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Modernizing Suburban Office and Industrial Zoning

By Arista Strungys, AICP, and Christopher Jennette

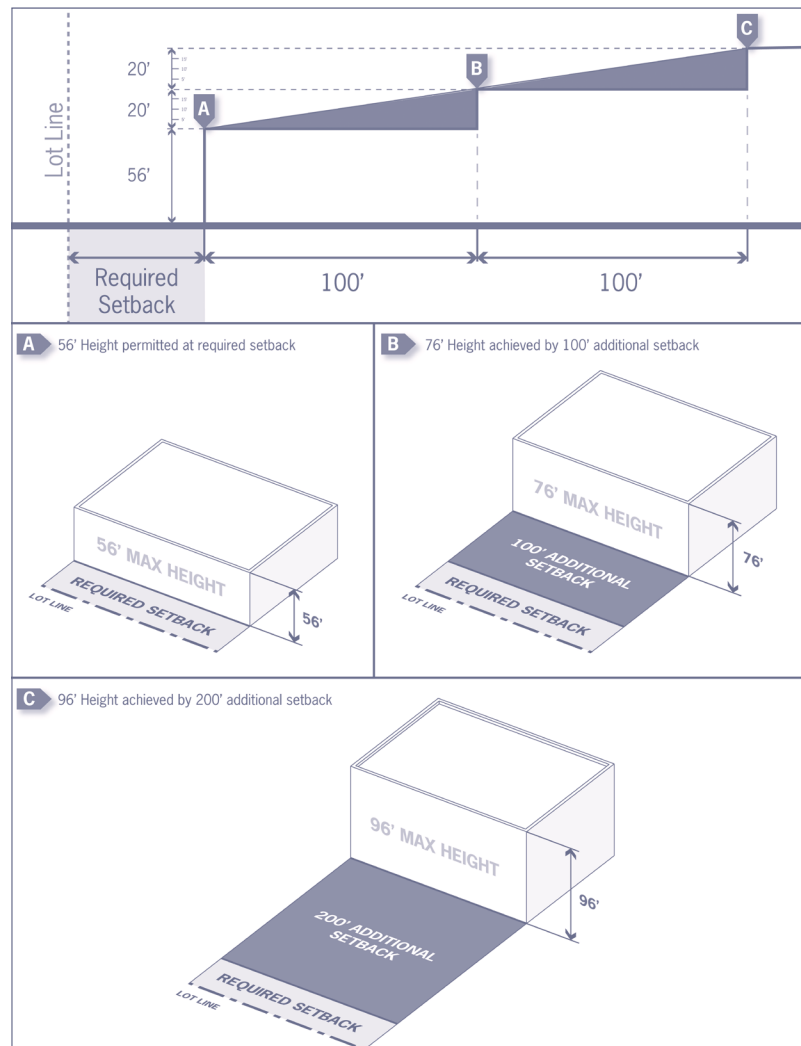
The ubiquitous suburban office park has fallen out of favor.

In many communities, the shift away from this type of single-purpose, auto-oriented development is becoming apparent through increases in vacancies and sharp declines in new office construction. In most cases, this shift is not primarily due to aging structures or poor marketing but is simply the result of changing market demands. Employees increasingly want to work in a mixed use environment that allows them to accomplish a number of daily tasks (or at least grab lunch without getting in a car). Similarly, employers want to occupy spaces that are flexible, sustainable, and adaptable to their daily needs and long-term goals, and developers want to build projects that appeal to a wider pool of potential tenants.

➡ In this example of a sliding scale for building height, each additional 100 feet of setback will yield 20 feet in additional building height, up to the district maximum.

Providing flexibility and adaptability, and appealing to a wider pool of tenants, requires consideration of both the use and form of these developments. Many older zoning ordinances unintentionally stand in the way of providing developers, employers, and workers the types of modern spaces that they desire. This is often true for both office and industrial districts, where use permissions and standards that only allow for low-rise, single-purpose development forms may be inhibiting a community's economic competitiveness.

