

Comprehensive Planning/Development Regulations-Small Cities & Counties City of Port Townsend 2025 Comprehensive Plan

Supporting Materials

[Port Townsend 2025 Comprehensive Plan and appendices along with Ordinance 3361](#)

(this is also posted in [Code Publishing](#))

[Storymap](#) of Port Townsend Sustainable Streets Plan as adopted through Ordinance 3361

[City's 2025 Comprehensive Plan Project website](#) and event photos

[Comprehensive Plan update Public Engagement repository](#)

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Outstanding Application of Planning Principles

The Port Townsend 2025 Comprehensive Plan began with a realization that emerged repeatedly throughout public engagement and policymaker deliberations: **The greatest threat to Port Townsend's character is not growth—it is the loss of the people who create that character. Port Townsend faces a paradox: the very qualities that make the city extraordinary have been making it increasingly difficult for future generations to call it home.**

Reoccurring tensions range from:

- Historic character versus housing affordability
- Aging population versus workforce retention
- Environmental stewardship versus growth pressures
- Aging infrastructure versus limited financial capacity
- Housing demand versus limited easily developable land

Port Townsend's 2045 Vision describes a future that is "healthy, affordable and caring" and values "multi-generational neighborhoods of differing income levels and life experiences." The community recognized that achieving that vision would require planning for people who increasingly could not afford to live in the city they loved.

Unlike many communities that frame preservation and growth as opposing forces, Port Townsend embraced a different approach: **Growth and preservation are not competing goals. Growth is how we preserve the people, businesses, institutions, and cultural traditions that make Port Townsend unique.**

The Plan exceeded standard planning practice by directly linking housing affordability, economic development, infrastructure planning, transportation, environmental stewardship, and fiscal sustainability into a single integrated strategy.

Most notably, the City exceeded state housing requirements and made adequate provision for housing across all economic segments through a comprehensive package of housing reforms, including:

- Planning for 1,648 additional housing units through 2045.
- Increasing opportunities for multifamily housing citywide.
- Establishing minimum density requirements to promote infill development and discourage underutilization of land.
- Upzoning residential areas to authorize sixplex development in the R-II zone.
- Expanding opportunities for ADUs, cottage housing, duplexes, triplexes, fourplexes, co-living arrangements, townhomes, and multifamily housing.
- Expanding affordability incentives including the Multifamily Tax Exemption program, density bonuses, fee reductions, and expedited permit review.
- Reduction in street pavement with the Sustainable Streets Plan, increase in active transportation routes with new Level of Service standards for trails, sidewalks and transit, mode shift towards active transportation.

The result is a Plan that doesn't simply accommodate growth. It leverages growth to fulfill community values.

Implementation of Community Values

The Comprehensive Plan's vision states that Port Townsend will remain:

"A healthy, affordable, caring community valued for its natural beauty, ecological function and environmental stewardship, cultural resources, pace and scale of life, artistic and craft traditions, historic architecture, maritime trades and local businesses, family wage jobs, multi-generational neighborhoods, and creative, cooperative and resourceful community spirit."

This vision was created by the community.

It emerged from extensive outreach that included planning studios, youth engagement, open houses, scenario workshops, advisory committees, neighborhood conversations, farmers market outreach, and the highly successful People-Planet-Prosperty Walking Tours. During one walking tour, attendance was so extensive that a nearby resident called the police because they believed an event of unusual scale was occurring in the neighborhood.

The reality was even better.

The crowd was *participating* in planning. They were discussing housing types, neighborhood design, net density, egress, street design, public spaces, and what Port Townsend should become over the next twenty years.

