

ZONING PRACTICE

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Modernizing Outdoor Lighting Regulations



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Modernizing Outdoor Lighting Regulations

By **K. A. McBride**, CFLC

Any code update, no matter how small the section, can be a significant investment of time and effort on the part of local staff, consultants, and community stakeholders. Updates to zoning codes are even more difficult to take on when it's a topic unfamiliar to many planners, like how best to regulate outdoor lighting.

Ideally, recommendations for outdoor lighting best practices should address much more than pole heights and luminaire (or light fixture) styles, but most national lighting standards are written for and by lighting professionals. Quality outdoor lighting is both an art and a science, and the science of what light levels are safe for a bustling city, a quiet town, and the environment at the same time is often unintuitive. So, where's the best place for a planner to start? And why is it an effort worth taking on?

This issue of *Zoning Practice* explores how lighting zoning and other regulatory strategies can help planners and local officials modernize their outdoor lighting regulations. It begins by summarizing common problems with existing exterior

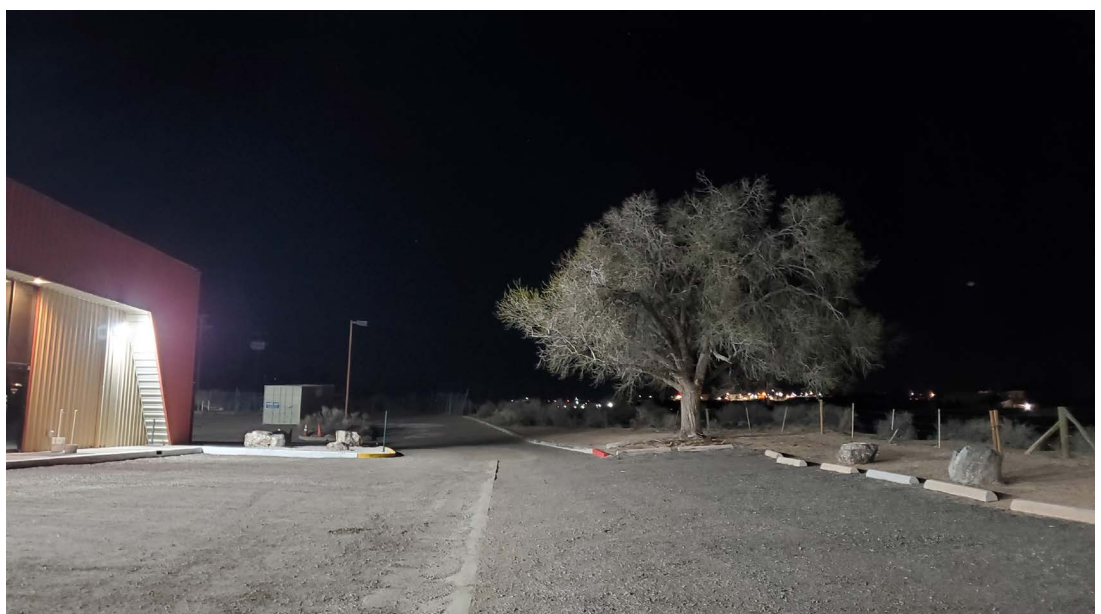
lighting regulations before examining the concept of lighting zoning, providing implementation guidance, and highlighting alternative approaches to meeting outdoor lighting objectives.

Problems With the Lighting Status Quo

Outdoor lighting technology has gone through many changes over the last 20 years. Light emitting diode (LED) light sources have gone from a risky unknown to an established technology. However, existing lighting ordinances have struggled to adapt to all the changes involved in converting to LEDs from traditional light sources.

Many ordinances in cities across the country still have language to regulate their lighting by wattages, when LED light sources need to be regulated by lumen output. Many also lack the language to manage where different correlated color temperatures (CCTs) are appropriate in their communities. While nuisance lighting is a common complaint from residents,

A business in Albuquerque, New Mexico, that closed for the night hours ago continues to cast light on surrounding properties and sensitive ecosystems (Credit: Photo courtesy of Clanton & Associates)



lighting regulations often omit how to measure a property for compliance using a modern light meter.

National lighting standards are mainly developed through collaboration between the Illuminating Engineering Society (IES), the American National Standards Institute (ANSI), and DarkSky International (previously the International Dark Sky Association). These standards account for the latest research into public safety, visibility, and the environmental impact of artificial lighting at night (ALAN) by developing acceptable light levels and other performance ranges. Exceeding the light levels in these standards only increases energy consumption and costs for a community.

