

Preserving Student Housing Affordability in the City of Seattle: An Open Letter to City Leadership from the Associated Students of the University of Washington

Students of the University of Washington have faced new challenges with Seattle's recent rent hikes. Rising housing costs, in addition to soaring tuition and student debt levels, have had significant negative impacts on affordability at UWⁱ. Now, as the city prepares to rezone the U District, we, the Associated Students of the University of Washington, call upon the Council and Mayor Ed Murray to incorporate student voices into the city planning process and establish affordability for students as a primary concern.

Specifically, we ask that the City take three concrete steps:

- **Authorize the formation of a Student Housing Affordability Task Force to advise the Department of Planning and Development in the affordable housing needs of students.**
We ask that this group be charged specifically with looking into the regulatory policy surrounding the U District Urban Design Framework, and be authorized to present their recommendations to City Council and DPD officials.
- **Install a UW student representative on the Mayor's Housing Affordability Task Force**
- **Ensure a reasonable proportion of funding is set aside in development projects to develop student-eligible affordable housing.**

Without such measures in place, students will either be displaced or driven further into debt by the proposed rezoning. We believe that it is the joint responsibility of the city and our university to provide adequate and affordable housing for the 44,000 students of the University of Washingtonⁱⁱ.

Already, plummeting state support has made it harder for us to finance our education. With a 52% decline in public funding, tuition at UW has risen more than 75% in the past six years, placing an increased burden on ourselves and our familiesⁱⁱⁱ. Commensurately, average student debt at UW has risen 17%^{iv}, as have the average number of hours we must work to finance our education^v.

Therefore, it is of great concern to us when proposed plans to develop the University District threaten to further increase the cost burden for students already struggling to access the University^{vi}.

Some have argued UW should develop additional units of affordable housing priced for students. While we agree with this position and would like to see the University develop additional units, we must also note that neither now, nor at any time in our school's history, have there been sufficient units to house the entire student community^{vii}. The simple truth is that we are expected to live off-campus, and we must have affordable places to live.

Unfortunately, that truth is becoming rapidly unattainable. The average student earns just \$763 per month working part time at 20 hours per week^{viii}. That money must be allocated to food, books, housing, and tuition in the cases where financial aid does not cover costs. Yet, housing rates are increasing at a rate of more than 7% per quarter^{ix}, which places current pricing in the University District at or above \$1,000 per month/per student^x.

Consequently, even without the rezoning measure, students are forced to use student loans in order to afford housing near our University. At a time when student debt surpasses \$1 trillion dollars, we are deeply concerned about housing costs further contributing to student debt.

Unless we take action now, the affordability of our education will continue to decrease at an alarming rate, threatening our vibrant student community. We believe that by working in partnership with local community officials we can find a solution that preserves access and affordability for students, while fitting within the city's master plan.

We look forward to partnering with the City of Seattle on this issue, and eagerly await the Council's action on these three requests.

ⁱ Kutz, Michael; McNerny, Jeff; Badger, Hailey, et al. “Meet us in the Middle: Affordability for the Working Student.” Associated Students of the University of Washington, Seattle: May 14.

ⁱⁱ On average, public institutions of the UW’s size tend to house just 25% of students on campus. The rest are expected to live in outside housing, making City-University partnerships critical in maintaining college access.

ⁱⁱⁱ Office of Planning & Budgeting. “Twenty Year History of Tuition & Required Fees.” University of Washington, Seattle.

^{iv} Kutz, Michael; McNerny, Jeff; Badger, Hailey, et al. “Meet us in the Middle: Affordability for the Working Student.” Associated Students of the University of Washington, Seattle: May 14.

^v Ibid.

^{vi} “Draft Environmental Impact Statement.” Department of Planning & Development, City of Seattle: April 14.

^{vii} The UW’s master housing plan, authorized by the Board of Regents, projects the University will house 21% of students.

^{viii} Curtis, Kyle. “ASUW Wage Summary.” Associated Students of the University of Washington, Seattle: 1 Jul 14.

^{ix} Bhatt, Sanjay. “Seattle-area apartment rents climb to average \$1,284 a month.” Seattle Times, Seattle: 26 Jun 14. http://seattletimes.com/html/business/technology/2023936495_apartmentrentsurveyxml.html

^x Housing & Food Services. “Market Survey, Private Sector Recap.” University of Washington, Seattle: Sep 2013.