The typical low-rise, large-floor-plate pattern of suburban office development often prescribed by older ordinances does not suit the needs of modern office users, who increasingly demand more open space, less building coverage, and greater flexibility in building height. Obsolete zoning creates similar difficulties for industrial users, who also need flexibility for things like increased building heights to accommodate modern manufacturing techniques and processes. Furthermore, ordinances may in-



All graphics by Camiros, Ltd.

clude parking, landscaping, signage, and other site-development standards that can significantly increase development costs or prohibit reuse or redevelopment within office and industrial districts.

This article seeks to explain how obsolete suburban office and industrial zoning regulations may be preventing new development or adaptive reuse that would be desirable to office and industrial firms and the wider community alike. It provides guidance to help communities

evaluate their current regulations, and it introduces concepts and regulatory approaches that can set the direction for substantive code revisions to foster economic competitiveness. The following sections explore three main types of regulations: dimensional and design standards, use permissions, and site-development standards.

DIMENSIONAL AND DESIGN STANDARDS

Many older codes contain dimensional and design standards that hinder modern

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About the Authors

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Christopher Jennette is an urban designer, landscape designer, planner, and LEED Green Associate with Camiros. His experience includes land-use planning, urban design, master planning, zoning, transit-oriented development, and landscape design work at a variety of scales. Jennette is committed to thoughtful, responsive planning and design that positively impacts people’s daily lives and acts as a transformative force for communities.

development techniques. These can include setback requirements that are difficult to apply or are not sensitive to the surrounding development, height limits that are too restrictive, site-development standards that are poorly aligned with real-life demand, inadequate signage permissions for larger structures, and excessive landscape requirements. Updates to the district dimensional and design regulations that address these types of issues allow for more flexibility in development types and remove current restrictions that may unintentionally limit sustainable development techniques.

Simplify Setbacks

Office and industrial parcels are often large and irregularly shaped. Simplifying setbacks so they can be easily applied eliminates the need for interpretations and variations. One approach that works well to both simplify setback standards and take into consideration abutting residential areas is to replace typical zoning code front, side, and rear setback requirements with setbacks from public rights-of-way, setbacks from residential districts, and setbacks from non-residential districts. This approach emphasizes the context of the setback location and avoids potentially ambiguous definitions of front, rear, corner, and interior lot lines.

A number of benefits emerge with this type of standard. If existing front and corner side setbacks are different dimensions, simplifying to a single-street setback requirement eliminates the need to interpret which setback that abuts a street will serve as a front or corner side setback. Further, specifying setbacks from residential and nonresidential districts ensures

the proper buffers are in place when abutting residential districts and more flexibility is allowed when abutting nonresidential districts. For instance, zoning could allow for a lesser setback between two adjacent nonresidential properties, facilitating cross-access easements or shared parking agreements.

Increase Height

Height can be a controversial regulation in some communities, as residents may be accustomed to the profile of existing structures and are concerned that any increase in height will impact their quality of life. However, there are ways to increase height while maintaining sensitivity to adjacent areas of residential and lower-intensity commercial uses.

Modern office development has evolved away from large footprint, low-rise structures toward significantly taller structures with reduced building footprints and smaller amounts of impervious surface and overall lot coverage. This is largely due to the desire of developers to maximize flexibility and marketability of interior spaces, while minimizing impacts on the surrounding environment. This is also relevant for industrial development, where even single-story industrial buildings may reach heights akin to a four- or five-story structure.

Consider increasing height allowances in office districts to 75 to 100 feet. Setting heights in terms of feet, rather than stories, gives the developer maximum flexibility in determining floor-to-floor heights, which can vary based on the anticipated use of the structure. Certain uses, such as research and development and medical uses, require greater floor-to-floor heights

to house necessary mechanical and ventilation equipment, while other types of uses may seek to minimize floor-to-floor heights in an effort to reduce material consumption and improve energy efficiency.

In cases where an office district abuts a residential neighborhood, consider adopting a base height allowance, such as 35 to 45 feet, with additional standards that authorize increased height in specific circumstances. Here are some potential examples.