However, planners and local officials have seemed reluctant to update outdoor lighting standards without an insistent voice in the community forcing the issue. I've personally heard that outdoor lighting seems like an issue best addressed by the city engineer, that planners were intimidated by the different measurement systems for lighting, or that they worried about necessary changes to plan review processes to enforce new lighting

standards.

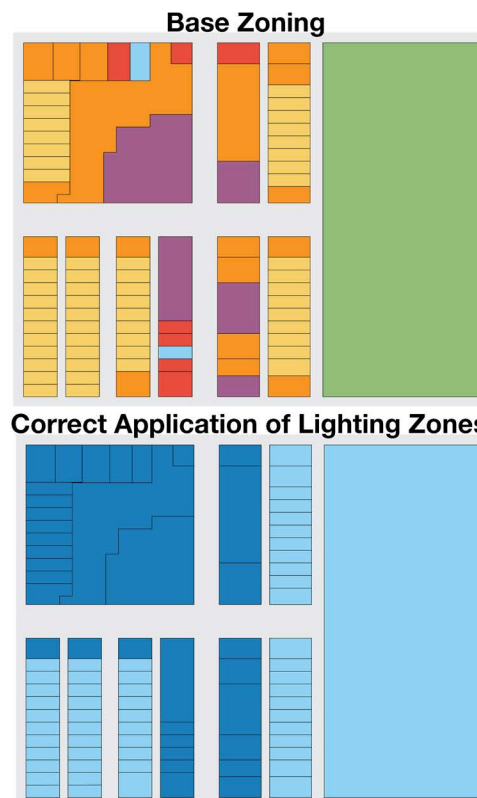
But taking no action on lighting regulations can reduce the overall impact of other planning efforts, such as sustainability plans, complete streets programs, active transportation plans, or efforts in cities to improve their nighttime economy. When lighting is not included in those documents or elsewhere, the whole picture of what is needed for success remains incomplete.

There is no reason planners should feel incapable of taking on the challenge of new lighting regulations. Like any other planning effort for a highly specific topic, it may require some expert assistance from a consultant. Ultimately, it is the same process as any other code update. And one of the most powerful regulatory tools for modernizing outdoor lighting regulations should be very familiar. It's zoning.

The Lighting Zoning Concept

Lighting zoning can be thought of as a type of overlay zoning or as an additional, location-dependent regulation added to a parcel's land use zoning. Lighting zones identify the broad areas in a jurisdiction

Incorrect and correct applications of lighting zoning
(Credit: Graphics produced by K.A. McBride)



Incorrect Application of Lighting Zones



- Lighting Zone 0 (LZ0)
- Lighting Zone 1 (LZ1)
- Lighting Zone 2 (LZ2)
- Lighting Zone 3 (LZ3)

where a particular level of ambient lighting or a particular range of light levels is both expected by residents and appropriate for the area's use at nighttime. This could mean a low light level for a predominately low-density residential area or a brighter light level throughout a downtown area with businesses open late. The goal is to create a consistent lighting experience in someone's field of view. If a busy mixed-use corridor has multiple base zoning designations, it is not a problem for lighting zoning. Everyone occupying that corridor at night needs the same light level.

History

Lighting zoning may be new in American planning spaces, but it is not a new concept. It gradually moved across the Atlantic from Europe's International Commission on Illumination (CIE), where it was referred to as *environmental zones*.

If a busy mixed-use corridor has multiple base zoning designations, it is not a problem for lighting zoning.

Dr. Ian Lewin, a lighting engineer who emigrated from Great Britain to the United States in the 1960s, had been advocating for its adoption by the IES and DarkSky for some time. DarkSky's technical committee was interested in finding a way to adapt the system for use in the U.S. to move beyond regulating only "obnoxious" use of light at night and toward regulating actual quantities of light, says Nancy Clanton, a long-time member of the committee.

Finally, an opportunity came in the 1990s, when California began preparing for an update to its statewide energy code ([Title 24 Part 6](#)). State officials hired Heschong-Mahome Group (HMG) to investigate energy use by state buildings to develop a baseline of energy consumption. Lisa Heschong suggested they also look into the energy consumption of outdoor lighting in the state and then hired Clanton, founder of Clanton & Associates, to develop the baseline measurements of

California's outdoor lighting.