City staff engaged with 12th and 4th grade courses on planning and governance to include the voices of young people, an often underrepresented voice in the community, engaged in the planning process. For example, 4th graders engaged in debate on scale of commercial development in residential neighborhoods looking at an example of a detached single family home next to a mixed use building in uptown. It was particularly memorable when one student led the debate for higher density near mixed use nodes, arguing that “if you live in a neighborhood next to larger buildings, you can probably walk to the movies at night without driving.” Later, staff made the connection that his family owned the local theater. This 11 year old grasped the value of urban design with economic opportunity for his family and quality of life for the neighborhood. While simple, the observation captured many of the ideas emerging throughout the planning process: proximity, transportation choice, economic vitality, and neighborhood-scale mixed-use development. The sentiment echoed throughout community engagement and ultimately helped inform policies supporting neighborhood commercial and mixed-use nodes.

City staff helped the 12th grade writing and discourse teacher design a city planning and housing equity focused curriculum and visited the class throughout the year. Inspired by their class, students wrote editorials and made public comment urging the City to preserve the Cappy’s Trails Preservation Area in the Comprehensive Plan. As a direct result of student advocacy, the area was identified on the Comprehensive Plan Vision Map. That designation has since supported grant applications for conservation easements and helped advance implementation of the community’s environmental stewardship goals. This will help ease development pressure in a wildfire area of concern while enhancing environmental functions and values of a wetland area, and provide public access and open space—adding to the City’s current inventory of open spaces lands, comprising approximately 50% of the City. It affirms to the young people in Port Townsend that their voices are being heard.

City staff held workshops at a youth oriented coffee house attended by high school aged and recently graduated teens. Their concerns centered heavily on having fun things to do that didn’t involve alcohol, transportation, and housing choice/affordability. This was juxtaposed with the City’s recently adopted Parks and Recreation and Open Space Plan, which showed public engagement participation highest among older adult women who prefer nature parks rather than active recreational areas. By listening to the voices who will be raising families in the next 20 years, the City adopted a parks level of service: “Provide parks and recreation facilities within a ¼ to ½ mile or 10-minute walk to park amenities with a focus on ¼ mile for children and families to access park amenities to reach over 90% of Port Townsend’s population by 2046.”

The community energy and deep care generated by City engagement is reflected throughout the Plan.

Participants consistently expressed a desire for:

- Housing for young families.
- Aging-in-place opportunities for seniors.
- Housing choices for workers.
- More equitable access to opportunity.
- Climate resilience.
- Walkable neighborhoods.
- Protection of historic character.
- Preservation of natural systems.

The Plan translates those values directly into policies and regulations generated from an unprecedented community engagement effort by City staff.

Contribution to Planning Technologies and Techniques

Many cities confronting housing shortages begin by asking:

"Where can we build more housing?"

Port Townsend asked a different question: **How can every public investment simultaneously support housing, active transportation, climate resilience, and community character?**

The answer became the Sustainable Streets framework.

The Comprehensive Plan recognizes that Port Townsend maintains over 80 miles of streets for a city of roughly 10,000 residents and acknowledges that traditional assumptions about street construction and maintenance are increasingly difficult to sustain.

Rather than treating every platted right-of-way as future pavement, the City developed a framework that allows rights-of-way to function as:

- Active transportation corridors.
- Green infrastructure.
- Stormwater facilities.
- Open space.

- Urban forestry corridors.
- Climate resilience assets.

The Plan itself notes that compact development and infill housing reduce infrastructure costs and improve long-term fiscal sustainability.

Combined with a Housing Needs Analysis, Racially Disparate Impacts Analysis, climate planning, land capacity analysis, and active transportation performance measures, the result is an innovative planning framework that can be replicated by communities throughout Washington.

Furtherance of the Growth Management Act

The Growth Management Act requires that cities make adequate provision for housing for all economic segments of the population.

Port Townsend fully embraced that responsibility.

The Housing Element identifies a need for approximately 1,648 additional housing units by 2045, with the overwhelming majority needed by low-income and workforce households. The Plan responds not only with policy direction but with specific regulatory reforms designed to make those homes possible.

Among the most transformative actions were the City's development regulation updates.

What Did the City Actually Change?

