

Middle Housing MythBusters

Common concerns raised about rezoning for Middle Housing, and how you can respond.



Technical Assistance
for Local Planning
HOUSING

MYTH 1



Height / Scale / Compatibility

Middle Housing will destroy privacy, with new neighbors looking down into my backyard.

Whether using a form-based approach or other development standards, most Middle Housing that is internal to neighborhoods should be two stories tall (or 2.5, with a habitable attic space) and designed to physically fit in with its neighbors. In addition, Middle Housing's footprint should be similar to the footprint of single-unit houses: if the length of a Middle Housing building is similar or the same as a single-unit house, views into neighbors' backyards is no more possible than it is for single-unit homes.

Upper Middle Housing may be three stories tall (or 3.5 with a habitable attic space). These Middle Housing types may be located at the edges of neighborhoods, along busier streets and areas of transition between single-unit houses and larger buildings. Having separate standards for Upper Middle Housing lets you distinguish between the two-story and three-story typologies to make sure the scale and height works based on location.

MYTH 2



Middle Housing will create large apartment buildings and change the scale and character of our neighborhood.

A key difference between Middle Housing and typical apartment buildings is that Middle Housing is house-scale. House-scale is the size of small to large houses, so that it fits in with existing houses. Some Middle Housing types are small and some are larger but they all are the size of small to large houses.

There are eight Middle Housing types with variations of each of these types. Each type has the massing of either a small, medium or large house. The large Middle Housing types (Multiplex Large and Courtyard Building) include massing standards to make sure that each building looks like a large single-unit house.

Upper Middle Housing types which are three stories tall include massing standards to visually break down their size and relate them to neighboring two-story houses. However, it's best to locate the Upper Middle Housing types in ways to avoid being near single-unit houses.

MYTH 3



We don't have enough open space in our neighborhood for more units.

Most Middle Housing types have rear yards or courtyards for on-site open space. Because Middle Housing types fit on lots that are the same size as lots for single-unit houses, the need for on-site open space is lower than for typical apartment buildings. In addition, larger Middle Housing types can be located near parks and other open space to provide additional opportunities.

MYTH 4

Parking & Traffic

Adding Middle Housing is going to create a parking nightmare.

There are many things that impact demand for on-street parking. In many places, car ownership rates are higher now than in the past, and upper income households (who are well represented in single family neighborhoods) have more cars per household than lower income households. There's also the reality that many single family households use their garages for storing everything but their car. On-street parking may be burdened, but it's important to acknowledge the source of the problem and make that part of the conversation and solution.

Where Middle Housing is located matters. A core strategy is to consider it in areas where new residents have the real option of not using a car for every trip. These areas are the lots within short walking distance of existing or future amenities (say up to 10 minutes). By locating Middle Housing in these amenity-rich areas, it's reasonable to expect that the need for a car will be less. For moderate and lower income households, being able to forego the cost of full-time car ownership (by not owning a vehicle or participating in a carshare) can be a substantial benefit in creating an affordable living option.

A parking ratio of 1 space per unit will usually suffice, or can be even lower. Providing off-street parking spaces helps to address neighborhood concerns, but one space per unit is typically adequate to meet Middle Housing parking needs. That ratio can be even lower (0.5 per unit) in areas where frequent transit service is available.

While possibly tempting, requiring off-street parking creates other problems. By requiring more parking per unit, the size of the lot and the project must grow, causing compatibility issues with neighbors and the area. Middle Housing seeks to be at the size and scale of single-unit houses and the lots that those houses fit on, while using a mix of off-street and on-street parking just like the single-unit houses do. Also, requiring more off-street parking can kill project feasibility, countering the purpose of the rezoning all together.

A residential parking permit program can help manage on-street parking. We all use on-street parking: to park extra vehicles, for visitors or because garages are full of other things. Rezoning for Middle Housing can be accompanied by policies or programs to better manage on-street parking to serve all residents—new and old—recognizing that the street is a shared public resource. (While many think of the street parking in front of their property as “theirs,” it isn't. The street is public space for shared use, and should be managed accordingly.)

MYTH 5

We need to screen Middle Housing parking spaces to make them fit in.

Middle Housing should use the same parking location approach as neighboring single-unit houses. For example, if the existing pattern is of parking down a side drive from the street to the middle or rear of single-unit lots, Middle Housing should be designed with the same pattern. As a result, “screening,” which is common in areas where a large project or non-residential project is near housing, isn't needed in Middle Housing projects.

MYTH 6



Our streets can't handle additional traffic.

Large single-family homes often have three or more cars per unit and tend to generate more trips per unit than Middle Housing units. When Middle Housing is located in walkable areas where people have more options for getting around and less need to use their cars, the number of new vehicle trips per unit is even lower.

MYTH >



Infrastructure Capacity

Middle Housing will strain our infrastructure; we don't have capacity for more housing.