The consultant team eventually suggested lighting zoning to offer the state a familiar and accessible regulatory tool with which to begin to better regulate their lighting. California adopted the new Title 24 statewide in 2003, using the census tract data of the time to assign the lighting zones, but while lighting zoning now existed for the whole state, it wasn't being promoted or enforced. Most cities simply didn't know about it.

In 2011, the IES and DarkSky incorporated the lighting zoning concept into their [Model Lighting Ordinance \(MLO\)](#), a model outdoor lighting code for local jurisdictions. It was intended as an accessible way to regulate outdoor lighting, broad enough for economic development but strict enough to satisfy environmental advocates. Unfortunately, many planners have found the MLO intimidating and difficult to use.

Key Features

Lighting zoning currently functions as a system of five zones, which account for the outdoor lighting environments found in America and around the world:

- LZ0—No ambient lighting: Typically, natural areas outside of cities such as national parks
- LZ1—Low ambient lighting: Typically, lower-density residential, urban parks, some mixed-use or traditional development styles
- LZ2—Moderate ambient lighting: Town centers or dense residential as a component of mixed-use development
- LZ3—Moderately high ambient lighting: Downtowns or busy commercial areas
- LZ4—High ambient lighting: Extremely urbanized areas with 24/7 activity like Times Square or the Vegas strip

The first iteration of lighting zoning omitted LZ0. That zone was developed over the last five years through discussion with the National Park Service about their facility lighting needs. The formal descriptions for these zones as used by the lighting profession can be found in the MLO and [ANSI/IES RP-43-22](#), or on [DarkSky's website](#).

There are a few features that make lighting zoning unique when compared to land use zoning. The current or desired nighttime activity level in an area takes precedence over any architectural characteristic of a location. Lighting zoning should also not be applied in a parcel-by-parcel way. If one parcel in an area is of a higher intensity commercial use, that property would still need to conform to the ambient light level it is surrounded by to stay unobtrusive. According to Rick Utting, a main contributor to RP-43-22, lighting zoning should generally not be applied to an area smaller than five acres, and the minimum lighting zone necessary for public safety should always be used to protect the environment and the night sky. Unlike with land use zoning, most cities could successfully manage their outdoor lighting with only two or three lighting zones.

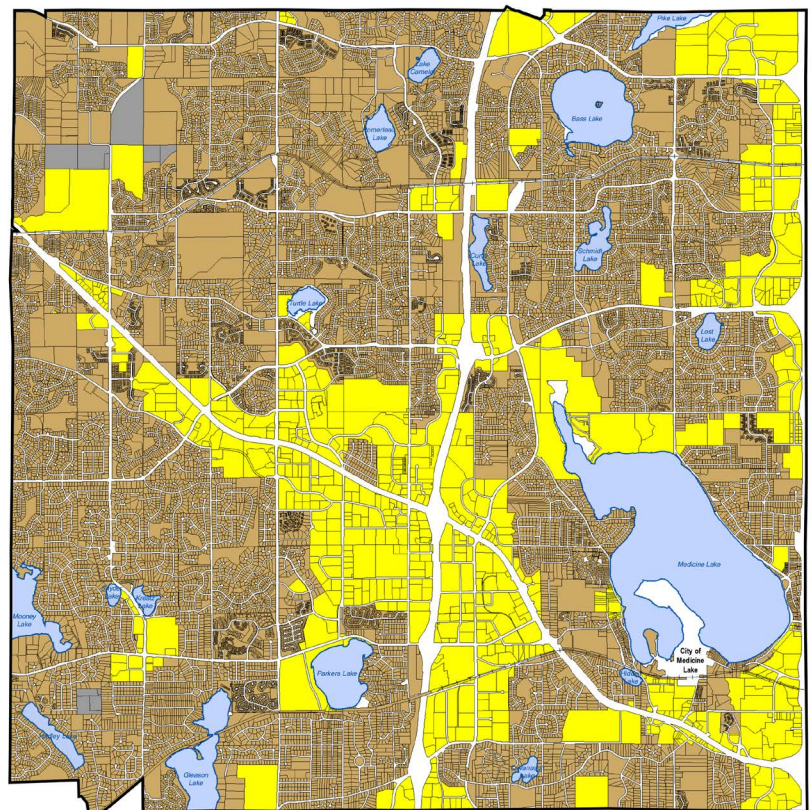
Another unique element of lighting zoning is that buffer conditions or transitions between zones are built in. Rather than needing specific requirements for when dissimilar zones are adjacent, lighting zoning typically functions more like a heat map. For example, an LZ1 can be alongside an LZ0 or LZ2 but not alongside an LZ3 in any significant amount. This adjacency restriction allows the human eye to adapt to the different ambient light levels in the different zones comfortably over time. Moving from a LZ3 to a LZ0 while driving through an intersection or walking across a local street would be an abrupt change in light level and uncomfortable for anyone out at night.

