



Visalia City Council

Staff Report

Visalia City Council
707 W. Acequia
Visalia, CA 93291

File #: 25-0364

Agenda Date: 8/19/2025

Agenda #: 3.

Agenda Item Wording:

Updates to City regulations and zoning districts to allow for a mix of dwelling types and sizes, including limited promotion of missing middle-density housing types, and to the public hearing requirements related to parcel maps and large multi-family uses, in fulfillment of General Plan Housing Element Implementation Programs 2.7 and 3.17.

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Department Recommendation:

Staff recommends that the City Council and Planning Commission consider the information provided in the report and provide comments and guidance as directed.

Recommendations provided by the City Council will be used as a basis for a Zoning Ordinance Text Amendment to adopt revised residential development standards to encourage the development of housing types affordable to the local workforce, fulfillment of Housing Element Implementation Program 2.7 and 3.17.

Program 2.7 Missing Middle Housing:

Visalia's Housing Element Program 2.7 directs the City to conduct an evaluation of existing development standards in the Zoning Ordinance to identify potential constraints and potential incentives towards development of "missing middle housing". The program entails public outreach to local developers, property owners, and non-profit agencies, and adopting revised standards for such development in 2025.

Missing middle housing is characterized by a range of low to medium density range housing types, such as duplexes, triplexes, townhomes, and cottage homes, located within residential neighborhoods and providing a more affordable alternative to the local workforce. They may also include a triplex or a fourplex on a single lot. Figure 1 below provides an illustration of unit types typically associated with missing middle housing. According to the National League of Cities (<https://www.nlc.org/article/2024/01/23/what-is-missing-middle-housing/>), this housing supply is considered "missing" because such building types have often been illegal or difficult to build since the innovation of single-family zoning in the 1940s. Thus, much of the existing middle housing stock built prior to the 1940s is experiencing a decline in quality, safety, and accessibility. The target audience for missing middle housing can span from singles and young couples to baby boomers and retirees, who may not be willing to take on the cost and maintenance burden of a detached single-family home.



Fig. 1: Missing Middle Housing Types (image credit: City of Bellingham, Washington)

The density and composition of missing middle housing can vary based on the setting of the community. Housing in a more urban and/or walkable area of the city could entail multi-unit and multi-story structures. Conversely, housing in existing single-family neighborhoods could entail smaller detached dwelling units or duplexes developed in a manner that maintains the neighborhood's existing character. The latter example has to an extent been sanctioned in California through accessory dwelling units (ADUs), Senate Bill (SB) 9 ministerial duplexes, and SB 9 ministerial lot splits.

Visalia already has a track record of approving units through SB 9 and updating its ADU ordinance to be compatible with State law. Program 2.7 calls for the City to adopt revised standards to incentivize such development, particularly in "high resource, low-density, infill parcels". High resource areas, while not defined in Program 2.7, could be inferred to, in the context of the Housing Element, as areas with positive economic, educational, and environmental outcomes, as considered by the California Tax Credit Allocation Committee (TCAC).

In Visalia, the predominant housing product being constructed throughout the City are single-family detached houses - be it on traditional sized lots or in small lot subdivisions - followed by apartment-style multi-family residences. Only a small percentage of units being constructed are in other forms of housing, such as ADUs or duplexes/triplexes/fourplexes.

Following is a breakdown of units by housing type among permits issued between 2020 and 2024:

Residential Permit Category	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025*
Single-Family Houses	599	632	540	317	236	349
Units in Structures with 5+ units	0	76	615	12	307	10
Units in Structures with 2-4 units	6	126	76	0	20	22
Accessory Dwelling Units	2	5	16	22	37	21
* 2025 is through August 1, 2025						

Direction Sought on Missing Middle Housing

Based on the information as noted above, and to identify ways to establish provisions to implement Program 2.7, staff seeks direction and comments on whether the City of Visalia should consider expanding its range of building types in high resource, infill parts of the City. If directed to proceed, further direction is needed on which focus area the City of Visalia should seek to promote and/or allow for a greater mix of dwelling units and sizes. Two types of areas that could be considered for an expansion of unit types are described here:

- 1. Areas and neighborhoods that are more walkable and within close proximity to locally serving retail and transportation options, that have a zoning designation of R-1 and/or Downtown Mixed Use (DMU) and have traditional lot sizes (e.g. 5,000 to 10,000 square feet).** (See Attachment 1 for map location.)