If a parcel is sloped and the buildable area along the right-of-way is at a lower elevation than the buildable area along a property line abutting a residential use, the neighboring residents will perceive building height differently based on where the building is sited. In such cases, consider allowing a taller height by-right for buildings constructed on lower ground.

For large sites, consider establishing a sliding-scale height standard, allowing for increased heights when the size of required setbacks are increased based on distance from abutting residential districts. For example, if an additional foot of building height is allowed for each additional five feet of setback beyond the required minimum, an additional 100 feet of setback will yield 20 feet in additional building height. Such a sliding scale encourages tall buildings to locate further from residential areas, reducing the potential for conflicts.

Allowances for increased heights can be scaled to building footprint so that taller buildings are “thinner” than low-rise, large footprint ones. For example, consider limiting any structure over a certain height, perhaps any structure over 35 to 45 feet, to a 25,000-square-foot



- ➞ Building identification walls signs can become local landmarks and often serve as a point of pride for tenants.

building footprint. This limitation is intended to prevent development of a series of wide, monolithic structures that could create a wall effect. To further require light, air, and view corridors between structures, consider including a minimum building separation standard, such as 75 to 100 feet between structures, depending on the existing lot sizes.

The benefits of increased height are two-fold. First, it encourages new development and redevelopment of existing office structures. Second, it conserves natural resources and enhances stormwater management and green infrastructure opportunities by reducing the amount of impervious surface on the site.

Include Design Standards

For new developments, especially where the profile of the structures is more visible with increased height, consider including objective design standards. The goal of these standards should be to encourage unified, cohesive, high-quality design within each office or industrial park development. To this end, design standards should address building form and the relationship of buildings to each other (without requiring architectural uniformity), the siting of and access to plazas and other gathering areas within more campus-like developments, connectivity between buildings, and the location of parking and other site elements to minimize potential negative effects on adjacent residential developments.

Standards that enhance the appearance of stand-alone industrial buildings should also be

included, although these should only include basic elements of form such as building-material restrictions and facade articulation, since these structures tend to require certain types of design based on function or use.

If commercial uses are allowed in office or industrial park developments, consider including design standards for ground-floor shops and restaurants that address facade transparency, outdoor seating placement, and similar aspects. If the intent of the district is to establish a campus-like environment, consider including standards that require unifying architectural details to provide a visual cue or link and standards that require developers to orient buildings around plazas, courtyards, gardens, pathways, or other common open spaces. These standards may also encourage connectivity between buildings, as well as adjacent uses, by requiring that sites provide continuous bike paths, side-walks, and pedestrian linkages to any adjacent development. Depending on the nature and location of the development, these connectivity standards should be tailored to linkages to adjacent nonresidential development and, in some cases, adjacent residential neighborhoods where it is anticipated that residents may access the development by walking or biking for employment purposes or to patronize commercial uses that may be part of the development. Importantly, these standards should not be overly prescriptive but should instead simply describe the required elements to create quality building and site design while retaining as much design flexibility as possible.

USE PERMISSIONS

Often older office and industrial districts permit only office or industrial uses, respectively, but many contemporary developers desire a greater range of permitted uses. Consequently, it is important to reevaluate the intent of these districts and adjust use permissions accordingly.

Office Districts

Office structures and office parks have evolved over time to include more than just office uses. Consider permitting commercial uses such as convenience retail, restaurants, health clubs, day care, and personal service facilities as ancillary uses within office complexes. These uses serve employees who may not want to travel off-site to eat lunch, purchase necessities, or accomplish daily errands, and when offices are closed, many of these uses remain open and available to area residents, who find their nearby location convenient.

Consider permitting hotels and other forms of guest accommodations within office parks. Hotels are important within an office use mix, as they can create a symbiotic, mutually beneficial relationship. Not only do they provide a convenient lodging option for business travelers who may want to stay as close as possible to the office, they also serve to enhance the choice of accommodation for all visitors to the community.

