

Zoning for Mixed Uses

There was a time when single-use zoning served a vital purpose. Before zoning, industrial and waste-generating land uses were a major nuisance for nearby residential and commercial areas, sometimes even threatening public health. But today, as our economy continues on a path of rapid deindustrialization, we are finding that a system developed early in the last century cannot meet the needs of our changing communities. Strict segregation of land uses continues to stand in the way of developing modern, mixed use neighborhoods and districts that foster both environmental sustainability and a sense of community.

Traditional Zoning and Overlay Districts. More and more communities are finding that their 10- to 20-year-old zoning ordinances are no longer responsive to current development trends. Traditional zoning codes can be an obstacle to elements that make cities vibrant and livable, such as higher density development and easy access to public transport. Also, older codes can lack flexibility in allowing developers to negotiate with the city for mutually beneficial projects. Some areas designate overlay districts or special zones to remedy problems caused by outdated zoning codes. If overused, this strategy can lead to confusion, as the community's zoning map becomes an impossible-to-read hodgepodge of numerous districts, special districts, and overlay districts, each with their accompanying pages of text, lists of uses, and differing design standards. In many cases, a better solution is creating a mixed use zoning ordinance that clearly defines the land regulation standards necessary for implementing the community vision.

Mixed Use Zoning. Mixed use zoning sets standards for the blending of residential, commercial, cultural, institutional, and where appropriate, industrial uses. Mixed use zoning is generally closely linked to increased density, which allows for more compact development. Higher densities increase land-use efficiency and housing variety while reducing energy consumption and transportation costs. The mixed use buildings that result can help strengthen or establish neighborhood character and encourage walking and bicycling.

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MIXED USE ZONING FOR SMART GROWTH

Smart growth seeks to encourage compact design, walkable neighborhoods, housing choice, and the creation of more transportation options through access to transit and greater connectivity between neighborhoods. To further the goals of smart growth, a growing number of communities are including provisions for mixed use development in their zoning ordinance.

Traditional Neighborhood Development and New Urbanism.

Traditional zoning ordinances can result in large-scale, single-use, large-lot residential developments. These subdivisions often require costly and redundant municipal infrastructure to function while furthering dependence on nonrenewable energy sources. Traditional neighborhood developments and new urbanism projects tend to sup-



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Mixed use development encourages compact development through increased density.

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port a wider range of uses and higher densities in new projects while encouraging travel to, from, and within neighborhoods by modes other than the automobile. Thanks in part to advocates for traditional neighborhood development, many developers are responding to a growing demand for neighborhoods that offer a range of housing types where services and goods are nearby and accessible to pedestrians.

Traffic Congestion. Mixed use zoning can reduce the peak-hour congestion paralyzing urban areas across the nation. It provides the tools necessary to develop areas where people have the opportunity to work, shop, and socialize near their homes. By increasing opportunities to combine trips, mixed uses can reduce the vehicle miles traveled by residents of a community.

Parking. Parking requirements for mixed use development can be flexible because spaces can be shared among the uses. For example, a bank with regular day-time hours has no need to provide parking during the evening hours. The bank's parking can be used by people coming home from work or by patrons of nearby cafes or entertainment facilities. Shared parking reduces the amount of surface area devoted to parking, resulting in cost savings for developers, environmental benefits in the form of less stormwater runoff, and aesthetic improvements to neighborhood's appearance.

Transit-Oriented Development. TOD establishes a "symbiotic relationship" between land uses in proximity to a transit station. For example, medical and institutional services, retail, and multifamily residential structures can all be integrated around major public transport nodes. Increasing residential density to levels that support public transit makes it possible to carry out day-to-day activities—such as shopping or visiting the doctor—without needing to travel outside of the neighborhood. TODs are not possible without mixed use zoning and a consideration of the appropriate residential density and land-use mix.



Integrating uses—residential, retail, and child care in this case—helps to create vibrant neighborhoods in which residents can accomplish several activities walking instead of driving.

REGULATORY TOOLS

Planned Unit Development. Traditional zoning and development codes tend to prohibit the densities and mix of uses found in traditional neighborhood developments. As a remedy, localities without mixed use zoning can turn to a Planned Unit Development (PUD) designation to incorporate retail and commercial uses within select residential subdivisions. A problem with PUDs is that developers often perceive the process as highly politicized, unpredictable, costly, and time consuming. Clearly worded ordinances that allow mixed uses can circumvent many of the complications arising from more arbitrary or location-specific PUD designations.

Revising the Zoning Ordinance. Many practitioners and scholars recognize that current codes need more flexibility to create places that are diverse, sustainable, and supportive of current trends in business and technology. Revising the zoning ordinance is likely to be politically unpopular in almost any city. Once property owners and developers understand the potential benefits of allowing mixed uses, much of the initial opposition may subside. Educating both developers and the community at large is a critical component for ensuring the successful adoption of mixed use zoning regulations.

Comprehensive Planning. The implementation of the comprehensive plan is dependent on the rules of the zoning ordinance. Linking a revised ordinance to the goals of the comprehensive plan gives municipal land-use controls the structure necessary to withstand legal challenge. This connection helps to guarantee that the goals identified in the comprehensive plan are linked to standards for implementing the community's vision. *Patrick C. Smith* ■

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