

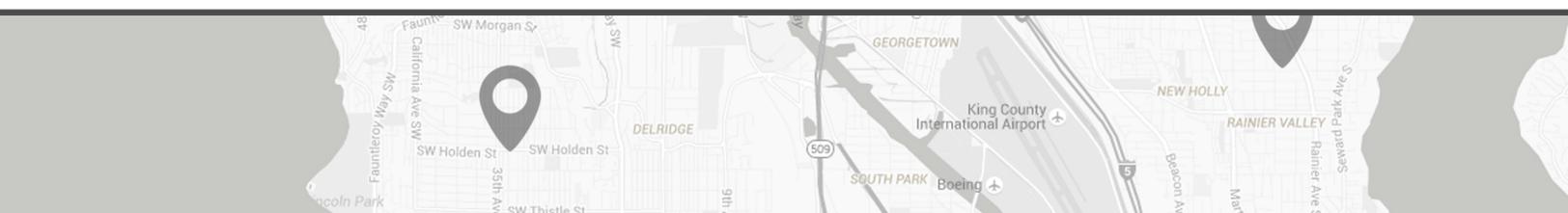
REGULATING SHORT TERM RENTALS POLICY BRIEF

OFFICE OF COUNCILMEMBER TIM BURGESS

 SEATTLE CITY COUNCIL

Please Direct Questions to Seferiana Day / Office of Councilmember Tim Burgess
seferiana.day@seattle.gov / 206-684-8806 / 600 4th Ave . 2nd Floor . Seattle, WA 98104

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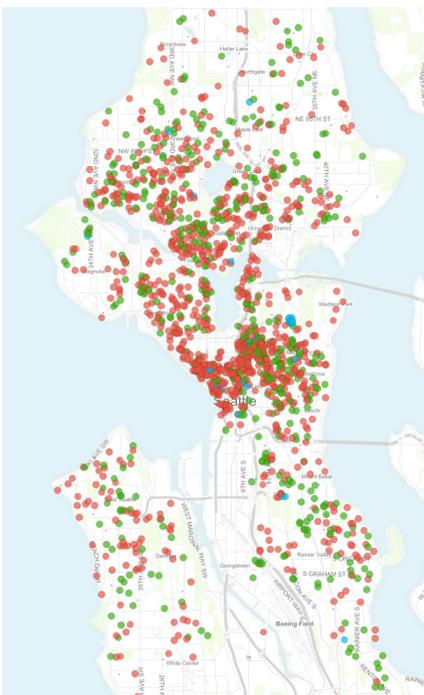
Introduction

For many years, short term home rentals have been a popular lodging choice for travelers in Europe and certain high volume tourist destinations in the United States. With the advent of technology-based online platforms that facilitate the marketing and booking of short term rentals, this market has rapidly expanded across the globe.

One need only look at the rise of two of the major companies in the short term rental industry to view the incredibly fast pace of growth. Airbnb received its first \$20,000 seed grant in 2009.¹ In December 2015, less than seven years later, the company confirmed a round of \$1.5 billion in venture capital funding, bringing its total valuation up to \$25.5 billion.² Its website now touts more than 2 million listings available in 34,000 cities across 191 countries.³

HomeAway, another vacation rental company that includes the website VRBO.com (Vacation Rentals by Owner), launched in 2006 and also grew rapidly; the company's website states its annual revenue increased 28.9% in 2014 over the prior year.⁴ Previously a publicly traded company on the NASDAQ exchange, Homeaway was acquired by Expedia in late 2015 for \$3.9 billion, a price nearly 20% higher than its market value at that point.⁵ It currently offers more than 1 million listings in 190 countries.⁶

No evidence suggests that the growth of this industry in Seattle is any different. While Seattle-specific data has not been made publicly available by major players in the short term rental marketplace, external websites scrub Airbnb listings data and aggregate the information for market analysis. These websites show recent rapid growth in the number of listings.⁷ Airbnb states on its website, "The number of guests using Airbnb has grown steadily since 2009, with visitation more than doubling every year."



*Estimated AirBnB rental reviews in Seattle in July 2013 (top) and July 2015 (bottom).
Data from insideairbnb.com*

“My landlord is a nice guy, he has kept the rent relatively reasonable for me and my partner, but he’s recently informed us we will need to leave in a few months because he wants to rent out the property on Airbnb.”