As important as these ancillary uses within an office district are, however, a careful balance must be struck so that the nonoffice uses do not come to dominate the development or district. To achieve this balance, consider including use conditions to ensure that such ancillary uses are allowed only when secondary to office developments and are oriented to primarily serve district employees.

Industrial Districts

Unlike office districts, industrial land is typically not compatible with most nonindustrial uses, though certain supportive commercial uses, such as restaurants, union halls, and convenience retail are generally acceptable, provided they remain small in scale and targeted to serve industrial workers within the district. Consider making these special uses and including conditions such as limits on gross floor area to maintain district compatibility.

In some communities, however, industrial areas have already become popular hotspots for ancillary development and are slowly converting into areas that are more mixed use in nature. In such cases, it may be beneficial

to create a new industrial mixed use district. An industrial mixed use district can target those areas where uses have become mixed to the point that industrial firms are no longer dominant. This zoning district would allow for continued light industrial and research and development uses but would also allow indoor sports facilities, pet care establishments, artisan industrial spaces, artists' studios, and a variety of other nonindustrial uses to create a mixed use environment. This type of district can also facilitate the reuse of older industrial buildings for nonindustrial uses. By rezoning those areas that were formerly exclusive to industrial uses only but which, over time, have seen a variety of nonindustrial uses locate within them, the community is able to acknowledge the emergence of a district with a distinct mixed use nature and therefore tailor the use mix to allow a wider range of uses. Tailoring the use mix this way also eliminates the need for special use approvals, which is a key factor in encouraging economic development. This also allows the community to reserve remaining industrial areas for industrial use only, preventing further encroachment of potentially incompatible uses.

SITE DEVELOPMENT STANDARDS

Parking, landscaping, and signage are key elements of site development. Updating the standards for these elements to better address development realities can reduce nonconformities and minimize requests for variances and special approvals. For each element, there are a number of items that should be taken into consideration to create reasonable regulations.

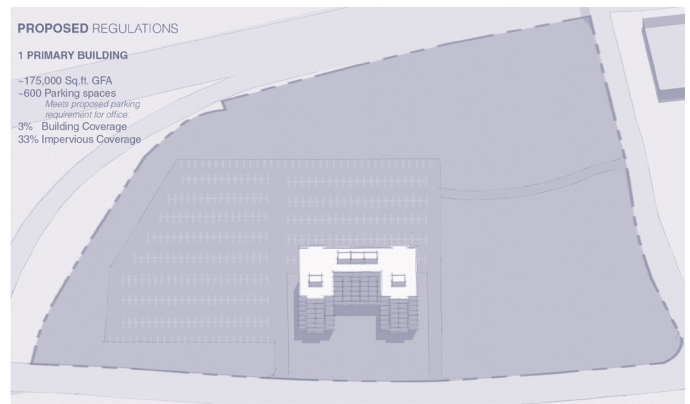
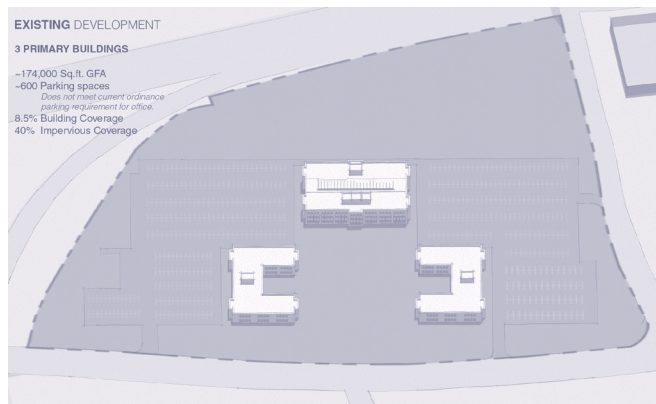
Parking

Off-street parking requirements often play a critical role in determining the potential size of structures on a given site. If the current parking ratios for nonresidential uses are too high, a number of negative impacts can result. Existing sites may not have the space necessary to accommodate the additional parking required for expansion. New construction may be constrained to the point of making development infeasible, and developers may be forced to pave excessive amounts of land. Consequently, it is important to align parking ratios with local demand and development realities.

