

# Living in the City

Envisioning Olympia's Downtown Housing



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## Introduction

What is the Olympia residents' vision for downtown housing?

Olympia has not done public opinion research regarding downtown housing, even though downtown housing is a city council priority for 2007. After extensive urban infill and public involvement research, this study compiled public opinions on Olympia's downtown housing.

The findings indicate that Olympians value downtown housing that is demographically diverse, well designed, vibrant and densely planned.

## Methodology

The objective of this study was to collect public opinions that would elements of a vision statement for housing in downtown Olympia. A literature review was conducted to develop a research model that included best practices of studies elsewhere. Based on those findings, a web-based survey and focus groups were used to collect opinion data on downtown housing.

### On-line Survey

117 individuals responded to a mix of ranking and categorical questions between February and March of 2007. The survey was emailed to neighborhood presidents, city council and city employees, Evergreen State College MPA students, businesses, nonprofits, and city volunteer groups. It was assumed that those responding had an interest in downtown Olympia.

### Focus Groups

Focus group participants were city of Olympia residents and all identified an interest in downtown Olympia. One group consisted of general citizens and did not identify as having technical knowledge of the city. The second focus group was comprised of a former city council member, a planning commissioner, the chair of a city commission and a city contractor.

"We as a community need to talk more about the current status of housing and what we envision in years to come."

SURVEY RESPONDENT

## Limitations & Assumptions

The on-line survey and focus group was solicited through a convenience method. Neither populations were tested to assess whether they were statistically representative of Olympia. Survey questions regarding income never differentiated earned wages and total household income. A survey question regarding ‘family’ household was not defined. Perhaps because of that, 12.3 percent of respondents chose ‘other’ in response to that question. The phrase, ‘Super’ citizens is used to distinguish between the two focus groups. ‘Super’ citizens have direct experience with Olympia as an elected official, a contractor or as a member of an advisory committee.

## Survey Participant Profile

The majority of survey respondents (39 percent) identified as a part of a two-person household. 47.1 percent of respondents stated their household income was above \$60,001 annually. While there was no statistical significance of whether household size or type affected respondent’s choices, analysis indicated that the higher the income level of the respondent, the higher ‘shopping’ was ranked as the most important element for a vibrant downtown. The variance in the correlation, however, was relatively weak.

## Density Equals Vibrancy

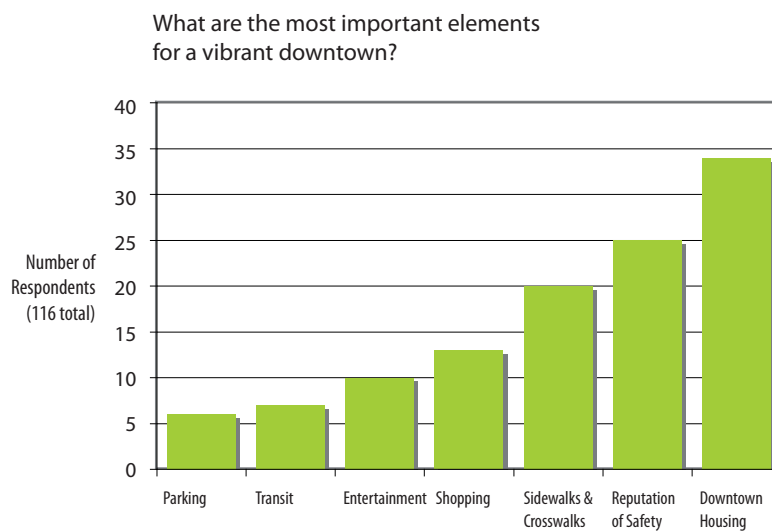
Olympians indicated an association between density and vibrancy. When asked what the most appealing images of a future downtown Olympia were, 46 percent of survey respondents suggested ‘People on the street during the day, evening and after hours’.

Many focus group respondents identified downtown Olympia as a key reason why they moved to Olympia. Themes from both groups indicated that a dense downtown was necessary for vibrancy and that housing downtown was a nexus for density and vibrancy.

“I like being able to walk to [downtown] restaurants. I’d like to be closer to the pulse of things happening downtown.”

FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

Study participants indicated that housing is the most important element for a vibrant downtown Olympia. Both focus groups found it very important that Olympia’s downtown continue to develop as a neighborhood and commercial district. They felt that a dense, vibrant, downtown neighborhood would sustain local businesses, reduce commute trips, and support the city’s arts community.



