/3/21
Mike Reardon	Area Agency on Aging & Disabilities of Southwest Washington	2/8/21
Jim Bain	Planning Commission, Architect, Developer	2/9/21
Whitney Littlefield	Housing-Homelessness Task Force, Juvenile Probation Officer	2/10/21
Travis Goddard	City of Woodland Community Development Director	3/4/21
	Total People: 12	

Online Surveys

Beginning January 11, 2021 two surveys were made available to members of the public for input on the County website. The first survey was designed for resident response. The second survey was designed for the building industry; this includes county staff, builders, septic designers, septic installers, realtors, developers, et cetera. These surveys focused on outlining the existing need for housing, identifying the need for upcoming generations, and suggesting goals for the Housing Action Plan.

Survey released via

- County Press Release on 1/11/21
- Printed in The Daily News, Local Newspaper 1/17/21
- Survey sent to County Staff in Building & Planning and Environmental Health Unit
- Survey sent to all meeting attendees
- Survey sent to building professionals registered with the Building and Planning Office
- Survey sent to septic system professionals registered with the Environmental Health Unit

In total, the surveys received 60 responses. The resident specific survey received 51 responses. The industry survey received 9 responses.

Outreach Results

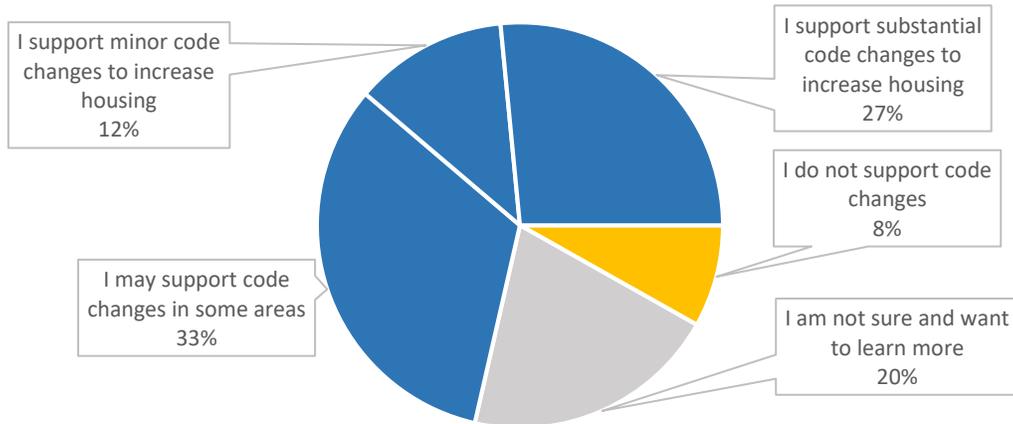
The public outreach results broadly fell into five groups. These groupings are imperfect, and some opinions discussed fall into multiple categories.

1. **Code Changes** – Change existing land use zones and building codes to reduce regulatory burden on property owners
2. **Process Changes** – Change internal permitting processes to increase applicant understanding and review consistency
3. **Outreach** – Actively encourage housing construction in Cowlitz County
4. **Invest in the Future** – Keep an eye on future development to best support it when it comes
 - a. **General** – General housing suggestions, including senior housing
 - b. **Land and Infrastructure** – Focuses on the mechanics of homebuilding
5. **Other** – General ideas that cover multiple themes

Code Changes

Survey respondents and interviewees responses suggested that county code should be as flexible as possible to encourage housing development.

Should regulations be loosened to allow more homes?



The specific code changes that participants suggested include:

- If the minimum lot size in Urban zoned areas was reduced, the number of proposed homes would increase
- Keep the code as flexible as possible to allow for homes of all shapes and sizes
- Front yard setbacks create wasted land in urban areas, as people don't use their front yard. The front yard is a difficult burden to maintain for older folks. The front yard setback reduces the number of homes in an area
- Respondents suggested adjusting the Zoning and Comprehensive Plan maps to reflect on the ground infrastructure improvements. Suggestions included creating a heat map/ zoning layer of public investments to better place additional density. These public investments included sewerage systems, public water, public schools, libraries, parks, and bus routes. A distance of $\frac{1}{4}$ mile was suggested as a buffer from these public investments. These heat maps could be improved by adding private investments to better place additional density, such as grocery stores, private schools, day care centers, and senior care facilities
- By increasing the number of homes allowed in Comprehensive Plan Urban Areas, existing infrastructure could be better used and decrease the need for expensive wells and septic systems
- Increase the amount of land zoned Multiple Family
- Increase the number of apartments allowed in in Multiple Family zones
- Private roads are often built during a subdivision. These roads provide access and typically include utilities in the Right Of Way (ROW). The required Right of Way or Easement width for private roads is 60'. Respondents suggested reducing this ROW width because the increased width doesn't provide additional public benefit, increases undesirable urban sprawl, and increases storm water management costs
- Staff should review Planned Use Development and Cottage Housing ordinances to recommend housing friendly code updates
- There is a need for smaller lot, smaller detached homes. These detached developments are more marketable than attached units

Process Changes

These suggestions broadly seek greater clarity, speed, and ease during permitting.