Many zoning codes default to a cumulative parking requirement (i.e., the amount of parking required for each use on a site is summed).

This approach may prohibit the mixing of uses due to insufficient space on the lot and may require excessive amounts of paving. If select commercial uses are allowed within office and industrial districts, consider adding shared parking provisions for multiple uses on a lot. These provisions should be tailored to how the site functions with multiple uses (i.e., when patrons and employees are parking on site). Shared parking provisions typically include a formula that calculates the number of required spaces for a given use mix based on how peak parking demand varies for different uses by time of day and day of the week.

Finally, it is important to consider how alternate modes of transportation, such as biking and public transit, affect parking needs. If public transit or a private shuttle serves the district, consider adding a formula that reduces the required amount of parking based on the level of service available at a given site. In bike-friendly communities, or those looking to become more bike friendly, it may make sense to require bicycle parking. These requirements should specify how many short-term and long-term bicycle spaces are needed and should include design and siting requirements for such facilities. And



➡ Build-out comparisons such as these can easily demonstrate the difference between development forms possible under existing and proposed district standards, and bridge the mental gap between written regulations and physical results.

EXISTING DEVELOPMENT

3 PRIMARY BUILDINGS

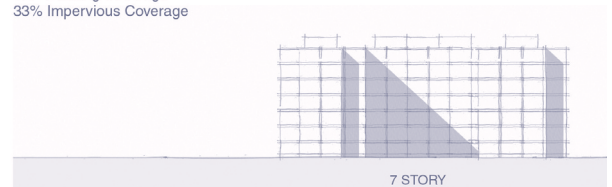
- ~174,000 Sq.ft. GFA
- 8.5% Building Coverage
- 40% Impervious Coverage

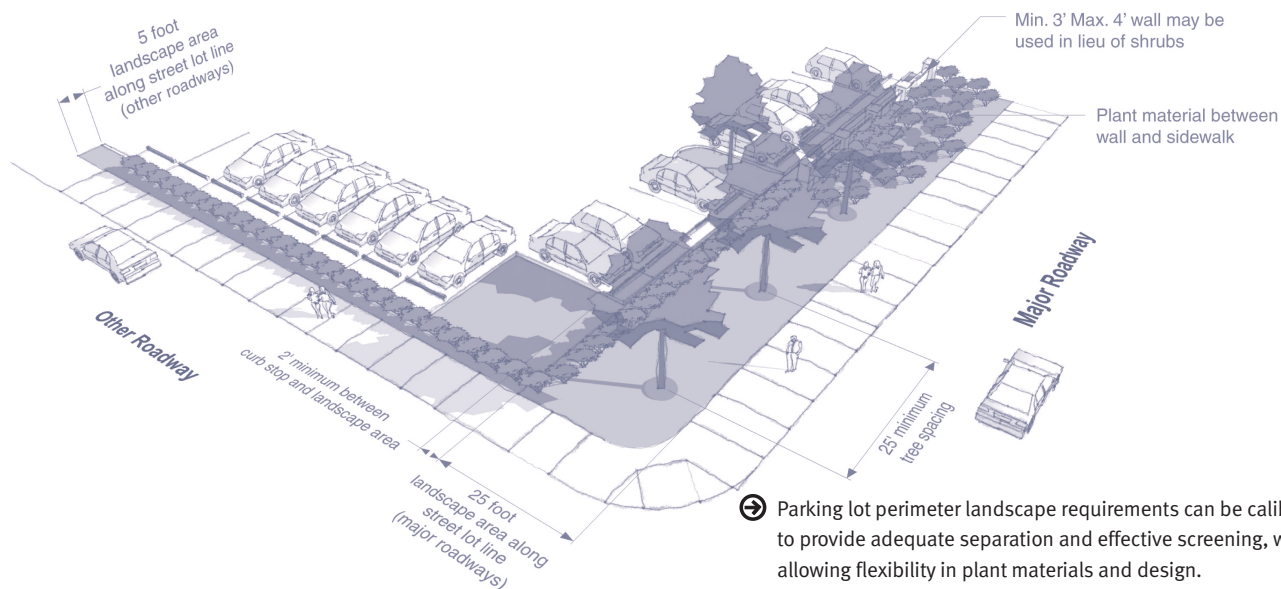


PROPOSED REGULATIONS

1 PRIMARY BUILDING

- ~175,000 Sq.ft. GFA
- 3% Building Coverage
- 33% Impervious Coverage





in areas where bicycling is popular, communities may consider offering a vehicular parking reduction for the provision of bicycle parking.