To incentivize parcels that are already in close proximity to retail and transit, the Council may consider allowing more diverse housing options such as duplexes, triplexes, courtyard buildings, and townhomes.

This example is the closest resemblance to the national concept that has been coined as “Missing Middle Housing”, defined as “house-scale buildings with multiple units in walkable neighborhoods”. (reference: <https://missingmiddlehousing.com/about-2/>)

Attachment 1 is included for the intent to illustrate heavily travelled corridors with transit that provide access to locally serving retail. The areas shown in buffer represent a 100-foot buffer from transit lines. Residential-zoned parcels within these buffers, together with parcels within the Downtown Mixed Use zone containing residential uses, could be incentivized.

- 2. Infill areas with undeveloped or underdeveloped lots, that have a zoning designation of R-1-5 and have larger lot sizes (for example, 20,000 square feet and above).** (See Attachment 2 for locations and clusters of R-1-5-zoned lots with >20,000 sq. ft.)

To incentivize under-developed lots or vacant bypassed parcels, the Council may consider allowing, in limited cases, missing middle housing on larger-sized lots as a “by-right” use, without having to subdivide a lot. Large size lots frequently have surplus land that is vacant or is underdeveloped, thereby not being used to its highest and best potential. Planning staff has found that such lots are interspersed throughout the City, and in some circumstances already have more than one dwelling unit on them.

As shown on Attachment 2, infill sites that are undeveloped or underdeveloped are interspersed throughout the city, but more so in the northeast and southeast quadrants. Other sites are located in the vicinity of Walnut & Chinowth, Mineral King & Linwood, and Hurley north of Chinowth.

The code change would introduce opportunities for these lots to increase the number of dwelling units, while maintaining development within the range of the Low Density Residential land use designation (i.e., 2 to 10 dwelling units per acre).

Sites having a zoning of R-1-12.5 and R-1-20 would be excluded since these areas are predominantly developed as established neighborhoods and since their zoning intends for only one unit on larger lot sizes.

Missing middle housing types that could be considered for these lots could be one or more of the following: duplexes, triplexes, and cottage homes. A maximum unit count could be imposed based on site area (e.g. one unit for every 5,000 square feet, not to exceed 8 units per site).

If implemented, any new construction of missing middle housing would be subject to the City’s recently adopted objective design standards. Additionally, staff would recommend adding criteria to ensure that the construction of MMH is in areas that are best suited for meeting their objectives, such as affordability and accessibility. Units within gated communities generally do not fall into this context.

Alternative: Zoning Ordinance Amendments to streamline Single-family Development

As an alternative to Examples 1 and 2 above, direction could be provided to implementing amendments to the Zoning Ordinance that support and further streamline the types of units allowed in Visalia's Residential (i.e., R-1-5, R-M-2 and R-M-3) and Mixed Use (i.e., D-MU and C-MU) zones, which already include ADUs, duplexes, small lots, and townhomes.

The suggested amendments below would be in keeping with the language of Housing Element Program 2.7, which states *"the City shall evaluate zoning standards related to minimum lot size and width, maximum lot coverage, required setbacks, open space and landscaping requirements, and parking ratios"*.

