

FiveSquare

Five homes. One lot. A new path to ownership.

The Columbia neighborhood was once a haven of working-class homeownership. Its craftsman bungalows and cottages were built in the early 1900s by employees of the mills, canneries, and mines that industrialized Bellingham. Today, with median home prices in these neighborhoods consistently above \$650,000, homeownership has drifted far from those modest beginnings.

Our project asks whether middle housing can change that trajectory without changing what people love about the neighborhood. Our goals were simple: make a home that a Bellingham family could actually afford, and design it to fit and adapt to their needs.

The project began not with a floor plan, but with a pro forma. We assumed a \$475,000 land acquisition, \$250 per square foot for vertical construction, and \$350,000 for street improvements, site work, and utility development. We also accounted for the less visible costs of development: sales and closing costs, hard-cost contingency, financing and carrying costs, sprinklers, permitting, surveying and land division, legal fees, and architecture. With the full development cost in view, we worked backward to determine how much house we could build at a viable sale price.

The result is five homes on a typical 5,000-square-foot lot: three approximately 1,100-square-foot two-bedroom-plus-office homes targeted at approximately \$495,000, and two approximately 1,200-square-foot three-bedroom homes targeted at approximately \$575,000.

Affordability + Constructability

The primary affordability strategy is effectively using one lot. Five homes share the cost of a single lot and its infrastructure, while Washington's middle-housing provisions create the potential for individual ownership of each home and the land beneath it.

Every square foot was considered against its cost. Rather than simply making the homes smaller, we asked which spaces a household actually needs to feel comfortable. The floor plans eliminate unnecessary rooms and circulation while protecting the things that make a home feel generous: good daylight, useful kitchens, comfortable bedrooms, dedicated work space, and direct connections to the outdoors.

The construction follows the same utility logic. Conventional wood framing, crawlspace foundations, shared walls, compact two-story footprints, and repeated plans keep the project within familiar construction methods. Three homes use the same basic plan, while two larger homes respond to the corner and provide an option for larger families. The result is a development that is intentionally economical rather than merely inexpensive.

Sustainability + Resilience

The same discipline that reduces construction cost also reduces the resources required to operate the homes. Shared walls reduce exterior envelope area and heat loss, while compact conditioned footprints require fewer materials and less energy than five detached houses.

Each home is all-electric, with high-efficiency heat pumps, heat-pump water heaters, Energy Star appliances, R-60 blown-cellulose attic insulation, R-21 wall insulation, R-38 floor insulation, and U-0.28 windows. Low-flow fixtures reduce water use, while permeable paving and planted areas keep as much rainwater as practical on site before directing the remainder to public infrastructure.

The project also makes a deliberate trade: land is prioritized for people and landscape rather than driveways. Removing individual parking areas creates more permeable surface, gardens, and usable outdoor space, while the rear patios provide direct bike access and storage from the alley. In a neighborhood where many residents walk and ride, the absence of dedicated parking is less a sacrifice than an opportunity.

Innovation + Creativity

The innovation here is deliberately quiet. We did not want to invent a new architectural language for middle housing; we wanted to see how much density could be introduced while still fitting to the scale of typical single family residences.

Five homes are arranged to read, at first glance, almost like one large Craftsman house. Individual entries and front porches, projecting bays, varied gables, and articulated rooflines break down the scale of the development and echo the forms already found along the street. Front gardens create opportunities to see and greet neighbors, while private rear patios provide space for outdoor dining, gardening, and bike storage.

The result is density that participates in the neighborhood rather than standing apart from it. Five households gain the benefits of ownership, private outdoor space, and a carefully designed home on land that might otherwise support only one.

The proposition is simple: affordability does not have to mean asking people to accept less of a home. By starting with what a household can afford—and designing everything else around that number—we can make more homes, preserve the character of established neighborhoods, and create places where Bellingham families can put down roots.

Middle Housing

How to achieve the goal

As a local architecture firm working on residential projects in Bellingham, we support the broader effort to expand housing options and make better use of our limited residential land through the recent Middle Housing Ordinances. We also recognize that implementing changes of this scale is an iterative process, and that the interim period provides an important opportunity to see how the regulations function when applied to actual projects.

Through our work, we are beginning to see several areas where the practical outcome of the regulations may conflict with their goals of increasing housing supply, improving affordability, expanding homeownership opportunities, and encouraging thoughtful development.

Street Improvements and Affordability

Street improvement requirements are one of our greatest concerns because the magnitude of these costs can directly affect whether additional housing is financially feasible.

The City's current middle housing guidance generally requires abutting streets to be improved with curb, gutter, and sidewalk, while identifying that exceptions may be available. In practice, however, the extent of required improvements and availability of exceptions can be difficult to determine early in design.

On one current project, a 5,000-square-foot corner lot has approximately 150 feet of street frontage. We got an additional estimate for street improvements and associated utility work to be approximately \$200,000. At four units, that represents roughly \$50,000 per dwelling before construction of the homes themselves.