-K., Seattle resident

Benefits and Challenges of Short Term Rentals

Short term rentals bring numerous benefits to those who operate them, their visitors, and the surrounding neighborhood. Many individuals use short term rentals as a way to help afford their own home, either renting out a basement, a spare room, or the entire home when they are out of town themselves. **In a housing market that presents affordability challenges, there is no doubt short term rentals alleviate the housing burden for the many families that operate them.**

For visitors, short term rentals often offer a more affordable option. Short term rentals bring tourists, wedding parties, visiting family members and their collective spending power to neighborhoods across Seattle. Airbnb recently estimated the economic impact of its visitors in Seattle was \$178 million from August 2014 to July 2015, supporting 1,700 jobs.⁸

At the same time, the more commercial use of short term rental platforms has taken entire houses, condos and apartments off of the long term housing market. One external website estimates that roughly one-third of Airbnb’s listings in Seattle are from hosts with multiple listings. These could be multiple rooms in a house or completely separate units; hosts with multiple listings are more likely to be commercial operators not renting portions of their own primary residence.⁹ A recent report published by CBRE Hotels’ American Research found that 79 percent of Airbnb’s revenue in Seattle comes from entire home listings and the revenue generated by hosts with multiple entire-home listings increased by 183 percent between 2015 and 2016.¹⁰ **Commercial enterprises utilizing online rental platforms to market multiple units in multiple locations further exacerbate the housing crisis facing Seattle.**

Without regulation, this practice could continue to rapidly expand. As a



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recent Harvard Law and Policy Review article explains, “So long as a property owner or leaseholder can rent out a room on Airbnb for cheaper than the price of a hotel room, while earning a substantial premium over the residential market or rent-controlled rent, there is an overpowering incentive to list each unit in a building on Airbnb... In tight housing markets with near-zero vacancy rates, a sudden reduction in supply naturally increases rents, particularly because neither the market nor the public sector can swiftly add to the housing stock.”¹¹

The extent of Seattle’s housing crisis is well known. Lower income renters are being pushed further from the center city as prices rise; home buyers face an extreme lack of options and strong competition for every purchase offer.

In 2015, Mayor Murray’s Housing Affordability and Livability Agenda (HALA) taskforce put forward recommendations to achieve his goal of 50,000 new units of housing over the next 10 years, with 20,000 of these units designated as affordable. Short term rentals are not the leading cause of the severe shortage of housing (at all levels of affordability), but they have exacerbated an existing crisis. Any strategy the City can pursue to put more units into the long term market is worth examination.

One of the recommendations from the HALA taskforce focused on short term rentals. Specifically, the taskforce recommended that the City pursue collecting taxes on this activity and dedicating those tax dollars to affordable housing. Currently, the City lacks the taxing authority to implement this recommendation. The sales tax is collected by the State and the hotel-motel tax in Washington is revenue carved out from the State’s portion of the sales tax and remitted to local jurisdictions; state law dictates how this revenue can be spent. Facing this lack of options for new taxing authority, we have focused on regulatory actions that would align with the HALA goal of putting more units into the long term market.

“The only unit I have rented through a short term rental service, Airbnb, has been my primary residence, a single family home located in an SF 5000 zone. I utilize the service for times when I will be on vacation, and my rental days have never exceeded thirty days per year.”

- G., landlord and AirBnB host

Taxation and Regulatory Context in Seattle

Short term rental transactions currently operate outside of a solid regulatory framework in Seattle. Any person providing lodging services is required to collect and remit retail sales tax, meaning that anyone who offers their home or a portion of their home for short term rental should be paying this tax. Airbnb recently announced an agreement with the Washington State Department of Revenue to pay sales tax on behalf of its hosts, but it is unclear how many other owners pay the retail sales tax (9.6% in Seattle) on their units if they are not offering the units through Airbnb's website.

“Last year a [neighboring townhouse] unit was sold.... One neighbor found that the owner is now renting out all three bedrooms in the house and apparently runs it as an AirBnB.... When I mentioned this to a couple of friends living in other parts of the city two of them said they were aware of similar situations in their areas.”

-E., concerned neighbor

The Convention and Trade Center tax (15.6% when combined with sales tax) only applies to lodging businesses with 60 or more units. The sales tax is the only applicable tax to a short term rental transaction, because the basic hotel/motel tax in Washington State is collected as part of the state's portion of the sales tax and then remitted to local jurisdictions.

The vast majority of short term rental operators do not have business licenses, which are currently required . While most if not all short term rental operators would fall under the Business and Occupation Tax minimum threshold of \$100,000 in gross revenue, they are still required to get a license and report their revenue.

With the exception of Bed and Breakfasts, commercial lodging (hotels and motels) are not allowed in residential zones. In single family zones, bed and breakfasts are allowed with conditions

outlined in Seattle Municipal Code 23.44.051. They must have a business license, adhere to dispersion requirements, establish quiet hours, must be operated by the principal owner and the owner must live on site, must notify neighbors, have limited signage, and meet parking requirements. In multifamily zones, bed and breakfasts have similar but slightly less restrictive requirements (SMC 23.45.545G).