The following suggestions are crafted for and fit directly to Visalia's Zoning Ordinance. The objectives of these ideas are:

- To provide more clarity on allowed unit types and the development standards within the R-1-5 residential zone.
- To further streamline the approval process of residential entitlements on more routine actions in the Residential and Mixed Use zones, when it can be found that there are no land use compatibility issues.
- To provide more options for units to meet setback requirements in the Residential zones, particularly on lots that are constrained by lot depth.

Where potential changes to the City's Municipal Code are shown, new/additions to text is specified by underline & italics while deletions are specified by ~~strikeout~~.

1. Rename the "Single-family residential zone - 5,000 square foot minimum site area" (abbreviated as R-1-5) to the "Single-family residential zone" (abbreviated as R-1).

Clean up language in the R-1 Zone regulations to clearly state that lots under 5,000 square foot site area are permitted.

The literal name of the R-1-5 zone implies that all lots shall have a minimum lot size of 5,000 square feet; however, the R-1-5 zone clearly allows for lots below 5,000 square feet as well. Section 17.12.135 allows for single-family residences without a minimum lot size. The City has seen many examples of this type of development, often in the form of planned unit developments. All development within the R-1-5 zone must comply with General Plan Policy LU-P-55, which allows for development at 2 to 10 dwelling units per gross acre in the zone.

Removing the "-5" lot size qualifier from the R-1-5 zone name will help provide a clearer message that single-family residential or low density residential development meeting the density range (2 to 10 units per acres) is allowed in the zone.

The zone names for R-1-12.5 and R-1-20, which respectively require lot sizes with a minimum of 12,500 and 20,000 square feet, would remain unchanged.

Changes would be made to Sections 17.06.010, 17.12.020, 17.12.040, and 17.12.050 as follows.

17.06.010 Establishment of zone names.

A.4. Single-family residential zone—5,000-square-foot minimum site area, abbreviated as R-1-5;

17.12.020 Permitted uses.

In the R-1 single-family residential zones, the following uses shall be permitted by right:

A. One-family dwellings, including lots with lot area of 3,600 square feet and above if developed in accordance with Sections 17.12.135(A) and (B);

17.12.040 Conditional uses.

In the R-1 single-family residential zone, the following conditional uses may be permitted in accordance with the provisions of Chapter 17.38:

A. Planned development subject to the provisions of Chapter 17.26. Planned developments are required to create lots having a lot area of 3,600 square feet or less, in accordance with Section 17.12.135(C).;

17.12.050 Site area.

The minimum site area shall be as follows:

Zone	Minimum Site Area
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R-1-5	5,000 square feet, <u>unless developed in accordance with Section 17.12.135.</u>
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R-1-12.5	12,500 square feet
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R-1-20	20,000 square feet
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2. Work to remove Planned Unit Development / Conditional Use Permit requirements for simple lot splits.

Over the past several years, the Planning Division has processed an ample number of tentative parcel maps for oversized residential properties, splitting the property between 2 and 4 parcels. Lot splits that include the creation of an access easement require a Planned Unit Development (PUD), processed as a conditional use permit entitlement. In cases where a PUD is only needed to establish an easement and not to create common lots or to request a deviation from setbacks, or creation of private streets, the PUD process may be seen as an unnecessary additional entitlement which adds cost and processing but has no other practical application for development standard deviations.

The City could consider waiving the PUD requirement for lot splits that result in the creation of parcels without public street frontage (i.e. landlocked parcels) and require no more than the establishment of an access easement for vehicular or pedestrian purposes. The access easement would be allowed in lieu of meeting the R-1-5 zoning designation requirement of a minimum 40-foot public street frontage requirement.

Alternately, the City could allow the parcel map “by-right” without a tentative parcel map requirement.

Changes would be made to Subdivision Ordinance Section 16.28.040 and Zoning Ordinance Section 17.12.040 if directed to proceed with these updates.

3. Reduce the Single-Family Residential Zone’s 25-foot rear yard setback requirement, or apply a reduced rear yard setback for lots located on the interior of a subdivision (i.e. not

on the perimeter adjacent to existing developments).