While this is the typical way to apply lighting zoning, it is not required and, in some cases, is unnecessary. Smaller communities using only one or two lighting zones will have no transitional issues to manage. Those with a more limited number of land use zones may find simply assigning a lighting zone to their land use zones a workable solution. For cities with more complicated zoning and more mixed-use areas, it is beneficial to take the time to plan out these lighting zone transitions instead. If there are known sensitive ecological regions that require LZ0 or a busy event center that will need LZ3, those conditions will determine which parcels around them need to be LZ1 or LZ2.

Lighting Zoning in Plymouth, Minnesota

The first city in the U.S. to adopt the new lighting zoning being developed for the eventual MLO was Plymouth, Minnesota ([§21105.06](#)). Located to the west of Minneapolis, Plymouth is a suburban community that was looking to better manage nuisance lighting and preserve access to the night sky as it grew.

In 2000, the city had expanded its performance standards for outdoor lighting, but the new standards did not work as intended. Light levels remained high, and the new language was not allowing the city to regulate the nuisance issues it'd been hoping to address. Developers and residents were confused about expectations, and city staff was unsure which parts of the regulations were causing the



Legend

Light Zone

- LZ-0; No Ambient Lighting
- LZ-1; Low Ambient Lighting
- LZ-2; Moderate Ambient Lighting
- LZ-3; Moderately High Ambient Lighting

Lighting zones in Plymouth, Minnesota (Credit: City of Plymouth)

most trouble. While the planning commission and city council were reluctant to take on another lighting effort so soon, a citizen with nuisance lighting impacting their residence repeatedly encouraged the city to look to the MLO for guidance, which at that time was still under development.

The planning director at the time, Barbara Thomson, and her staff were following the development of the MLO, but after its completion was delayed, the city brought in Nancy Clanton who was part of the effort to develop the document to help them directly. Outreach on lighting best practices was done with the city council and staff, and a lighting zoning system was chosen to help the city's regulatory problems.

The city started off in 2004 with a system of three lighting zones, using LZ1 for their more rural spaces, LZ2 for denser residential, and LZ3 only for industrial areas or spaces with nighttime activity like ball fields. Over time, local officials found most of their lighting plan applications were actually asking for *less* light than applicants were allowed. The community

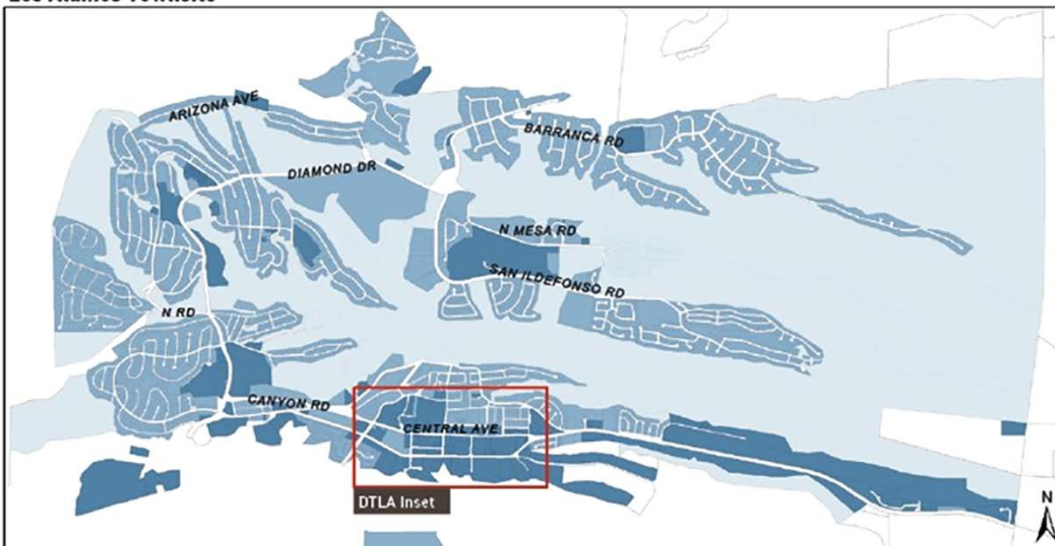
simply didn't need it. After a new land use plan was required by their region in 2009, this knowledge allowed the city to "step down" its entire lighting zoning system, converting LZ1 to LZ0, LZ2 to LZ1, and LZ3 to LZ2. This change was followed by an update in 2013 to adjust the lighting ordinance for LED light sources.

