

Central Seattle absorbed more than half of the city's housing growth in the last decade

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1 of 2 | The Space Needle can be seen in the space between new apartments for rent in Seattle's South Lake Union neighborhood on Nov. 18. (Ellen M. Banner / The Seattle Times)

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The 2020 census didn't just count people. It also counted homes. So what does it tell us about the growth of housing units in Seattle, a city often considered to have a critical shortage of housing?

The 2020 census counted roughly 368,000 housing units in Seattle, up about 60,000 from 2010. That pencils out to a 19% increase over the course of the decade.

That's an impressive number. Among the 50 U.S. cities with the largest number of housing units in 2010, Seattle ranks third for the rate of growth in housing. Only Austin (26%) and Denver (21%) had a faster rate of increase.

Some major cities lost population in the last decade: Detroit, Cleveland, St. Louis, Baltimore and Memphis, Tennessee. All these cities saw their housing stock decrease.

Seattle's 19% growth in the housing stock was still a little smaller than the increase in population. The number of city residents grew by 21% in the 2010s, a gain of about 129,000 people. Seattle's population reached 737,000 in 2020.

A closer look at the census data shows Seattle's growth in housing units was far from evenly spread out across the city. In fact, one section of the city — Central Seattle — absorbed more than half of the 60,000-unit increase.

Central Seattle, which sits between the Lake Washington Ship Canal to the north and I-90 to the south, includes the fast-growing downtown neighborhoods, as well as Capitol Hill and the Central Area.

The number of housing units in Central Seattle increased by 32,300, or about 30%. That's more than 10 percentage points faster than the rate of growth in any of the city's other three quadrants.

This was by design rather than by chance. A greater share of Central Seattle is zoned to absorb high-density growth when compared with other sections of the city, which have more neighborhoods zoned primarily for single-family homes.

The 2020 census data doesn't distinguish housing units by type, but there's no question most of the housing units added in the central part of the city are multifamily dwellings.

With the huge increase in housing, Central Seattle just about caught up with North Seattle, which grew much more slowly in the last decade. Both areas had a total of roughly 141,000 housing units in 2020.

As you'd expect, Central Seattle also absorbed most of the population growth. This part of the city grew by almost 58,000 people, or an increase of 33%, the 2020 census shows. Central Seattle's population now stands at about 236,000.

The second-fastest growth in housing units in the 2010s was in South Seattle, which added 5,500 units — a 16% increase. That brings the total number of units to nearly 40,000. Much of the new development in South Seattle is along the Link Light Rail line, which runs through the Rainier Valley.

Interestingly, this is the only section of the city where the rate of growth in housing units exceeded that of population. South Seattle added about 12,000 people in the last decade for a growth rate of 14%. The total population is now just about 100,000.

North Seattle added 17,000 housing units in the past decade, bringing the total to 141,000. That equals a 14% rate of growth, which ranks third among the city's four sections. Several of the city's fastest-growing neighborhoods are in North Seattle, including Ballard, the University District and Wallingford.

North Seattle remains the most populous quadrant of Seattle, with 302,000 residents. Its population increased by almost 46,000, or 18%, which is second fastest after Central Seattle.

West Seattle added the fewest number of housing units (5,000) and had the slowest rate of growth of units (12%) of any section of Seattle. The total number of units hit almost 47,000 in 2020.

West Seattle grew a little faster in population than South Seattle, with a 15% increase in residents. And it does have one of the city's fastest growing neighborhoods — the Junction. Both West and South Seattle had about 100,000 inhabitants in 2020.

The 2020 census figures for housing units include both occupied and vacant units. A unit is considered vacant if no one is living in it on Census Day (April 1, 2020), unless the occupant is away temporarily (such as on a trip or in the hospital).

The census shows the number of vacant units dropped significantly in Seattle from about 25,000 in 2010 to less than 23,000 in 2020. In 2010, of course, the nation was

gripped by the Great Recession and a housing crisis that forced many homeowners into foreclosure.

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