Current development trends in the region and state have seen residential homebuilders request subdivisions with smaller average lot sizes, together with residential plots that would necessitate setbacks below City standard requirements. Visalia's single-family setback requirements have remained unchanged since 2004, when an Ordinance was approved to reduce the 25-foot front yard setback to 15 feet for living space and 22 feet for front-loading garages. The setbacks for side yards (5 feet) and rear yards (25 feet, or 20 feet for one-story structures meeting open space requirements) have been in place for several decades.

Many California jurisdictions have adopted ordinance updates for rear yard setbacks of less than 25 feet. Rear yard setbacks in nearby large cities include 5 feet in Tulare (5,000 sq. ft. min. lot size), 10 feet in Fresno (5,000 sq. ft. min. lot size), and 20 feet in Clovis (6,000 sq. ft. min. lot size). In addition, recent trends for cities to accommodate missing middle housing have seen further reductions in rear yard setback requirements.

The City could consider a reduction in the minimum rear yard setback requirement to easily facilitate standard production plans onto lots within subdivisions in Visalia. The City has often been challenged to find solutions for homebuilders that cannot fit one or more of their production plans on lots, typically located on shallower cul-de-sac or knuckle lots, or when a homebuilder acquires a previously approved subdivision. Being that the City has often processed Variance entitlements to overcome plot plans not able to meet setbacks, a reduction in the minimum rear yard setback requirement would reduce staff's workload in processing Variance applications.

Furthermore, if there is concern regarding the interface of new residences with reduced rear yard setbacks that back onto the rear yards of established residences, the City could further consider applying a reduced rear yard setback only to lots that do not back onto existing residences. New subdivisions could utilize a reduced rear yard setback requirement, except for those lots on the perimeter of the subdivision adjacent to existing developments or major roadways (i.e., arterial and collector streets).

4. Remove the Conditional Use Permit requirement for Multi-Family Residential development less than two acres in site area.

The City of Visalia's R-M zones allow multi-family dwellings as a use permitted by-right, currently up to 80 units per site. While sites may be developed with multi-family dwellings as such, the City's development standards for the R-M zones state that the division of any R-M zoned property less than two acres shall be approved as a part of a conditional use permit.

This standard may be considered as a constraint towards the development of multi-family residential opportunities by imposing a discretionary process on a use that would otherwise be a permitted by-right use. Furthermore, the standard implies that the development of such uses may be limited to only larger sites. This constraint is identified in the City's 6th Cycle Housing Element, and Program 5.8 in the Housing Element commits the City to amend its Zoning Ordinance to overcome this constraint.

Staff therefore recommends that the ordinance be revised and reduce the two acre requirement. Changes would be made to Section 17.16.050 as follows.

17.16.050 Site area and configuration.

A. The division of (R-M) multi-family residential property less than two (2) acres shall be approved as part of a conditional use permit. The minimum site area shall be 6,000 square feet. One-family dwellings may be allowed with a site area less than 6,000 square feet subject to the granting of a conditional use permit.

5. Remove the Multi-Family Residential Zone's development standard for a minimum 10-foot side yard that provides access to more than one dwelling unit.

Visalia's setback requirement for side yards in the multi-family residential zone is 5 feet, per Zoning Ordinance Section 17.16.080. The following excerpt (Subsection B) of this regulation requires a larger side yard (minimum 10 feet) in circumstances as follows:

B. Side yard providing access to more than one dwelling unit shall be not less than ten feet.

This subsection is intended to apply when a side yard contains a pedestrian walkway that leads to and provides direct access to two or more dwelling units located within the site.

The Planning Division has found that this subsection tends to be overlooked when staff reviews designs of multi-family residential developments. While the subsection is intended to provide a wider, and thus more appealing entry within the site, it can conversely be seen as unused space that serves no purpose for requiring a greater setback. The setback can further be seen as creating an unnecessary hardship towards smaller sized parcels (e.g. under one-half acre).