The City:

- Removed parking minimums.
- Replaced restrictive dimensional standards.
- Reduced setbacks.
- Increased allowable lot coverage.
- Reduced minimum lot sizes.
- Reduced minimum lot widths.
- Increased allowable building heights.
- Authorized greater densities throughout residential districts.
- Established minimum density requirements.
- Authorized sixplex development in the R-II zone.

- Expanded opportunities for ADUs.
- Expanded opportunities for middle housing.
- Expanded opportunities for co-living arrangements.
- Expanded opportunities for multifamily housing.

These changes represent a fundamental shift in approach.

Rather than merely identifying a need for housing, Port Townsend systematically removed regulatory barriers that historically prevented infill housing production.

The Plan also advances multiple GMA goals through:

- Encouraging urban infill over sprawl.
- Supporting housing choices across all income levels.
- Integrating climate resilience into all elements.
- Aligning housing and capital facilities planning.
- Prioritizing multimodal transportation systems.
- Advancing equity and anti-displacement strategies.

As the Plan states through its policies, growth should be directed where infrastructure exists, where housing opportunity can expand, and where environmental impacts can be minimized.

Suitability of the Solution to the Problem or Context

Port Townsend is constrained by geography, infrastructure costs, environmental considerations, and a limited supply of readily developable land. At the same time, rapidly rising housing costs increasingly placed homeownership and rental housing beyond the reach of many workers, young families, seniors, and lower-income households. The City's Adequate Provisions Analysis and Land Capacity Analysis led to a difficult but unavoidable conclusion: existing zoning patterns were contributing to exclusion by limiting housing choices and restricting opportunities for people of differing incomes and life experiences to live within the community. The City's vision of maintaining "multi-generational neighborhoods of differing income levels and life experiences" could not be achieved under the status quo.

Although Port Townsend is not a city required to implement HB 1110, it successfully secured competitive state funding and voluntarily embraced many of the law's underlying principles. The City recognized that providing adequate provisions for all segments of the housing market required more than identifying housing need—it required changing the regulatory framework that limited housing opportunities.

The Comprehensive Plan and implementing development regulations therefore shifted from a model that largely reserved land for detached single-family housing to one that welcomes a broader range of housing choices. The City established minimum density requirements to promote efficient use of urban land, increased allowable densities across residential districts, and authorized sixplex development within the R-II zone. It also removed parking minimums, reduced setbacks, increased lot coverage allowances, reduced minimum lot sizes and widths, increased building heights, and expanded opportunities for ADUs, middle housing, co-living arrangements, and multifamily housing. Together, these changes removed longstanding barriers to infill development and created realistic pathways to housing production.

Importantly, the strategy reflects Port Townsend's development reality. Many lots of partially or underutilized, with few large vacant tracts under single ownership. The market is unlikely to meet housing needs through large apartment complexes alone. Instead, the Plan relies on incremental infill—the addition of homes through duplexes, fourplexes, sixplexes, ADUs, cottage housing, co-living, and small multifamily projects distributed throughout existing neighborhoods. Growth is accommodated through evolution rather than expansion.

The fact that the Plan is currently under appeal illustrates the significance of these choices. One of the central debates concerns whether increasing residential capacity protects affordability and inclusion or creates displacement pressures. Port Townsend's planning process confronted that question directly. The City's analysis ultimately found that continuing exclusionary zoning patterns posed its own risk of displacement by limiting housing supply and restricting access to opportunity with only 10 units on average of constructed multifamily units per year, not enough to meet the need of 70 units per year. Rather than avoiding that tension, the Comprehensive Plan engages it transparently and establishes a framework for balancing housing affordability, community character, equity, and long-term resilience. The focused engagement the City did with housing developers, non-profits, Community Based Organizations, and those living in transitional housing such as tiny shelter villages and hearing their housing stories. The City's willingness to grapple with difficult and sometimes competing public values is one of the Plan's greatest strengths.