- Stormwater engineering and private road engineering are currently reviewed by the Public Works Department, in a separate office. Respondents indicated this increases review time, increases required coordination on behalf of the applicant and staff, and makes getting questions answered more difficult for applicants. Applicants suggested the Building and Planning office review these portions of projects to reduce redundancies and hasten review timelines
- Create a stormwater review process that is simple, concise, and direct
- Increase the speed of Planning Permit review
- Increase the speed of Building Permit review
- Make the permitting process more accessible to common people
- Research the ability of the County Environmental Health Unit to test well water
- Reduce Building and Planning permitting costs
- Continue to receive permit submittals online
- Continue to offer virtual staff consultations and virtual pre-app conferences
- Allow online payments for permits
- Identify permitting process for group housing built with shared kitchen amenities
- Clarify tiny home requirements, including preferred permitting route, design standards
- Encourage policy meetings between Planning Commission and elected County Commissioners
- Draft a shared septic maintenance agreement, similar to a shared well agreement or private road maintenance agreement. This would facilitate cost sharing of septic systems for smaller units

Outreach

These suggestions focus on how the Building and Planning Department could foster better dialogue between home builders and the Building and Planning office.

- Identify a staff member at the Building and Planning Office to act as a Housing Navigator for Home Builders. This role would act as the initial point of contact to answer immediate questions, set up meetings, and keep the process moving. This staff's input would be valuable to the Planning Commission
- Send a quarterly email/ mailing update about changes in the Building and Planning office to builders/realtors/community members/frequent permit users. This communication can include information about flexible codes, code changes, development information, and staffing changes
- Host periodic informal Building and Planning open houses to talk about existing county codes, and development generally. A drop-in round table with refreshments would increase attendance
- Actively market the benefits of building in Cowlitz County, including the lower cost to develop, the higher speed of permitting, and business friendly office
- Market Cowlitz County as worthy of housing investment to out of town financiers and builders
- Create a 'Developer's Toolkit' with more information on the permitting process and options to achieve higher density development

- Cowlitz County's current Accessory Dwelling Unit [ADU] Code is among the most flexible in the state. The Building and Planning office needs to actively market this benefit to encourage ADU's
- Collaborate on concurrent Housing Action Plans with the Cowlitz Wahkiakum Council of Governments and the City of Woodland
- The county should undertake a robust outreach effort to disseminate the results of this plan
- Property Tax Relief programs can greatly support seniors. The Building and Planning office needs to support the Cowlitz County Assessor with any outreach about this existing program
- Partner with the Economic Development Council to support housing development
- There are rural areas of Cowlitz County without cost effective electricity infrastructure. Public Utility District #1 should be actively encouraged to expand electricity to these areas
- Most survey respondents expected that young people would be living in apartments and condos in the future, and that housing cost would be a significant factor in where they choose to live
- Encourage beautification efforts to attract development

Invest in the Future

General

- Focus on generating market-rate, for-profit, housing over traditional non-profit housing
- Create a geographic vision for county development that focuses housing development
- Encourage incorporation of county areas by cities. Incorporated cities are much more competitive for grant funding for infrastructure upgrades
- The county has many aging seniors. The county should support senior housing, this includes:
 - Zone for new senior housing
 - Run a potential project through the permitting process to identify expected timeline, cost, and procedure
 - Review existing senior housing, identify factors that supported successful projects
 - Send staff to a senior housing development training/business to learn how to support these types of projects
 - Support housing in place for seniors, including retro-fits for handicap accessible homes
 - Encourage senior cottage housing clustered around shared amenities and situated on public water/sewer
 - There is a coming silver tsunami of seniors, most of them county residents. Programming and housing should be in place so that they are not forced to leave the area to find housing that meets their changing needs
 - Self-sufficiency and rural living are prized in our community. However, as people age, rural living becomes onerous with frequent medical appointments, a large property to maintain, and declining physical ability. Programming should be developed to warn seniors about this inevitability, and recommend solutions for seniors to age in their homes and acknowledge the unfortunate need to relocate to easier settings
- Encourage quality residential construction
- Support tax generating property uses that create housing
- Develop a Housing Trust Fund to fund land acquisition and development, awarded to housing providers with a program to refund the money or forgive it over time. This could be used to support affordable housing projects, either through review fee and utility connection fee waivers or for construction of necessary infrastructure. Many other communities have a fund

available for granting to affordable housing developers (governmental and non-profit). See RCW 84.52.105

