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Vancouver Planning Commission  
415 W 6th St.  
Vancouver, WA 98660

COV Housing Code Updates

Dear Chair Ledell and fellow Commissioners,

I am writing to you on behalf of the Building Industry Association of Clark County to provide input on the proposed housing code updates for the City of Vancouver. Building more affordable and middle housing is crucial to solving the housing crisis we face in this state. The majority of the code updates would aid in that effort, however some of the design standard requirements proposed would increase costs, and severely limit the type of housing and amenities that our member's clients demand. As an industry, we want to work collaboratively with the city to provide livable, attractive neighborhoods while providing the necessary flexibility so our members can maximize space, which creates greater value for those seeking housing. Our specific concerns are outlined below.

### **1. Small-Lot Subdivisions: R-17**

The creation of this new zoning type is vital. Land supply is constrained throughout the city and small lot subdivisions create the option for more density, affordable housing, and a neighborhood feel. However, the requirement of onerous design standards would slow down the development of this product type. Specifically, the garage frontage restrictions and rear alley requirement (where feasible) are two standards that would severely limit our members in the type of product they can produce for the public. The rear alley requirement would increase the cost of housing while creating more impervious surface. The elimination of the rear alley requirement wouldn't take any on-street parking away. Moreover, many potential home buyers don't want a backyard surrounded by a sea of asphalt and the noise pollution associated with neighbors' car/garage use. The backyard is a sanctuary, and we should keep it that way. The industry would like to see more flexibility on the rear alley requirement and an explanation on the purpose of rear alleys because they seem to function exclusively for vehicle use. Who will be responsible for the unregulated intersections, sightlines, and maintenance needs that will come from the creation of these rear alleys? Will the front façade garage standard apply to rear alley access frontage?

In addition, the front façade restrictions on garages would severely limit the type of product our members can build. In the R-17 zone, we are talking about lots less than 50ft in width. To provide a bare minimum two car garage, the garage needs to be a little over 20ft in width. A 50% cap on garage frontage would unduly restrict the size of garages on top of current requirements like setback standards. How will allowing more than 50% of the front façade to be garage discourage neighborhood pedestrian activity? At the builder/developer open house presented by staff there was also mention of requiring 9ft of front facing lot width dedicated to the front entry. We support the front entry requirement but implementing a 9ft requirement would limit what homeowners can buy and what our members can build. Both the front façade garage restriction and the 9ft front entry dedication requirement would restrict garage width. This could create massive, unintended consequences. The market wants garage space, and grand theft auto has increased 179% since 2019 within the City of Vancouver. These new street front requirements should not be extended to R-9 and R-6 zoning.

The concerns of homogenous neighborhoods are valid. Our members recognize this and want to work with the city and staff to devise solutions. One solution that the City of Ridgefield has used is instituting both structural and decorative elements to break-up the garage and enhance curb appeal. Structural elements could include a covered porch area with a minimum of 15sqft, dormers, gables, bay windows, 12-inch offset from one exterior wall to another, and balconies. Decorative elements could include garage doors, pillars/posts, eave or barge boards with two material variations, shingles or varied siding in gables, siding shingles, shake, batten board, wainscoting, or similar, brick, stone or cedar accents covering at least ten percent of the front facade wall surface area, variable siding (e.g. shed roof above windows), belly band cladding, etc. The City could require the use of a set number of the previously mentioned design elements that would visually break-up the garage frontage.

The commission should also consider recommending an increase in allowable height in this zone. The 25ft height cap should be increased to 35ft so our members can provide additional value for both homeowners and renters. That 10ft could allow for a work from home space, fitness space, and additional bedrooms to accommodate more individuals living under one roof. This additional space would also benefit renters, allowing for more roommates in one dwelling, thereby lowering the cost of housing.

## **2. Cottage Housing**

Cottage housing provides a unique opportunity for our members to build more affordable homes with the benefit of a doubling density in the underlying zone. We applaud the efforts of City Staff and the planning commission in modifying the cottage cluster standards. Specifically, allowing 200% density in the underlying zone and the allowance of cottage duplexes would increase housing capacity in the City of Vancouver. However, the industry believes there are additional ways to modify the code, push boundaries, and provide essential housing for the citizens of Vancouver.

First and foremost, the market wants an attached garage. Our members can achieve greater density using attached garages compared to a communal parking arrangement. The citizens of Vancouver are fearful for the safety of their vehicles, and attached garages are one of the solutions and what the market demands. Staff has acknowledged this and provided a 200sqft exemption to the 1,600sqft maximum for an attached garage. While we commend this provision, it clearly doesn't satisfy the intent. A one car garage **bare minimum** is 250sqft. The Planning Commission should recommend an exemption over 250sqft so that garage space is usable. If cottage duplexes are to be allowed, both units should be entitled to the same garage space exemption as a single cottage.

Also, like the R-17 zone, we would like to see the height cap increase from 25ft to 35ft, which would provide the necessary flexibility our members need to create the type of product the public wants. Quite frankly, we are in a housing crisis, and we need more flexibility in our design standards to match the need. Further flexibility on courtyard orientation and open space requirements would be a step in the right direction. Recently, the City of Bend, OR made those changes to their cottage cluster code. It may also suit the commission to contemplate an increase in the number of cottages allowed per cluster as well.

### **3. Supporting Strategies**

Despite our concerns, we appreciate the important work the commission is taking on. We are in full agreement with the changes to ADUs as it relates to garages and setbacks, shared kitchen and bath for apartments, state mandated parking reductions, incentives for visitability, the creation of a denser multifamily zone, and many others. Our association and its members want to build livable, attractive communities so the citizens of Vancouver can achieve the American dream and build generational wealth. Communication with our local jurisdictions is vital and our industry appreciates the opportunity to provide input.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Justin Wood". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Justin Wood  
Government Affairs Manager