This regulatory system has been in use for almost 20 years. To this day, Plymouth is contacted by other planning departments curious about how and why they adopted lighting zoning. According to Thompson, the concept is "just not rocket science" at the end of the day, but it is hard to take on without a driving force in the community and without a guarantee that it's something the community wants to see. Ultimately developers, businesses, and residents just want to know what the expectations are in a clear and sensible way.

Lighting Zoning in Los Alamos County, New Mexico

Lighting zoning can be a powerful tool to manage the transitions between different

Los Alamos Townsite



Legend

- LZ0 Lighting Zone 0
- LZ1 Lighting Zone 1
- LZ2 Lighting Zone 2

Dekker
Architecture in Progress

Lighting zones in Los Alamos County, New Mexico (Credit: Map graphic produced by Dekker for Los Alamos County)

areas of local control, as was the case for Los Alamos County, New Mexico, which adopted lighting zoning as part of a new lighting ordinance in 2022.

The county was facing an ongoing, contentious situation between the lighting preferences of environmental activists looking to protect dark sky access and the local mountain ecosystem, residents of both the more urbanized Los Alamos Census Designated Place and the more rural White Rock Census Designated Place, and the Los Alamos National Laboratory. All had different opinions on how the lighting issues should be addressed, and all had different needs.

Given the number of distinct stakeholders involved, the fact that the county lacked regulatory authority over the lighting within the National Laboratory, and the amount of natural land between human occupied places, a simple update to outdoor lighting design standards for the county wasn't going to be effective. Los Alamos County doesn't own most of their street lighting, so managing that source of light wasn't an option.

The county had hired the planning firm Dekker Design (then DPS) to work on the

ordinance updates. When Will Gleason and Jessica Lawlis from Dekker Design started on the project, citizen scientists had already taken lighting measurements and drafted a lighting ordinance on their own. The planners immediately faced difficulties in knowing what lighting regulations were appropriate for this scenario. While the MLO contains information on many potential solutions, it does not provide guidance on when to use a particular strategy, let alone on how to navigate a contentious lighting situation. Unfortunately, there was little else in existing planning literature or specific case studies to draw upon.

Dekker Design brought in Clanton & Associates as experts in outdoor lighting to help build consensus in the community and explain the lighting strategies that may work. Lighting zoning was suggested in addition to the new outdoor lighting ordinance language as a way to better transition between the townsites, rural homes, and the National Laboratory. Using LZ0 protected the mountain ecosystem and night sky quality by containing the higher ambient light levels into the more occupied areas of the townsites. While the county lacked jurisdiction to enforce compliance on the Laboratory, surrounding the Laboratory with LZ0 lets them know the light levels appropriate for LZ1 is what they should be using for most of the facility.



The view from a wildlife path in California, showing how animals like mountain lions experience light trespass (Credit: Photo courtesy of Benjamin Banet with Longcore Lab)

Lighting Zoning Implementation

Deciding if pursuing lighting zoning is the right choice for your community can mainly be determined by answering two questions: What lighting do you need to regulate the most, and what changes will you be able to make to your existing land use code? Many current lighting ordinances still refer to *semi-cutoff* or *full-cutoff* fixtures, even though use of those terms was discontinued in the lighting profession in 2009. While lighting zoning is not land use zoning, it often works best as part of the process of updating an entire lighting ordinance rather than by making an addition to an existing lighting ordinance.