In most cases, Middle Housing in developed areas will be built incrementally, adding new neighbors slowly over time. Also, Middle Housing units are typically smaller than single-family homes, helping reduce the demand per unit on infrastructure and public facilities (higher income households and larger homes typically have more impact in terms of resource use per-capita than smaller units and low/moderate income households). Lastly, new development typically pays impact fees that help fund additional capacity for impacted public systems, and creates additional taxable value that generates property tax revenue to support public services.

MYTH 8



Our schools are already overcrowded; we can't add more families to this neighborhood.

Depending on the housing type and unit size, some Middle Housing may be more appealing to smaller households, including smaller families and households without children, so not all Middle Housing development will increase school enrollment. Further, new housing is one factor among many that can cause enrollment to fluctuate—demographic shifts, an aging population, and private school enrollment are all factors districts have to consider as they balance capacity. Most public school funding in California is provided by the state based on enrollment and student needs,¹ if enrollment does increase, then funding will increase as well.

MYTH 9



Our water and sewer systems are barely adequate as is; they can't handle the strain.

Given the incremental pace of change for Middle Housing development in established neighborhoods, only very severe and immediate capacity constraints should be a concern for Middle Housing. While it is not legal to require new development to bear the full cost of improving infrastructure systems to fix pre-existing problems, if capacity upgrades are needed, that will generally also mean new pipes, some of which can be funded with revenue from new development.

¹ <https://www.ppic.org/publication/financing-californias-public-schools/>

MYTH 10



Property Values

Adding duplexes, triplexes, and other Middle Housing will decrease neighboring property values.

House-scale Middle Housing can be designed to look much like a single-family home. People may not even realize that there are multiple units. Oftentimes, if the development looks like a house, buyers will act like it's a house. Even if the Middle Housing doesn't look exactly like a single-family home, if well designed, new construction can add value to the adjacent areas by demonstrating demand for housing in the area and increasing investment in the area.

MYTH 11



Renters are less invested in their neighborhoods and landlords don't take good care of the property.

Both Middle Housing and single family can be owner-occupied or rentals. Some renter households do need to move frequently and may not have deep connections to a particular neighborhood, but others stay in one place for many years and are as much a part of their community as other long-term residents. There are some property owners who do not or cannot take good care of their properties (whether they live in them or not), in which case code enforcement is the appropriate response, but new development generally does not need a lot of maintenance while the building is new.

MYTH 12



Displacement Impacts

Redeveloping older single family homes with Middle Housing will cause displacement.

Displacement risk can be real, but it can also be used by wealthy homeowners as a cover for other underlying concerns. Think about who is really at risk, and whether that's who is expressing the concern.

- **Homeowners are protected from market-driven displacement.** If Middle Housing increases property values, Proposition 13 means that property taxes will still only increase by two percent per year as long as the homeowner owns that home,² which protects homeowners from displacement. While predatory home buying offers can be a concern, homeowners get to choose whether to redevelop and/or sell their properties.
- **Renters in apartments are less likely to be affected.** There is little precedent for larger apartment buildings being redeveloped, as Middle Housing is unlikely to generate sufficient financial returns to justify redeveloping an apartment complex. While there is a perception that new construction can cause rents to increase for existing nearby rental housing, adding more housing (particularly rental housing) in a desirable area can actually reduce upward pressure on rents for existing units.

² <https://www.nber.org/digest/apr05/lock-effect-californias-proposition-13>

- **Renters living in lower-cost single-family rental homes or older Middle Housing could experience displacement, but those risks may exist already.** The lowest cost homes in the community are generally more likely to get redeveloped, and renter households in lower-value single-family homes could face displacement risks. However, in some markets where there is strong demand for high-end single-family homes, the older, lower-value homes in the area may already have potential for redevelopment with new luxury homes. In those areas, continuing to prohibit Middle Housing does little to protect the renters.
- **Renters who have limited housing options or face discrimination in the housing market tend to be at greater risk of displacement and may experience more harm if they are forced to move.** These include low-income and cost-burdened households (spending more than 30 percent of their income on rent), people of color, people who do not speak English, immigrants and refugees, seniors, and people with disabilities. Communities considering enabling or prioritizing Middle Housing in areas with disproportionately high shares of renters, who may be at greater risk, should conduct more extensive and inclusive engagement, evaluate impacts to these communities and ensure policies and programs to mitigate the displacement pressures in conjunction with any rezoning.

MYTH 13



Old houses will get torn down, destroying neighborhood identity and history, and removing housing that is currently more affordable.

In areas with strong housing markets, older homes with comparatively low property value relative to the surrounding properties are generally more likely to get redeveloped than houses with higher property values. However, there is no guarantee that these properties will remain affordable or even that they will remain standing whether Middle Housing is allowed or not.

- Older homes in decent condition or with historic character are often easier and more profitable to remodel than to redevelop. Those that are remodeled may (or may not) keep some of their aesthetic character but tend to become much more expensive when they are next sold.
- In markets where there is strong demand for high-end single-family homes, the older, lower-value homes in the area may already have potential for redevelopment with new luxury homes.

In areas with weaker housing markets, redeveloping existing homes (even lower-value ones) often doesn't "pencil" and the main opportunity for new Middle Housing development will be on vacant land or undeveloped portions of a developed lot.