The City could not simply build outward.

Instead, it embraced a strategy of growing inward.

The Plan repeatedly emphasizes infill development, mixed-use centers, middle housing, multifamily housing, housing variety, minimum densities, infrastructure efficiency, and active transportation.

The solution is highly tailored to Port Townsend's specific circumstances.

Rather than relying on large-scale greenfield expansion, the City focused on:

- Incremental neighborhood-compatible density.

- Adaptive reuse.
- Missing-middle housing.
- Multifamily housing.
- Housing integrated into mixed-use centers.
- Strategic infrastructure investment.
- Expanded affordability incentives.

The result is growth that looks and feels like Port Townsend.

Innovative and Creative Solution / Applicability to Other Communities

What makes the Port Townsend Comprehensive Plan particularly transferable is that its challenges are shared by many Washington communities:

- Housing shortages.
- Escalating housing costs.
- Infrastructure funding constraints.
- Aging population.
- Workforce housing needs.
- Climate adaptation requirements.
- Concerns about preserving community character.

Yet Port Townsend's response is distinctive.

Instead of relying on one major initiative, the City created an interconnected system:

Vision + Housing + Infrastructure + Climate + Transportation + Equity + Development Regulations+Open Space

The Plan demonstrates that housing affordability cannot be addressed through subsidies alone.

It requires changing the underlying rules.

By removing parking minimums, reducing setbacks, increasing lot coverage, reducing minimum lot sizes, increasing building heights, authorizing sixplexes in the most common zone, implementing a Sustainable Streets Plan for establishing which historic platted streets are to be developed for access and which ones should be used for open space, expanding middle housing

options, and creating minimum density requirements, Port Townsend transformed its zoning code from a framework that constrained housing production into one that actively encourages it.

Port Townsend's challenges are not unique. Its approach may be.

And that approach offers a powerful roadmap for communities across Washington seeking to address housing affordability, climate resilience, and community vitality without losing the qualities that make them special. This can be transferrable to other communities like Port Townsend, a 15-minute city by car, that also is a 15-minute city by bike, creating a ripe opportunity for adopting LOS F for transportation to incentivize a mode shift and decrease vehicle miles travelled. For other historic communities with 19th century plats or many unopened ROW's burdened with expensive infrastructure extension and housing costs, the Sustainable Streets Plan concept realigns underdeveloped areas for open space and minimizes linear feet of streets and maintenance—this has a dual effect of building on fiscal sustainability for the City's pavement preservation funds and creates predictability for infill density opportunity while reducing vehicle miles travelled and greenhouse gas emissions. This shift towards focused density where there is infrastructure is transferrable to other communities.

APA WA Awards Letter of Support:

The City of Port Townsend is celebrating its 2025 Comprehensive Plan and implementing development regulations adopted in December 2025 and believes it's worthy of winning the 2026 APA Award for the Comprehensive Planning/Development Regulations category for a small city. For being such a small city, Port Townsend demonstrated outstanding application and exceedance of planning principles by using asset-based strategies to envision a future that solves some of the community's most challenging problems. The city recognized supporting infill density was vital to meet the community's needs for affordable and available housing of various types, citywide, and across all income levels. The City exceeded housing requirements for the GMA periodic update.

What makes Port Townsend's Comprehensive Plan unique is the intersection of multiple plans and major aspirations of the community: housing supply and inventory, parks and open space planning, efficient and active transportation systems. All of these are balanced based on robust community participation.

Port Townsend's 2025 Comprehensive Plan is ultimately a story about belonging. It recognizes that housing, transportation, infrastructure, climate resilience, and economic opportunity are not separate conversations—they are all part of the question of who gets to call a community home. Through visionary planning, transformative development regulations, and deep community engagement, Port Townsend chose a future where affordability, sustainability, and community character reinforce one another. The result is a model for Washington State and a worthy recipient of the APA Comprehensive Planning Award.