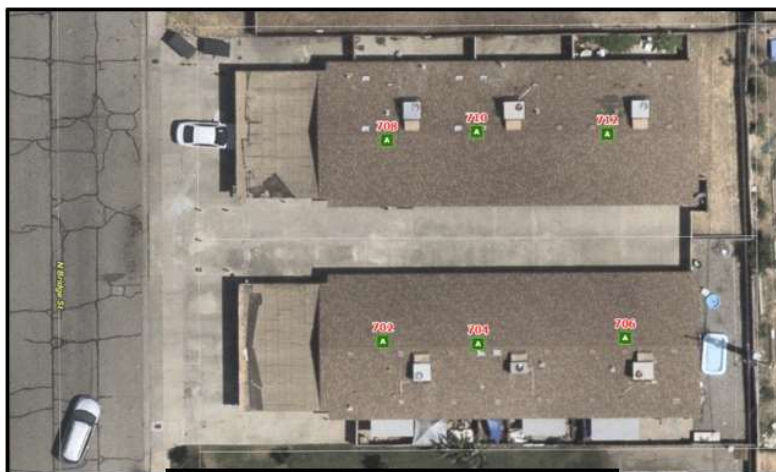


Fig. 2: Example of R-M zoned property with 5-foot side yard

As seen in the adjoining illustration labeled as Figure 2, the multi-family units' pedestrian walkway that provides access to multiple units towards the rear would be required to be built at a minimum 10-

foot setback from property line, rather than the 5-foot setback that is currently depicted.

Changes would be made to Section 17.16.080 as follows.

17.16.080 Side yards.

A. The minimum side yard for a permitted or conditional use shall be five feet subject to the exception that on the street side of a corner lot the side yard shall be not less than ten feet.

~~B. Side yard providing access to more than one dwelling unit shall be not less than ten feet.~~

6. Consider reduced parking space requirements for residential uses meeting certain criteria.

In 2022, the California legislature signed into law Assembly Bill 2097 which prohibits jurisdictions from mandating parking for land use projects that are located within one-half mile of a major stop. In this context, major transit stops are defined as any major transit stop located at the intersection of two or more bus routes with a frequency of service of 15 minutes or less. In Visalia, Transit Route 1 is the City's only transit route which meets the criteria

In compliance with state law, the City has refrained from imposing parking minimums within a half mile distance of Route 1, despite that Visalia's Zoning Ordinance currently has not been updated to align with the parking exemptions under AB 2097.

Staff recommends in favor of adding language within the City's Parking Facilities Chapter of the Ordinance to address that properties meeting criteria under AB 2097 shall be exempt from parking requirements.

If the Council recommends in favor of extending allowing missing middle housing types on large sized R-1 zoned lots, as described in Section C above, then parking requirements for housing on these lots could be reconsidered to require 1.5 parking spaces per unit rather than 2 spaces per unit, which matches the City's requirement for multi-family residential uses.

7. In Mixed Use Zones (D-MU and C-MU), remove Conditional Use Permit requirement when adding units to a site with established housing units.

The Zoning Ordinance currently allows new or expansion of residential uses as a conditionally allowed use in all of the City's commercial, office, and industrial ones, including the Downtown Mixed Use (D-MU) and Commercial Mixed Use (C-MU) zones. In 2022, in response to a Housing Element program to find creative ways to allow residential uses as permitted by-right in these zones, a Zoning Text Amendment was approved to allow residential units as a "mixed use" in an existing building containing one or more commercial or office uses.

