



TO: Elizabeth Pauli, City Manager
FROM: Melanie Harding, Chief Policy Analyst to the Mayor, City Manager's Office
COPY: City Council and City Clerk
SUBJECT: Resolution - Directing the Planning Commission to review Tacoma Municipal Code Section 13.06 as it relates to the regulation of Shipping Containers - June 8, 2021
DATE: June 1, 2021

SUMMARY AND PURPOSE:

A resolution directing the Planning Commission to review the prohibition of shipping containers for accessory building and/or storage uses as well as explore how the city could allow shipping containers to be adaptively reused for innovative housing solutions to address the housing shortage and affordability crisis in the City of Tacoma.

COUNCIL SPONSORS:

Mayor Victoria Woodards, Councilmember Chris Beale, and Councilmember Kristina Walker

BACKGROUND:

With the exception of temporary uses subject to the limitations and standards in Tacoma Municipal Code Section 13.06.080.P, Commercial shipping and/or storage containers (also known as cargo containers or intermodal freight containers) are currently prohibited to be used as an accessory building and/or for storage in the City of Tacoma in residential, commercial, and mixed-use zoning districts.

Unlike a number of other jurisdictions, this prohibition is outright and does not allow for exceptions when specified conditions are met (such as design standards, landscape buffers, sight-obscuring fences or walls, the container's location on the site, etc.) that either remove the containers from the sight of neighbors or passersby or ensure the containers are an aesthetically pleasing part of their surroundings.

Each year, thousands of shipping containers are left inactive and unutilized in America because the nation's imports exceed exports and the cost to return cargo containers to exporting countries can be high. In 2012 alone, US Department of Transportation statistics indicated there were more than 5 million 20-foot containers sitting dormant. Reprocessing or melting down a used shipping container to repurpose the steel requires at least 8,000 kWh of energy. If it can be done in a way that maintains the aesthetics of the surrounding neighborhood, reuse of used containers as building materials or as accessory buildings/storage uses in Tacoma could be a sustainable, energy efficient, and cost-effective way to repurpose them.

Overall, this resolution would direct the Planning Commission to review the outright prohibition of commercial shipping and/or storage containers as accessory buildings and/or for storage in the City of Tacoma and determine if there design standards, siting requirements, or other conditions which may make these uses appropriate in specified zoning districts. Additionally, within subsequent phases of Home in Tacoma, the Planning Commission would look separately at how the City could allow shipping containers to be adaptively reused for innovative housing solutions to address the housing shortage and housing affordability in the City of Tacoma.



COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT/ CUSTOMER RESEARCH:

This is a request for an initial review of these policies. Public comment and stakeholder input could be taken on any proposed changes.

2025 STRATEGIC PRIORITIES:

Equity and Accessibility: (Mandatory)

This is a request for initial review of these policies. Considerations of any policy change should include a review of impacts on racial and other inequities, disparities, or discrimination to under-represented communities.

Livability: Equity Index Score: Moderate Opportunity

Increase positive public perception of safety and overall quality of life.

How does your policy, program, or service help or harm the health of the natural environment?

Explain how your legislation will affect the selected indicator(s).

Reuse of the containers in an aesthetically acceptable way could provide a sustainable, affordable solution to accessory building, storage, and/or housing needs. While this request does not specify any policy outcome, the review will consider how limited exceptions to the shipping contain prohibition might impact public perception of overall quality of life.

ALTERNATIVES:

Alternative(s)	Positive Impact(s)	Negative Impact(s)
No change in policy	Planning Commission and staff time are directed toward other areas of interest.	Businesses and/or residents may be prohibited from pursuing environmentally-friendly, cost-effective solutions involving shipping containers even when there would be no aesthetic impact to the surrounding area.

EVALUATION AND FOLLOW UP:

If this resolution is approved, the Planning Commission will consider the review of the prohibition of storage containers for accessory buildings and/or storage needs as part of their annual work plan. The use of shipping containers as a potential innovative solution in housing affordability solutions would be considered as part of subsequent phases of the Home in Tacoma initiative.

STAFF/SPONSOR RECOMMENDATION:

The sponsors recommend approval of this resolution.



FISCAL IMPACT:

Fund Number & Name	COST OBJECT (CC/WBS/ORDER)	Cost Element	Total Amount
1. N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
2.			
TOTAL			

What Funding is being used to support the expense?

No additional expenses are anticipated.

Are the expenditures and revenues planned and budgeted in this biennium's current budget?

YES

This work is not anticipated to require additional costs, consultant services, or impacts to staff resources. The Planning Commission and the City Council Infrastructure, Planning, and Sustainability Committee will set priorities for existing staff resources by determining on how this review fits within the planning work program for the year ahead.

Are there financial costs or other impacts of not implementing the legislation?

YES

There may be costs to businesses or residents seeking the use of shipping containers as cost-effective solutions to accessory buildings, storage needs, and/or housing in a way that meets the aesthetic needs of the surrounding community.

Will the legislation have an ongoing/recurring fiscal impact?

NO

Will the legislation change the City's FTE/personnel counts?

NO

This work is not anticipated to require additional costs, consultant services, or impacts to staff resources. The Planning Commission and the City Council Infrastructure, Planning, and Sustainability Committee will set priorities for existing staff resources by determining on how this review fits within the planning work program for the year ahead.

ATTACHMENTS:

Resolution