## Demographics

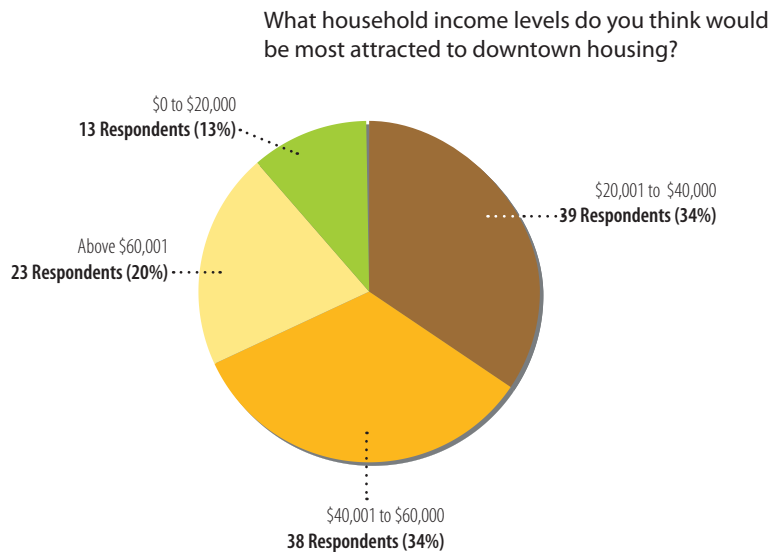
Respondents indicated a desire for mixed incomes and ages to live in downtown Olympia in the future.

Higher income survey respondents felt that downtown would continue to serve lower income residents in the future. 47 percent of survey respondents indicated that their household income was over \$60,000 a year, the highest survey category. When asked ‘what incomes levels would be attracted to downtown housing’, a majority of respondents (34.5 percent) felt that households that earn between \$20,001 and \$40,000 a year would be attracted to urban living.

“I’d like to see more family-oriented housing... I’d like to see a mix of income and ages encouraged.”

SURVEY RESPONDENT

Focus group participants identified that a mix of incomes are desirable. It appears Olympia’s housing market may agree. Since this research began, both condominiums and apartments have been proposed for development in the downtown core.



## Downtown Housing Design

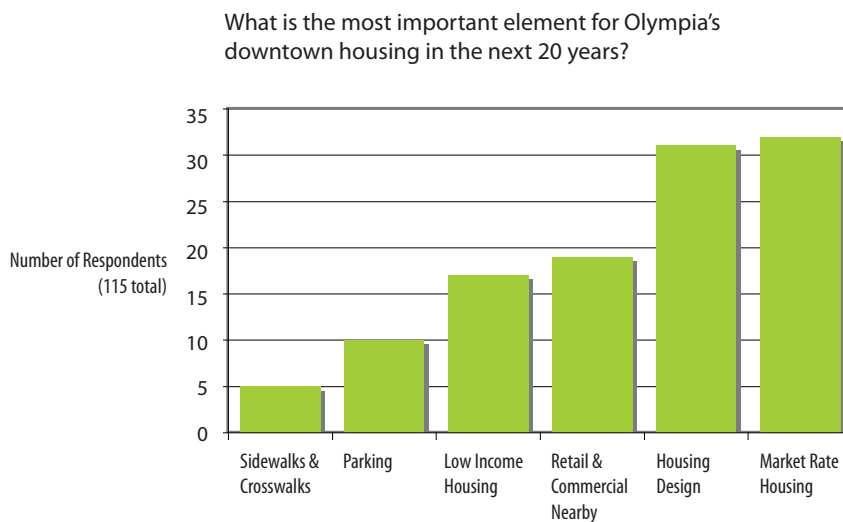
When asked ‘what the most important element for downtown Olympia would be in the next 20 years’, the majority of respondents chose ‘market rate housing’ as the most important. The next highest, almost tied for most important, was ‘housing design’.

Mixed-use buildings (e.g., housing and office space in one building) were consistently referred to in the focus group sessions. One group noted that it is difficult to talk about downtown housing without addressing other urban planning issues—they suggested that the

two topics are invariably linked. The super citizen focus group talked about the importance of dense mixed income urban housing with an emphasis on “architecture and design.” Several survey respondents also suggested housing with green, or environmentally friendly, design could be incorporated in future projects.

“If there were the aesthetics and attractions that our neighborhoods have, then maybe I would [live downtown].”

FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT



## So What?

Based on the results of this research, Olympians envision downtown housing that is demographically diverse, well designed, dense and vibrant. How does the city of Olympia measure up to that vision?

Respondents desire a demographically diverse downtown. With 120 new apartments and 30 condominiums in the planning stages, infill units that serve various income levels appear to be in the city’s future.

Well-designed housing makes housing attractive. All of downtown is currently subject to the City of Olympia Design Review Standards.

Respondents associate vibrant downtowns with density.

Downtown development in much of Olympia’s core now requires retail on the first floor of residential or commercial developments.





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