In the past 10 years, City staff has processed two Conditional Use Permits which have added a new residential unit to a property in the D-MU zone with existing legally established units. The locations of these CUPs were at 117 E. Main Street and 405 N. West Street. The requests were approved by Planning Commission without concern or protest. In response to these recent

requests, and in response to the General Plan and Zoning Ordinance that encourage a mix of commercial, service, office, and residential land uses, Staff recommends expanding the ability for sites with pre-established residential uses to add to the number of dwelling units on the site as a use permitted by-right, rather than with a CUP. The basis for removing the discretionary component is that there would be no new land uses being introduced to these sites with pre-established residential uses, and thus surrounding land uses are already conditioned to having existing residential uses. Staff would further recommend that residences be allowed by-right subject to maintaining the General Plan's density range requirements.

Changes would be made to Section 17.16.080 as follows.

Section 17.25.030 Commercial, Office, and Industrial Zone Use Table

D. [Table 17.25.030, Commercial, Mixed Use, Office, and Industrial Zones Use Matrix]

	USE	C-N	C-R	C-S	C-MU	D-MU	O-PA	O-C	BRP	I-L	I	identified Chapter or Section)
R28	Residential Units, New or Expansions, which may or may not be associated with a commercial activity	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	
<u>R29</u>	<u>Residential Units, New or Expansion, on a site with one or more legally established dwelling units, maintaining General Plan density standards</u>				<u>P</u>	<u>P</u>						

Housing Element Program 3.17 Planning for Large Sites

The State has established that parcels intended to support the development of units appropriate for lower-income households should be between 0.5 and 10 acres. It is possible and has been demonstrated by Visalia that parcels over 10 acres can be developed with lower-income households; however, affordable housing developers may face greater challenges on such sites such as being unable to finance the scale of a larger project. In Visalia's current Regional Housing Needs Assessment (RHNA) Sites Inventory, there are six sites over 10 acres in size that have either Low or Moderate Income Level unit requirements.

In response to "large sites" over 10 acres, Housing Element Implementation Program 3.17 commits the City to take measures to facilitate and remove constraints toward parceling these sites to appropriate sizes (0.5 and 10 acres).

The objectives to be achieved by this program, as stated in the program, are as follows:

By 2025, adopt incentives to encourage the development of large RHNA sites (over 10 acres) potentially including, but not limited to,

- *expedited approval of lot splits or creation of new parcels;*
- *waiving of the public hearing requirement related to parcel maps;*
- *waiving of the public hearing requirement related to approval of large multifamily uses (provided the project is affordable by deed-restriction),*
- *additional density bonus, lot coverage, or allowable height;*
- *and fee waivers, reductions, or deferral.*

Staff Recommendation:

Staff recommends that from the above list of objectives to assist with the development of large sites, a Text Amendment (to Visalia Municipal Code Title 16 Subdivisions) be initiated to waive the public hearing requirement (i.e. allow ministerial processing) for parcel maps that propose to divide large (i.e. minimum 10 acre) sites into smaller parcels (minimum 0.5 acres). Parcel maps may have ministerial approvals if they contain an R-M-2 or R-M-3 zoning designation, or if they have RHNA site inventory unit requirement for Lower or Moderate Income Level. This type of request would be similar to the SB 9 urban lot split process that the State has enacted ministerial approvals for, and which the City of Visalia has developed a track record for approving.

Staff would further recommend that the City Council provide guidance on any further incentives to encourage the development of large sites.

Zoning Text Amendment for Program 5.8:

For informational purposes, staff is providing a heads up of an upcoming ZTA associated with Program 5.8 to adopt state requirements. No direction is being sought on these updates since they are mandated in order to comply with State law.

Visalia's Housing Element Program 5.8 directs the City to process Municipal Code Updates for a variety of regulations in order to come into compliance with state law. Therefore, staff will also be processing a separate Zoning Text Amendment before the end of 2025 (as required by the Housing Element) to complete the municipal code updates.

For the purpose of providing advance notice and disclosure to the Council and Commission, the list of Municipal Code Updates as defined in Program 5.8 is included as Attachment "C".

