

An aerial photograph of a densely populated urban neighborhood, likely Seattle, showing a mix of residential buildings and greenery. In the foreground, a modern, light-colored multi-story building with large windows and a black metal railing is visible. The building has a prominent entrance with a set of stairs and a black door. The address number '34228' is visible above the door. The building's interior is lit up, showing a modern interior design. The background shows a dense urban landscape with various types of housing, including multi-story apartment buildings and smaller houses, interspersed with trees and green spaces. A large, curved, grey banner with a white border is overlaid on the image, containing the title text.

The Middle Path to

HOUSING FOR ALL

BY JAMES SLONE
CONTENT STRATEGIST

MBAKS and partners are working together to turn statewide legislative victories into more housing choices locally. Success will mean continued advocacy on every level.

It's no exaggeration to say that 2023 was a historic year for housing in Washington, with a thick bundle of reform bills passed in Olympia and signed into law by Governor Jay Inslee on May 8. But passing legislation is just half the battle. Effective implementation is the real measure of a reform's success.

To meet the needs of their growing populations over the next 20 years, King and Snohomish counties will need 308,000 and 167,000 new homes, respectively. Meeting that demand will require a broad spectrum of housing near jobs, transit, and amenities, accessible to both young professionals and new families.

So-called “middle” housing—multiplexes (duplexes and fourplexes), townhomes, cottage housing, and courtyard apartments—is naturally more affordable than single-family homes and an essential part of solving the housing puzzle. But historically, it's been hard to legally build these options due to zoning and code restrictions.

Middle housing just got a statewide boost with House Bill 1110, which effectively legalized duplexes and fourplexes in most single-family neighborhoods in 77 cities across the state. Other helpful bills

included loosening accessory dwelling unit (ADU) restrictions (HB 1337), streamlining SEPA review and permitting (HB 5212 and 1293, and Senate Bill 5290), and enacting condo reform (HB 5258 and 5058).

This is all good news. But these bills are just the first step.

Local Heroes

While statewide reforms are important, barriers to middle housing still linger in the communities most of us actually live in.

These roadblocks include resistance to new types of housing, building and code requirements that preclude new types of homes, and restrictive codes and permitting timelines with onerous infrastructure requirements. In some cities, mandatory affordability requirements ironically impose fees on the builder that drive up costs. They also discourage much-needed housing from being built in the first place.

Overcoming and pursuing effective housing policies means working directly with city and county governments and communities to change hearts and minds and encourage positive code changes. The homebuilding industry's biggest ally is local government, and the Master Builders Association of King and Snohomish Counties has been busy working closely with elected officials to get this right.

This year, MBAKS' advocacy team is prioritizing ensuring cities adequately support more housing in their urban areas as part of comprehensive plan updates and the “successful implementation of [HB 1110] so cities can expand housing choices.” (Read more about the association's priorities in the Housing Advocacy Update on page 10.)

It requires coming at the problem from multiple directions through multiple channels.

While working with cities and counties, the association continues its advocacy work on the state level. Every year, MBAKS holds a Hill Day event ahead of state legislative sessions to allow members to meet with legislators to discuss pressing priorities. To learn more about the 2024 Hill Day, stay tuned for our Hill Day Recap coming in the summer issue of Master Builder Magazine.





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MBAKS members and the association’s advocacy team regularly sit with city and county leaders and planning departments to discuss these priorities. As MBAKS Senior Policy Analyst Allison Butcher told me, “Open dialogue is critical, and these meetings provide an opportunity to discuss permitting issues and process improvements to enable more housing choices.”

Builder councils meet monthly and bring MBAKS members and staff together with elected officials and planners in Seattle, King County, and Snohomish County to discuss housing issues. MBAKS members also endorse pro-housing candidates in state, county, and city elections through its member-led Affordable Housing Council (AHC).

Of Model Ordinances and Comprehensive Plans

As MBAKS President Trevor Johnson says, solving the housing crisis is a team sport. The association works directly with other housing advocates by participating in the Coalition for More Housing Choices (CMHC). The CMHC represents a broad spectrum of regional business organizations and nonprofits working together to advance a “shared and defined vision for housing.”

The CMHC has outlined several strategies to promote middle housing, including supporting local governments in updating their comprehensive plans under Washington’s Growth Management Act (GMA), as well as reforming their development regulations to facilitate more types of housing.

In December, MBAKS hosted a CMHC roundtable with David Osaki, middle housing lead at the Washington State Department of

Commerce, and other planners to discuss how best to support new middle housing and provide input for the Commerce’s new model ordinances. Released in January, the ordinances provide a general template that municipalities can adapt to guide code changes.

Under the GMA, cities and counties must complete comprehensive planning updates every eight years—these updates set development regulations to conserve critical habitats and natural resource lands. As it happens, King, Pierce, Kitsap, and Snohomish counties are due for updates by December 31 of this year.

This is important because, as “fully planning” counties under the GMA, they are responsible for identifying urban growth areas based on population projections and adopting new development and zoning regulations to encourage new housing there. The model ordinances can support local efforts to bring about those changes.

Several recommendations were made in the roundtable to ease the adoption and adaptation of the codes. These include working with jurisdictions early to encourage local adoption, acknowledging that each local jurisdiction is unique, and creating consistent and transparent ordinances across jurisdictions to create housing types that “fit [each] community.”

Having the Right Tools

Of course, adopting code or adapting it to local conditions requires specialized tools to address specific barriers. One of MBAKS’ most elegant means of empowering jurisdictions to act is the Housing Toolkit. The toolkit offers practical steps cities and counties can take

to make the full range of housing types available, including specific code and process updates they can adopt.

Designed to be locally adapted without state action, the toolkits “use examples of local jurisdictions already utilizing these tools and model codes, where applicable, that other cities can reference.”

These include steps for SEPA reform, enabling affordable housing, and allowing for a variety of housing types (including innovative solutions like micro-housing and ADUs). It also gives advice on optimizing residential densities, increasing housing stock near transit and jobs, pairing housing and environmental benefits, making permitting processes more predictable, and increasing flexibility in site planning and design requirements.

When paired with state laws like HB 1110 and model ordinances, the Housing Toolkit offers a detailed and comprehensive guide for making housing actually happen.

Cities Can Change

It can feel like an uphill battle changing the way cities build housing and the types of housing they build. But there have been some success stories across the state that point the way to the future. In November of last year, Spokane’s City Council opened

the door for more housing choices in Spokane with the Building Opportunities for All ordinance—the biggest step forward taken by any city in the state.

As reported by the Urbanist, the new code legalizes townhomes, modest apartment buildings, and multiplexes of all kinds across the entire city. It simplifies dimensional standards and allows “any number of units they can reasonably fit on a site of less than two acres.” It also reduces setbacks and increases height limits to 40 feet.

Spokane acted because the need for more housing was grave. Based on state projections, the city will need at least 6,800 housing units by 2037 to meet future growth.

How did they do it? According to the Urbanist, their “elected officials, department leaders, and planners tried to strip away unnecessary layers of regulation and ensure that the new code actually allows middle housing to be built, and quickly.” In short, they took state law seriously and made it feasible locally.

It shows what happens when a local government is not only serious about solving the housing crisis but also fully empowered and equipped to act. If MBAKS and its partners are successful, cities in the Puget Sound region will soon join Spokane on the path to housing for all. 📌



To get involved or learn more about MBAKS’ builder councils, visit mbaks.com/advocacy/builder-councils

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