Land/Infrastructure

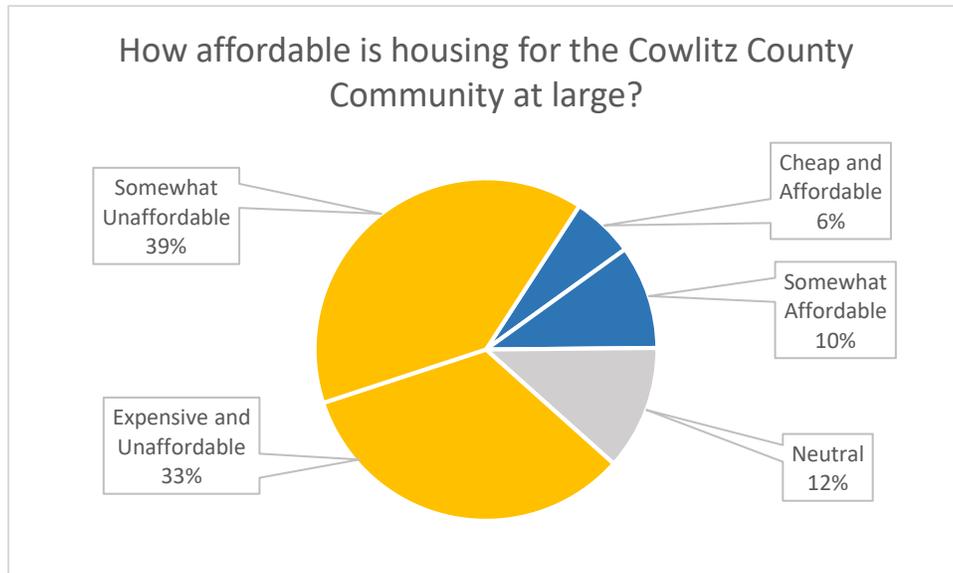
- The Building and Planning office should identify land for development, prepare preliminary information and market this land to housing developers. If appropriate, staff could take this a step further and create 'Shovel Ready' preliminary designs for areas identified for development. This could be done through Sub Area Planning, Creation of Local Improvement Districts, Preliminary SEPA permitting, et cetera
 - Hall/Hansen RD area in Toutle is an area worth considering for this research
 - Design and research should focus on improving quality of life for these areas
- Expand infrastructure and utilities to close-in rural areas to encourage housing development
- Dense housing is built where there is sufficient infrastructure. If funding was allocated for infrastructure upgrades, housing development would increase
- Complete a utility survey of Cowlitz County to identify areas for development
- Permit-exempt wells in the Lewis River valley should be supported
- The Washington Administrative Code does not allow one bedroom septic systems. WAC 246-272A-0230 should be amended to support one bedroom homes
- The cost for expanding utilities is expensive. Multiple respondents were interested in cost sharing for utility expansions, so that a shared benefit such as public water and sewer can be shared between neighboring beneficiaries

Other

- County Code should support housing that is:
 - Quality multiple level rental housing
 - Missing middle housing for middle income households
 - Safe, high quality, attractive, small apartment units for young professionals
 - Housing developments built without internal side setbacks, often called zero-lot-line developments
 - Encourage accessory dwelling unit construction
 - More homes of all shapes and sizes at a variety of price points
 - Starter homes for young families
 - Support low income home ownership and rentals
- Plan for the telecommuters who would otherwise look for housing in Clark and Multnomah Counties
- Create an inventory of mobile home parks and encourage expansion of existing parks
- Transitional Housing
 - Provide programming to support people living in recreational vehicles and trailers
 - Provide free or reduced cost housing for lower income people
 - Provide inpatient addiction and mental health facilities
 - Support rental housing for newly independent adolescents
 - Support low barrier/housing first housing for people without homes, where basic safety needs could be met
 - Innovative solutions for homelessness that build tiny housing with shared amenities

Online Survey Results

The Residents' survey received over 51 Responses. Housing affordability was of great concern to the respondents, with significant majorities believing housing was unaffordable to the broader community.



66% of respondents expected young adults that leave for military, college, or trade school to not return to Cowlitz County. The majority of respondents attributed this to increased employment and housing opportunities outside the county. To retain both young people and seniors in Cowlitz County, housing needs to become more affordable.

Conclusion

There is strong support from respondents for changes to county code and processes to encourage housing development. Commonalities include the desire to focus on supporting market rate development, housing for seniors, and a greater variety of housing in areas with existing public services. Industry professionals shared similar views and prioritized adjusting review processes to increase clarity and decrease project coordination. Surveys from residents supported conserving rural land while encouraging home construction in neighborhoods with existing houses.