Next Steps:

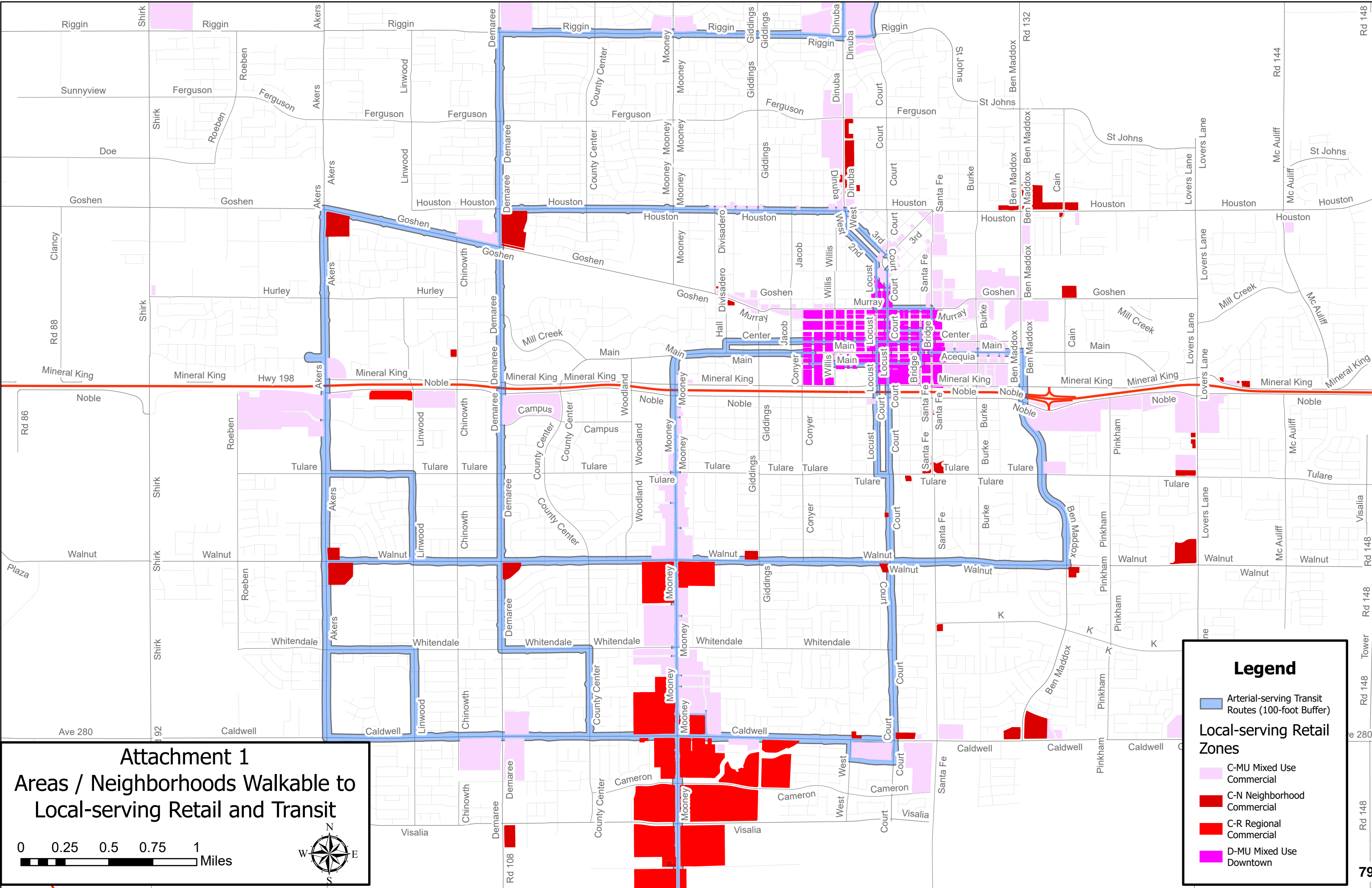
Recommendations provided will be used as a basis for a Zoning Ordinance Text Amendment to adopt revised residential development standards to encourage the development of housing types affordable to the local workforce, in fulfillment of Housing Element Implementation Program 2.7, and to adopt revised parcel map requirements for large sites, in fulfillment of Housing Element Implementation Program 3.17. The Zoning Ordinance Text Amendment will be formally noticed and heard as a public hearing item before the Planning Commission and City Council.

