

# Seattle council OKs legislation to streamline housing production

*Jul 5, 2023, 10:50pm PDT*



YWCA

The Seattle City Council on Wednesday passed two bills to reduce regulator barriers to development of affordable housing such as this building on Capitol Hill.

Seattle on Wednesday streamlined the permitting of some housing projects, including mixed-income developments if the affordable units are built on-site.

The City Council approved two bills. The first passed 8-0 and the second — a pilot program — was approved with two members,

Tammy Morales and Kshama Sawant, dissenting because the red-tape-cutting legislation will help market-rate builders.

The legislation moved quickly, with passage coming just three weeks after Mayor Bruce Harrell proposed it, reflecting the council's desire to make progress on big issues for voters like housing affordability.

The bill that passed 6-2 includes a provision to temporarily exempt projects from the time-consuming design-review process if the developer chooses to meet Seattle's Mandatory Housing Affordability (MHA) requirement by including the lower-cost apartments in the building. Most builders elect to instead pay into the MHA fund, which other developers tap into to build low-income units elsewhere.

The first bill makes permanent the temporary design-review exemptions that were put in place during the Covid-19 pandemic.

It previously applied only to rental housing projects where 40% of the units are affordable to households that earn up to 60% of the area median income, or AMI. The new law expands the exemption to include home-ownership projects with 40% of the units affordable at up to 80% AMI.

This pilot legislation was originally proposed to last for 12 months, but Councilmember Dan Strauss introduced an amendment to increase that to 24 months to allow additional time to assess the revisions and better inform a permanent code change.

Mayor Bruce Harrell sent both bills to the council. Recent polling by EMC Research found his popularity to be sky-high, with just over two-thirds of registered voters viewing him favorably.

"I'm proud to partner with Mayor Harrell and sponsor this legislation because the family I grew up in should be able to afford to live in the Seattle of today, and tomorrow," Strauss said in a news release. He is fending off five challengers as he seeks a second term.

Before the vote, Morales expressed concern over the city providing the benefit to market-rate developments "without receiving some

level of public benefit in return and particularly for folks that are low income."

Sawant said she has supported previous legislation to reduce regulatory barriers to building affordable housing.

"This bill that gives outrageously expensive market-rate housing development the same advantages and gets almost nothing in return for ... the countless people who are in search of affordable housing and are unable to find it in this city because rents are skyrocketing."

While it requires the MHA units to be built on-site, "it doesn't add one unit of affordable housing — absolutely nothing added," she added.

According to Apartment List, the overall median rent in the city stands at \$1,741 after rising 1.4% last month. Prices remain down 3.3% year over year.