Regulatory Role for Government

While some elements of the current short term rental market are novel, including the technology and the flexibility it offers, many aspects of this market are simply business operations. The City has always played a regulatory role when it comes to business and determining what level of operations is appropriate in residential areas.

Any City government regulations should support one of these three goals:

- 1 Balance the economic opportunity created by short term rentals with the need to maintain supply of long-term rental housing stock available at a range of prices.
- 2 Ensure a level playing field for individuals and companies in the short term rental market.
- 3 Protect the rights and safety of owners, guests and neighbors of these units.

As explained in the Benefits and Challenges section, the first goal is the most pressing for Seattle City government. The primary elements of the regulatory scheme proposed below were built to address this issue. At the same time, the proposed regulations also either directly or indirectly support the second and third goals.

Primary goal
Providing economic opportunity while maintaining rental housing stock



Proposed Regulations for Seattle Short Term Rental Operators

With any regulation, one must start by defining the activity being regulated. In this case, we are defining short term rentals as any stays of 29 nights or fewer in duration. Stays longer than 29 nights in duration would not be subject to this proposal or be part of any cumulative short term rental stay calculations. We believe any stays of 30 nights or more fill a need in our housing market for households in transition. One benefit of the technology that facilitates the marketing and booking of short term rentals is that it expanded this niche in the housing market.

Requirements

Primary Residence

Short term rental operator resides on-site

Not Primary Residence

Short term rental operator resides off-site

Business License

Existing Requirement

Business License

Existing Requirement

Short Term Rental Operator's License

New Requirement

Short Term Rental Operator's License

New Requirement

Limited to 1 dwelling unit in addition to the operator's primary residence located in the City of Seattle

New Requirement

The basic proposed framework for short term rentals in Seattle would look like this:

You will be :

1. limited to renting your primary residence (including an in-law unit or backyard cottage associated with your primary residence) and a maximum of one additional dwelling unit and
2. required to register with the City and get a new Short Term Rental Operator license as well as a business license, an existing requirement. You will also be subject to a few more standards, including providing:
 - proof that the unit is your primary residence,
 - the license number on any short term rental listing,
 - a local contact number for guests, and
 - a signed declaration that the unit is up to code

This proposed limit on the number of units is designed to meet the goal of maintaining our long term housing supply.

This requirement will impact those who use these platforms commercially, not homeowners trying to make a little extra income on the side. The proposal would allow an exception to the proposed limits for operators of existing short-term rentals located in the Downtown, South Lake Union, and Uptown Urban Centers (areas where many of the City's lodging uses are located) while not allowing this commercial activity to expand.

We also propose leveling the regulatory playing field for traditional bed and breakfasts, which still operate under regulations from the pre-online short term rental era. By lessening some the regulatory burden they currently face, the City can bring traditional bed and breakfasts in line with the new regulations for short term rentals.



The affected operators will be those who use these platforms commercially, not homeowners trying to make a little extra income on the side.

A Summary of New Regulations Facing Operators

Regulations / requirements	Operator's primary residence	Operator resides off-site	Applicable policy goal
Title 5 Business License (existing requirement)	x	x	1 2
Pay all applicable taxes (existing requirement)	x	x	1 2
Prohibit evidence of STR use from exterior for except for signs as permitted by the sign code	x	x	3
Limit # of units to the primary residence and one additional dwelling unit		x	1
Provide proof that the dwelling unit offered for short term rental is their primary residence	x	NA	1
Provide a local contact to all guests	x	x	3
Require operators declare that the unit meets the requirements of the Housing and Building Maintenance Code	x	x	3
Require posting of basic safety information for guests within rental units	x	x	3

Proposed Regulations for Seattle Short Term Rental Platforms

After surveying practices in other jurisdictions, it became clear that receiving data from the online platform companies is vital to an effective enforcement structure. In order to facilitate the enforcement, the City will need to collect basic information from the Short Term Rental Platforms like VRBO or Airbnb. To do so, these companies will need to register for a new regulatory license with the City.

"I am a residential cleaner and have cleaned for several Airbnb renters and have thought for a very long time that this was severely adding to the housing problem in our city. I find it unfair how people could sit on empty apartments and rent them out for income while my friends, who are willing to pay a monthly rent, can't find an affordable apartment in the city."

–S., residential cleaner

The only requirements for the license will be

- a) to provide information about Seattle's regulations to operators using the platform
- b) to share basic data with the City on a quarterly basis, including the total number of short term rentals listed on the platform and the total number of nights each listing was rented through the short term rental platform and
- c) provide booking services only with operators who have been issued a short-term rental operator's license.