Confirm That Lighting Zoning Is a Good Fit

If most complaints are regarding street lighting, an ordinance update and lighting zoning won't address the problem. However, if problems with private lighting seem to be the most pressing issue, lighting zoning could be the right tool. Lighting zoning may offer significant advantages over other methods of regulating outdoor lighting in these use cases:

- Cities and towns that do not share boundaries with other municipalities and need to ensure their light levels are well managed around their borders as they transition into natural land or farmland where light levels must be low
- Cities and towns containing large, semi-independent campuses with control of their own outdoor lighting, such as university campuses
- Counties that contain multiple cities or towns of varying sizes alongside natural lands and need to manage the light levels for transitioning into and out of urbanized spaces.

Valuable project champions could be your mayor, a city councilor, a local congressperson, or the city engineer.

Confirm What Code(s) You Need Updated

There are two typical ways jurisdictions tend to organize their lighting regulations:

- As a specific lighting ordinance, with all outdoor lighting information contained in one section along with typical submittal requirements
- Or as a subsection located under each specific land use zone within the larger zoning code

Both of these structures are acceptable ways to manage the outdoor lighting policy language that supports lighting zoning. While DarkSky's template is for a

standalone ordinance section, it can be adapted when the information is needed per land use zone.

Once you have decided lighting zoning is something your community would benefit from, take stock of which code sections or ordinances will need to be updated to support it. Do you have an existing lighting ordinance? Is it out of date or incomplete? Is the information included per land use zone or as a standalone section?

Find Project Champions

Having a local champion to help advocate for the importance of this code update helps get these projects funded and later adopted. The importance of lighting policies is not always as obvious as policies on housing or transportation are to residents or local officials.

Valuable project champions could be your mayor, a city councilor, a local congressperson, or the city engineer. This individual is able to advocate for the new regulations for the duration of the project and to provide valuable updates to their organization as the new lighting zoning is developed.

If there is significant hostility from residents about being asked to make changes to their lighting without there also being vocal supporters, or a current city council member is deeply opposed, it may be better to wait for a more favorable political climate.

Identify the Potential Project Partners

It is unlikely your community has someone already on staff who is equipped to take on the role of lighting expert. Finding a partner or two outside of local staff to help guide the new regulations can be very valuable to the project and prevent expensive missteps.

For smaller communities, there may be experienced DarkSky members who can help with interpreting and seeking advice about the MLO. Planners working in larger cities with more complex lighting needs may benefit from partnering with a dedicated lighting professional.

In some regions there are planning firms who can work on lighting ordinances, especially as part of a larger code update. There are also specialized lighting

firms that can help advise on specific lighting content, even if they aren't able to also write the lighting code for you or produce a lighting zoning map.

Determine what type of help you'll need most and what resources are already in your community as early as possible. Often a local potential project partner will have approached the city before the project ever begins.

Engage Key Stakeholders and the Broader Community

Think broadly about who the stakeholders are for the project. How much effort and resources can your community put toward public outreach? Will an online survey reach the right people? Will it need to be offered on paper also, or in multiple languages? Which neighborhoods have been historically underserved in the planning process, and which currently have the greatest lighting concerns?

It is crucial to gather lighting preferences that may have not ever been discussed before but also to make clear from the start what lighting the project can regulate and which regulations residents can influence most. Residents can have a significant amount of influence on luminaire styles they prefer, the appearance of different shielding options, and the colors of light preferred in their neighborhood within an acceptable range.

Local business owners, neighborhood associations, and school districts can all offer valuable input on their needs. Internal stakeholders are typically staff from planning, public works, parks and recreation, and public safety departments. All these groups may have different top concerns for the lighting, and a group discussion early in the project can be invaluable.

Allocate Time for Review of Drafts

Plan for and budget both adequate time and resources for the drafting and review process. Lighting ordinance language doesn't need to be lengthy, but for most jurisdictions updating it and adding lighting zoning is a major change. Plan for several drafts, several rounds of internal review by multiple departments, and a public comment period on the final working draft of the document before it is considered complete. The community's feedback should be incorporated soon enough to genuinely steer the project. Substantial late-stage revisions to a draft can cause cost overruns, especially when working with a consultant who may see a complete draft as the end of the project.

If a consultant is taking the lead on drafting the ordinance and developing the lighting zoning map, local staff will need to review the language used for appropriateness for their community and to spot any potential implementation issues. If staff is



Kaiti Phelan with Clanton & Associates answers residents' lighting questions during a public open house in Santa Ana, California



The author demonstrating proper use of an illuminance meter (Credit: Photo courtesy of Clanton & Associates)

taking the lead drafting the materials with input from a lighting specialist, that specialist will need to regularly review the draft to make sure technical material hasn't been misunderstood and the new code will meet best practices.

