



OP-ED

## Preserving Arlington's Character While We Grow

Mayor Barb Tolbert

In Arlington, we have a big challenge to plan housing for population growth. We have an equally important goal of preserving Arlington's character while we grow. Although we have focused on encouraging a wide variety of housing stock in Arlington, we have not and are not changing our focus on protecting the character and culture of Arlington.

Demand for housing is outpacing supply, which is driving up prices. To address this, Arlington is encouraging housing called the "missing middle": buildings like small duplexes, triplexes, backyard cottages, townhomes, accessory dwelling units ("mother-in-law" apartments), and unit lot subdivisions. Allowing these "missing middle" residences provides more affordable living options for the one- and two-person households that we are seeing seeking housing in Arlington.

While we work to fill existing gaps in housing, we also must plan for additional residents who might join our community. Arlington is required to submit a Comprehensive Plan to the Department of Commerce and to Puget Sound Regional Council under the Growth Management Act (GMA). The intent of the GMA, a state law adopted in 1990, is to concentrate growth into cities and to stop urban sprawl. Under the latest population allocation done in Snohomish County, Arlington must plan for an additional 7,000 residents by 2040. Although there is no guarantee that Arlington will grow this much, we are required to plan for growth, ensuring that we have adequate water and sewer capacity, roads, services, and housing. If we don't plan for growth, the city will lose state and federal funding for infrastructure projects.

Since Snohomish County does not allow for Arlington's urban growth boundary to expand, we need to plan for higher density housing to accommodate the existing gap and increased population. The keys to managing growth are proper zoning, insightful land-use planning, and careful development.

Arlington has focused on two strategies to accommodate the new population while respecting our culture: mixed use developments and city-wide design standards.

Mixed use developments have existed in Arlington since its founding. A majority of downtown buildings are vertical mixed use, with retail or services on the street level, and housing units on the second and third stories. A new concept for Arlington is horizontal mixed use, where retail and services are in buildings closest to the street, and a variety of housing options are constructed behind. These developments can share parking and open spaces. Arlington is already seeing developers' construction applications for mixed use development in several areas, including next to Skagit Regional Health on 172<sup>nd</sup> Avenue NE (commercial in the front and senior housing in the back).

City Council adopted city-wide design standards in 2018. These standards ensure that what is being constructed, whether an apartment complex, a mixed use development, or single family neighborhood, fits within the character and special uniqueness that is Arlington. In reviewing development applications, city staff and the Planning Commission focus on use of consistent setbacks, construction materials and

elements, preserving existing trees and natural features, and increasing pedestrian access and neighborhood interactions. These are standards that developers must meet to have their projects blend with Arlington's existing character.

People have the right to utilize their property to its highest and best use. The City is required to process those requests within the parameters of our state and local regulations. There is more to this process than a simple yes or no. We hope you will take the time to participate in the planning process for land use applications. We encourage you to attend the Planning Commission meetings, held on the first and third Tuesdays each month at 7:00 p.m. in the City Council Chambers, located at 110 E. Third Street. You can also sign up to receive Planning Commission and City Council agendas on our website to keep up to date on the processing and review of any applications and provide your input.

Arlington's sense of community is very important, and so is careful planning for growth. The trick is to protect our culture while adding new residents. I love Arlington's hometown feel with big town opportunities, and will protect and support both.