

Subject: Defining Neighborhood Character—Independent of Housing Type
Attachments: Defining "Neighborhood Character"—Independent of Housing Type - 07-19-25 v2.pdf

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Subject: Defining "Neighborhood Character"—Independent of Housing Type

Mayor, Council and Planning (please forward):

You may have noticed that I haven't yet taken a position on the resolution. I am providing this additional communication on "Neighborhood Character".

It is in the attached, and provides what I consider good language to use when discussing these aspects in ways that doesn't make cultural attributions, and instead focuses on measurable traits of neighborhoods.

Hopefully, this makes a good contribution to the discussions for Council this Monday

Brian

Defining neighborhood “character” solely by housing *type*—i.e., “single-family homes only”—is circular and tautological. That kind of reasoning says, essentially, “the neighborhood is single-family because it is single-family,” and then concludes that any change violates its character. But this is not how urban planners, architects, or form-based code theorists rigorously define or evaluate neighborhood character.

So, what actually defines “neighborhood character”—independent of housing type?

In planning and urban design, neighborhood character is defined by *form, pattern, and experience*, not tenure or number of housing units per structure.

Some commonly accepted, **non-housing-type-based** attributes of neighborhood character include:

1. Built Form

- **Height** (e.g., 1–3 stories)
- **Mass and scale** of structures (e.g., buildings that are consistent in size or proportion)
- **Setbacks** (distance from the sidewalk)
- **Lot coverage** (how much of the lot is built upon)
- **Roof styles and architectural detailing**
- **Porches, stoops, and entries that face the street**

A triplex or fourplex built with the same setbacks, height, and roofline as neighboring houses maintains this form-based character.

2. Streetscape and Rhythm

- **Street trees, sidewalks, and lighting**
- **Driveway placement**
- **Spacing between buildings**
- **Orientation of buildings to the street**

Multiplex homes can maintain the same rhythm and frontage orientation—especially if off-street parking is handled behind the building or via alleys.

3. Land Use Compatibility

- **Quiet residential feel**
- **Predominantly residential land use**
- **Minimal traffic or commercial intrusions**
- **Shared public spaces like parks or greenways**

Adding a few more households to a block—especially via missing middle housing—doesn’t inherently change these attributes. Noise, traffic, and behavior are regulated through other means.

4. Social and Cultural Life

- Cohesion among neighbors
- Walkability and casual encounters
- Diverse age groups and household types
- Sense of community identity

*If anything, adding a broader mix of unit types can **enhance** this by allowing a wider range of people— young adults, seniors, families, singles—to live nearby.*

What *could* alter perceived character—and how to avoid it?

- Poorly designed buildings that are **out of scale** or **disrupt the visual rhythm**.
- Large **paved parking pads** or front-yard driveways.
- **Bulkiness** that overpowers smaller neighboring buildings.
- Lack of attention to **materials and architectural detailing**.

These are **design and form issues**—not unit count issues—and can be regulated through **form-based code** and site design standards.

Conclusion:

Neighborhood character is not defined by whether a building has 1, 2, 3, or 4 units. It's defined by how the buildings look, feel, and relate to the public realm. A fourplex that respects height, setbacks, architectural style, and streetscape continuity is **no more disruptive to neighborhood character** than a new single-family home that's built to the same envelope.

When someone claims that “adding duplexes or fourplexes destroys neighborhood character,” ask them:

"What about the physical or social experience of the neighborhood will change if the new building looks the same from the street?"

If the answer is “just the number of kitchens,” then it's not character that's being disrupted—it's exclusivity.