It is not uncommon for a lighting consultant to take the lead on developing the new technical language for an ordinance update and for local planning staff to then develop the lighting zoning map to apply it across areas. Even on a lighting project, planners are still in the best position to accommodate neighborhood goals and their city's growth plans.

Revise and Present for Adoption

Comments should either be incorporated or the commentor provided with an explanation of why the comment is not being pursued per local comment response procedures. Lighting is a more technical topic, and its standards can only be customized so much. Providing responses that explain why a comment could not be considered may take more time for this type of update. Once the updates that were needed have been drafted, the actual lighting zoning

map can be produced. Whether the map itself will be shared for public comment or shared with an advisory committee should be determined at the start of the project. The map may be updated more frequently than the ordinance to reflect ongoing development in the community.

Planning staff should be comfortable with the material and confident that they have buy-in from local decision-makers before they present the new regulations for consideration and adoption. If staff is not confident in explaining the changes or handling tough technical questions, have a lighting consultant provide expert testimony on the project's behalf. Many will be willing to do so if they know it will be necessary in advance.

Train Code Enforcement Officers and Plan Reviewers

The work still isn't quite done. How will your community review lighting compliance for plan sets? Do your code enforcement staff know how to measure a site for lighting compliance? Do they have an acceptable illuminance meter with which to do it? These are important

questions for making sure your new lighting policy and zoning can be implemented.

How communities prefer to handle reviewing lighting plans varies. Private homes are rarely asked to provide an outdoor lighting plan but will still need a method to verify they're meeting the standards of their lighting zone. Sometimes someone on the planning staff has enough capacity and understanding of lighting to take the lead on that type of review. Sometimes a jurisdiction contracts with a local firm to review lighting plans specifically. There are some tabulation tools that can help generate a pass or fail calculation that any staff reviewer can successfully use. Any strategy that allows the jurisdiction to avoid subjectivity is acceptable.

Communities often have limited code enforcement staff who can work at night. Sometimes this individual (or an illuminance meter) is shared across multiple jurisdictions. Jurisdictions without an illuminance meter should plan to acquire one before any amortization period ends. For communities who do have a meter, staff should be trained on how to take measurements properly, and the meter itself needs to be properly maintained.

If enforcement of the lighting standards is going to be mainly complaints driven, local officials will need to plan for how those complaints will be responded to and how to prevent the system from being misused in subjective or targeted ways.

Manage the Amortization Period

Many types of code updates allow permanent exemptions for properties until a certain trigger event takes place such as a remodel or rezoning. For outdoor lighting, exemptions should be discouraged in favor of an amortization period, or the time available for all properties in the city to reach compliance with the new code. Some legacy light fixtures are toxic to the environment and to anyone doing maintenance on them. Poorly shielded lighting causes traffic safety and light pollution issues and cannot be left to remain indefinitely.

A typical amortization period for outdoor lighting is 10 years. This allows residents and business owners time to understand the new code and to get most

of the usable life of any lighting they've already purchased. When community buy-in on lighting goals is very strong, an amortization period of five years is plausible. An amortization period of 15 or even 20 years is still preferable to a blanket exemption.

There are still some tradeoffs with the usual 10-year period. With this strategy it takes longer to make any positive environmental impact through lighting changes, and any nuisance lighting remains an issue for longer. However, the decade reduces resident pushback against making lighting changes and allows more time for public education. For example, Dripping Springs, Texas, used a 10-year amortization and, at nine years, started notifying everyone still out of compliance ([§24.06.005](#)). This refreshed the issue in everyone's minds and prevented most surprises or arguments at the 10-year mark.

Don't let the term 'lighting zoning' become a barrier to its use.

Don't Get Hung Up on Terminology

Don't let the term *lighting zoning* become a barrier to its use. If referring to lighting zoning as overlay zoning or as a form of zoning at all is confusing to residents or is likely to become contentious when discussed with local decision-makers, calling it something else does not impact its efficacy. For example, Albuquerque, New Mexico, has pursued the term *lighting designations* to avoid confusion ([§5-8](#)). Fort Collins, Colorado, used the terminology *lighting context areas* ([§3.2.4](#)). The terminology is far less important than the concept.

This is especially important in 2025 as the original Model Lighting Ordinance was retired in fall of 2024. DarkSky has instead produced a new [Municipal Lighting Ordinance Template](#) that is suitable for many communities, especially smaller jurisdictions. DarkSky is also able to provide review assistance to ensure communities are on the right track.