More importantly, if a three-unit configuration can avoid a substantial portion of those improvements while adding a fourth unit results in a six-figure infrastructure obligation, the financially viable choice may be to stop at three units. This can make one single-family residence with two accessory dwelling units more feasible than four individually owned homes—working against one of the opportunities middle housing provides: creating more attainable paths to homeownership.

We encourage consideration of a more proportional approach to street improvements, including clearer thresholds and exceptions, proportional frontage requirements, fee-in-lieu options, or deferral of improvements until a larger coordinated street project occurs.

FAR and Unintended Impacts on Existing Homes

We are also concerned about applying the new Floor Area Ratio (FAR) limits to existing single-family properties. On a typical 5,000-square-foot lot, a single-family residence is now limited to 3,000 square feet of total floor area. That may initially sound generous, but the calculation also includes garages, accessory structures, and basements. This is a substantial reduction from what many properties could previously accommodate.

While a lot of historic properties are less than 5,000 square feet making this new FAR limitation to single family residences even more limiting. On a recent South Hill project, a 4,397 square foot lot contains an existing 2,139-square-foot residence. The new 60% FAR limits total floor area to approximately 2,638 square feet. The homeowners had been designing an approximately 800-square-foot detached art studio to allow them to work from home; under the new regulations, only about 499 square feet of additional floor area remains available.

We understand the need to establish equitable development standards between single-family and middle housing. However, state middle housing requirements do not prescribe Bellingham's specific FAR limits. Before these standards become permanent, we believe the impacts on existing homes, additions, accessory structures, and remodels deserve further consideration. This includes discussion with private builders, architects, land-use consultants, etc.

Basements and FAR

Related to FAR, we believe the treatment of basements deserves reconsideration. FAR is useful for regulating development intensity and building mass, but floor area substantially below grade does not contribute to perceived building mass in the same way as an above-grade story.

For example, on a 5,000-square-foot lot with a 3,000-square-foot FAR allowance, a 1,000-square-foot basement and 500-square-foot garage would consume half of the property's allowable floor area before accounting for the primary above-grade living space.

Other jurisdictions provide useful alternatives. Seattle, for example, excludes underground stories and portions of stories extending no more than four feet above grade from FAR calculations. A similar grade-based approach in Bellingham could distinguish a true below-grade basement from a daylight basement that functions more like an additional visible story. This would better align FAR with its purpose of regulating building scale without discouraging efficient use of below-grade space.

Utility Connections and Development Costs

Utility requirements can similarly have an outsized effect on small middle housing projects. The City's 2026 published System Development Charges total approximately \$13,605 for water and sewer for a 5/8-inch meter and approximately \$34,017 for a 1-inch meter, before accounting for excavation, private utility work, restoration, and other construction costs. Because of these costs, decisions about individual versus shared connections, meter sizing, and how utility demand is calculated can significantly affect project feasibility.

We encourage greater flexibility where health, safety, capacity, metering, maintenance, and future ownership can be adequately addressed. Middle housing can take many forms—including rental units, condominiums, individually owned lots, and multigenerational properties—and utility requirements should allow appropriate solutions for these different ownership models rather than unintentionally favoring one development type.

Flexibility and Collaboration

Finally, we believe the permanent regulations would benefit from clearer mechanisms for flexibility on unique sites and greater coordination between Planning, Public Works, applicants, and design professionals.

Bellingham contains steep sites, unusual lots, incomplete street networks, existing structures, alleys, and utility constraints that cannot always be addressed effectively through a single prescriptive standard.

For example, we are beginning design on a single-family residence on a steep lot where the required 10- to 20-foot setback to the right-of-way may not be the most appropriate location for the structure because of the site's topography. Without a clearly defined mechanism for an alternative approach, it can be difficult to know how the City will evaluate a solution until substantial design work has already occurred.

That uncertainty has a real cost. Homeowners and developers can incur additional architectural and engineering fees developing alternatives without knowing whether they will ultimately be accepted.

We encourage clearly defined alternative-compliance provisions that provide predictability while allowing professional judgment when unique site conditions warrant a different solution. Greater collaboration between Planning, Public Works, applicants, and design professionals during development of the permanent regulations could also help identify these issues before they become barriers to otherwise viable housing.

Closing

Overall, we support the City's effort to expand housing choices and see the interim ordinance as an important opportunity to evaluate what works and what does not.

Our primary concern is the difference between **housing capacity on paper and housing that is actually feasible to build**. Allowing four or six units does not necessarily result in four or six homes if infrastructure requirements make the additional units financially infeasible. Similarly, FAR, utility, and site-design standards can have unintended consequences that only become apparent when applied to real properties.

As the permanent regulations are developed, we hope the City will evaluate not only how much housing the code allows, but also what the regulations incentivize people to actually build.

We appreciate the Whatcom Housing Alliance's work advocating for housing solutions in our community and the opportunity to share what we are seeing as practitioners working with these regulations on actual projects.