Recommended Motion (and Alternative Motions if expected):

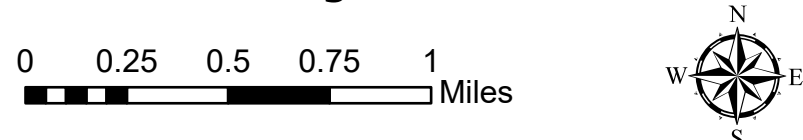
I recommend to provide direction to staff in preparation of an upcoming Zoning Text Amendment to implement Housing Element Programs 2.7 and 3.17.

Attachments:

1. City map illustrating areas and neighborhoods that are more walkable and within close proximity to locally serving retail and transportation options
2. City map illustrating undeveloped or underdeveloped lots that have a zoning designation of R-1-5 and have larger lot sizes (>20,000 square feet)
3. Housing Element Implementation Program 5.8



Attachment 1
Areas / Neighborhoods Walkable to
Local-serving Retail and Transit



Legend

Arterial-serving Transit Routes (100-foot Buffer)

Local-serving Retail Zones

C-MU Mixed Use Commercial

C-N Neighborhood Commercial

C-R Regional Commercial

D-MU Mixed Use Downtown

Attachment 3:
HE Program 5.8 Municipal Code Updates

HE Program 5.8 Municipal Code Updates	
Implementation Program Actions	Code Section
To remove constraints to a variety of housing types and ensure compliance with State law, the City shall amend the municipal code to:	
1. Allow Transitional and supportive housing by-right in the O-C zone.	17.25.030
2. Regarding emergency shelters, reduce development standards related to proximity to other emergency shelters, schools, and low barrier navigation centers to 300 feet, remove additional setback and perimeter wall requirements, and require only parking sufficient to meet the needs of facility employees but not more than what is required of residential or commercial uses in the same zone.	17.32.130
3. Allow accessory dwelling units (ADUs) by-right in all zones allowing residential uses, in compliance with State law.	Completed
The City will defer to State ADU and Junior ADU law until a compliant ADU Ordinance is adopted.	
4. Allow for at least two dwelling units per lot in all R-1 zones (R-1-20, R-1-12.5, and R-1-5) consistent with SB 9.	Completed
5. Provide streamlined ministerial review and a preliminary application process in compliance with SB 330 and SB 35.	N/A
6. Permit large residential care facilities with objectivity and certainty in all residential zones, subject only to the same requirements of residential uses of similar form in the same zones.	New Sections 17.32.145, 17.32.147
7. Adopt reduced parking standards for affordable multifamily developments and multifamily projects with small units (single-room occupancy, studio, and 1-bedroom units) of no more than one parking stall per unit.	17.34.020
8. Permit low barrier navigations centers by right (without conditional use or other discretionary permit) in nonresidential zones permitting residential uses.	17.25.030
9. Reduce lot size requirements in the R-M, C, C-MU, and D-MU zones (no more than one acre in the C-MU zone and no more than 20,000 square feet in the C and D-MU zones) to remove constraints to multifamily housing development and promote affordability.	17.16.050; 17.18.060; 17.18.070; 17.19.060
10. Provide a ministerial process for approving reasonable accommodation requests, including objective findings for approval, limited to decision-making criteria regarding fundamental alteration of zoning and land use and financial and administrative burden. (New Program, consultant)	New Section 17.02 Article 4
Implementation Program Actions	
Within two years of adoption of the Housing Element	