Landscaping

Landscaping greatly improves the visual quality of the built environment. In addition to its aesthetic impact, well-designed green space can provide myriad environmental benefits. However, more landscaping is not always better. Excessive planting requirements can significantly increase development and maintenance costs. In some cases, parking lot planting requirements can create difficulties in designing a conforming lot, and too many plantings along street frontages can reduce visibility of businesses that are set back from the street. Though landscaping is desirable, it must be designed to ensure that once trees planted between buildings and the street have reached maturity, they do not block the view of existing businesses.

In office and industrial districts, landscaping standards are needed for building setbacks, parking lot perimeters and interiors, and buffer areas. But care must be taken to ensure that these standards allow enough flexibility to maintain the visibility of the site, avoid conflicts with general operations, and prevent the creation of nonconformities. Consider building flexibility into landscaping requirements by allowing a variety of plant materials and design approaches to fulfill screening, buffering, and aesthetic goals. Native or naturalized species should be encouraged, and special attention should be paid to seasonal characteristics and heights at maturity. This will ensure effective

buffering and a pleasant appearance throughout the year, while reducing maintenance costs associated with replacement or excessive watering or trimming of plant material.

Signage

Restrictive sign regulations can deter businesses searching for potential future locations. Examples of excessive restrictions include sign area and number limits that treat all uses the same, regardless of lot or building size. Sites and structures within office and industrial districts tend to be larger, and a small sign on a large facade can look as out of place as a large sign on a small facade. A proportional approach to maximum sign areas, one based on the size of the structures, regulates the maximum sign area in a more refined manner that “fits” the structure and is more equitable to all businesses on a multitenant site. Similarly, sites within these districts also tend to have multiple entries; limitations on amount of signs, such as one ground sign per lot, can create circulation and wayfinding issues. Therefore, consider tying allowances for the number of signs on a lot to the size of the lot and the number of entryways (both site entrances from the right-of-way and building entrances from the site).

Additionally, consider adding allowances for roof and wall signs in office and industrial areas. Building identification wall signs, in particular, have become desirable for new office and industrial construction. These are wall signs that identify the tenant of a building in a manner that is easily visible from greater distances. Consequently, they often become landmarks

within districts or communities and can serve as a point of pride for tenants, marking their presence within the community. Consider permitting wall signs on taller structures, such as those 45 feet or taller, with standards addressing location (e.g., within the top 20 feet of the structure), maximum sign area, and mounting.

BUILDING SUPPORT

The public may be resistant to changes to the zoning code that, in some cases, may encourage great departures from a building form they are familiar with. Therefore, it is important to build support throughout the process, especially where residents may be in close proximity to the affected areas and afraid of the repercussions to their properties and neighborhood character. Graphic illustrations of build-out scenarios and additional supporting studies are two ways to accomplish this.

Build-Out Scenarios

Relatively simple visual aids can clearly and quickly convey complex regulations. This applies to both the process of building support and the final set of regulations. Creating illustrations such as build-out models can help the public, developers, and elected officials easily understand the physical implications of revised district regulations. These illustrations demonstrate the difference between development forms possible under existing and proposed district standards and can often bridge the mental gap between written regulations and physical results. Illustrating potential redevelopment forms by using sites and structures familiar within the

community is particularly effective, as it allows an audience to relate spatially with the material and to better grasp the scale and nature of any potential changes.