Other Regulatory Strategies

If lighting zoning isn't the right fit for your community currently or an updated ordinance wouldn't address your biggest outdoor lighting issues, it's important to know there are other regulatory options planners can pursue.

For communities experiencing a significant amount of new development, updating the lighting section of your engineering design guidelines may address many issues with plan review, permitting delays, complaints of subjectivity, or outdated specifications that the development community would have difficulty using. This strategy requires buy-in and a good working relationship with the local staff engineer but can be very impactful for development and public safety.

For communities taking on revitalization efforts, whether citywide or for specific areas, consider incorporating lighting considerations into any urban design guide. Lighting choices can have a dramatic visual impact on shopping centers, mixed-use corridors, and historic neighborhoods. Luminaire styles, pole finishes, or even custom finials can all work

with a city's unique urban design goals without compromising on lighting best practices or requiring major alterations to national standards.

When a community owns its street lighting, especially if ownership of it has been newly acquired by the jurisdiction from a utility, it's important to get out ahead of any existing problems with the system. A street lighting master plan may be the right choice in this scenario to prioritize system upgrades, identify underserved areas, incorporate community feedback on color temperature and shielding options, and provide for public comfort and safety, while being feasible for the jurisdiction to maintain.

How to best regulate your lighting depends on your city's sustainability goals and who your community wants to be. If light pollution is the community's main concern, per Rick Utting who authored much of RP-43, about 40 percent of light pollution comes from residential lighting. Street lighting only contributes about 12 percent. Each strategy has its benefits, but only updating an ordinance allows lighting zoning to be developed and implemented.

Lighting Regulatory Strategies

Strategy	Outdoor Lighting Ordinance	Urban Design Guidelines	Engineering Design Guidelines	Street Lighting Master Plan
Applicability	Exterior lighting from homes & businesses	Public & private property	Public rights-of-way & property	Public rights-of-way & property
Purpose	Prevent nuisance lighting and can incorporate lighting zoning	Addresses aesthetic needs	Addresses issues with street & pedestrian lighting	Addresses issues with street & pedestrian lighting
Scope	Establishes permissible lighting fixtures and levels	Provides design & light level expectations	Detailed lighting performance specifications	Lighting standards by street type
Timeframe	May have amortization period	No implementation schedule	No Implementation schedule	Phased implementation schedule
Legal status	Legally enforceable	Serves as a negotiation tool during design or renovations	Enforceable during construction review process	Guidance for local staff and contractors

A beautiful and accessible green space in Boulder, Colorado, that complies with lighting best practices (Credit: Photo courtesy of Sam Koerbel via Clanton & Associates)



Conclusions

For too long outdoor lighting has been approached by the planning world as a uniquely technical and segmented issue. Some outdoor lighting can be connected to architectural regulations, some to public safety, and some to environmental concerns, when in reality it is all interconnected as a system. Planning for lighting is part of addressing every one of those issues and more.

As many communities work to diversify their housing supply or to increase urban infill projects, issues with outdoor lighting will increase unless we plan to address them. As the staffers most often tasked with reviewing plans for new development and approving redevelopment projects, planners have the knowledge of local development trends crucial to determining what level of lighting is going to be needed in the community in the coming years. Alongside public works staff, planners are the best positioned to advocate for new lighting regulations that meet local needs and current national best practices.

Lighting zoning may not ultimately be the best fit for your community, but it is a familiar tool available to planners. Your communities, the lighting profession, and

other planners will benefit from more conversation on the topic and use cases of this regulatory tool.

Taking on lighting zoning may be daunting with the small body of planning literature on its successes and the technical rigor of the topic, but planners should feel empowered to be proactive on this issue. There are tools available now and whenever those aren't enough, there are experts out there waiting to work together.

Acknowledgements: I would like to thank Rick Utting, Nancy Clanton, Lisa Heschong, and Barbara Thomson for their time and excellent conversations while I was drafting this article. I'd also like to thank Will Gleason and Jessica Lawlis with Dekker Design for discussing their experiences as a planning firm in deciding to seek out lighting expertise for their work in Los Alamos County and for sharing the lighting zoning map they produced with us. It's a privilege to be able to make new connections between the lighting and planning professions during a time of flux and reinvention for both industries.

About the Author



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