

SEPA and GMA Integration and Flexible Tools for Project Level Review

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The State Environmental Policy Act (SEPA) includes several provisions giving local government flexibility to integrate project-level environmental reviews under SEPA with planning-level decisions for urban infill areas. These flexible tools are intended to assist cities and counties to meet planning objectives that focus on development proposals in existing urban areas while still providing the necessary environmental review under SEPA. These tools include:

- Minor new construction flexible exemption levels
- Planned actions
- Subarea planning for urban centers and transit oriented development
- Urban infill exemption levels

Minor New Construction Flexible Exemption Levels ([WAC 197-11-800\(1\)\(c\)](#))

The SEPA Rules specify minimum exempt levels for new construction projects such as residential and commercial development. Cities and counties have the option to increase the SEPA exemption levels for minor new construction projects up to the maximum specified in the SEPA Rules. The exemption levels and adoption processes were revised in 2012 and 2014. Higher exemption thresholds are allowed in urban areas (in fully planning GMA counties) if a city or county amends their SEPA procedures according to the requirements in [WAC 197-11-800\(1\)\(c\)](#). These exemptions do not apply to land-use decisions such as subdivisions – but there is a separate exemption for short plat subdivisions in [WAC 197-11-800\(6\)](#).

Planned Actions ([RCW 43.21C.440](#))

Cities and Counties planning under the Growth Management Act (GMA) may adopt “planned actions” that include SEPA review of future projects at the planning stage. Project-level permitting includes a “consistency” review to verify that the scope of the proposal and its impacts are covered by the development regulations in the planned action ordinance.

This involves the preparation of an environmental impact statement (EIS) on the planning area. It evaluates the impacts of the land-use changes as well as the anticipated future projects. The city/county can adopt a planned action ordinance using the information in the EIS specify the types of projects that will be allowed in the planning area. When a project application is submitted that is consistent with the planned action ordinance and for which its impacts were adequately evaluated in the EIS, no additional SEPA threshold determination, mitigation measures or SEPA appeal is required.

In 2017, the Legislature modified the criteria in [RCW 43.21C.440\(1\)\(b\)\(ii\)](#) to allow planned actions without using an environmental impact statement (EIS) in limited circumstances. A city or county may adopt a residential/mixed use planned action within half a mile of a major transit stop using a SEPA review that includes a Determination of Nonsignificance (DNS) with appropriate analysis and mitigation.

For more information see the [SEPA Handbook](#) and SEPA Rule: WAC 197-11-[164](#), [168](#), and [172](#). Numerous examples and additional information is included at the Municipal Research and Services Center's (MRSC) webpage on [Planned Actions](#).

Subarea Planning for Urban Centers and Transit Oriented Development ([RCW 43.21C.420](#))

Cities can also conduct project-level SEPA review at the planning stage when developing subarea plans to encourage high-density, compact, in-fill development and redevelopment. The process may be used within designated urban centers, or within half a mile of major transit stops where density is at least 15 dwelling units per acre. The project-level impacts of planned future development must be evaluated in a subarea EIS. Subsequent development that is consistent with the subarea plan does not require additional SEPA review. The city may recover costs of preparing the EIS by adopting "late-comer" fees for subsequent development.

Additional information available at MRSC's page about [Transit Oriented Development](#).

Urban Infill Exemption Thresholds ([RCW 43.21C.229](#))

GMA cities and counties are authorized to raise the SEPA exemption thresholds for construction projects to accommodate infill development. This provision is intended to encourage residential or mixed use development in an urban growth area. It is limited to areas where the current density and intensity of use is roughly equal to or lower than called for in the goals and policies of the applicable comprehensive plan. The exemptions are limited to residential, mixed use, and non-retail commercial (up to 65,000 sq. ft.) development.

To adopt infill exemptions to the local SEPA procedures, the city/county must have prepared an EIS that considers the proposed use and density in the area proposed for the infill exemption. It does not exempt development that is inconsistent with the applicable comprehensive plan or would clearly exceed the density or intensity of use called for in the goals and policies of the applicable comprehensive plan.

Additional on information available at MRSC's page about [Infill Development](#).

For additional information on integrating SEPA and GMA processes, please see MRSC resources for [Streamlining SEPA and Local Permit Review Procedures](#).

For additional information on SEPA streamlining for housing development, see the [Growth Management Planning for Housing](#) website at the Washington State Department of Commerce.