Supporting Studies

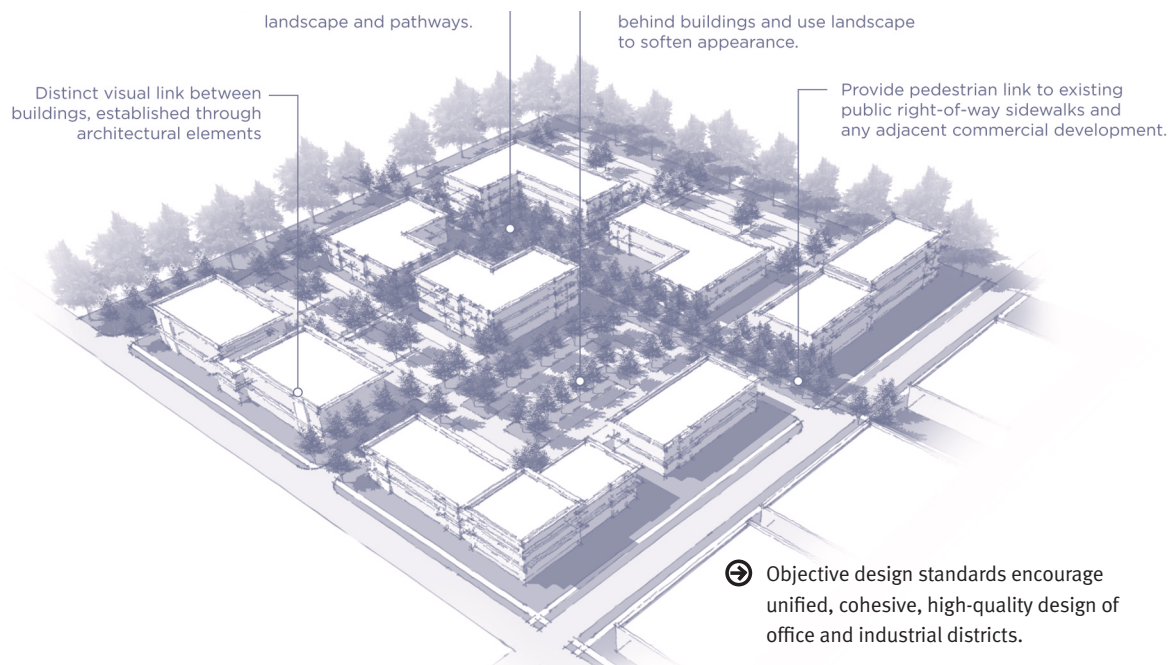
Additional supporting studies can help illustrate why the revisions are important. A prime example is an economic development analysis that shows how, once economic factors are considered, the current regulations are one of the main impediments to new development. Most communities compete for employers and employees within a larger region that may provide a wide range of choices in terms of jurisdictions in which to locate. Revising the land-use policies and zoning regulations can play a key role in supporting existing economic advantages.

Potential advantages include public transportation access, existing successful companies with employment growth, land area available for development or redevelopment (especially if such land is unavailable in surrounding markets), a favorable tax structure, and a favorable tax burden. Showing that these economic advantages can be bolstered by the proper development regulations can help the public to understand why revisions are necessary.

CONCLUSIONS

Low-rise, purpose-built complexes are often the predominant office and industrial building form in many communities. These complexes, however, may find themselves on the cusp of obsolescence—not because of their age or the quality of their development, but rather due to changing

market demands. Older zoning ordinances often only allow a low-rise, single-purpose development form, which may present a serious obstacle to modernization and place communities at a competitive disadvantage. Modernizing office and industrial zoning regulations to increase height, allow more diverse uses, and minimize the need for variances and special approvals can foster positive economic development outcomes. Importantly, modernization can be accomplished while maintaining sensitivity to, and often enhancing relationships with, the larger community. Efforts focused on modernizing and improving the relationship of these forms of development to the communities they serve can often increase economic opportunities, benefiting the community as a whole.



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IS YOUR COMMUNITY ZONING
FOR THE RIGHT TYPE OF OFFICE
AND INDUSTRIAL SPACE?

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