

Zoning Rewrite Fact Sheet

January 2017

How will the County's Land Use Zones Change?

About the Zoning Rewrite

The County's zoning code is 50 years old, over 1,000 pages long, and filled with obsolete and inconsistent provisions. The County needs a completely new zoning code to attract jobs and economic development and protect the quality of life in County neighborhoods. Under the direction of the County Council, the Planning Department is drafting a new, 21st Century code. Our competitors in the region are reforming their codes too, and we want ours to be the very best. This is one in a series of fact sheets discussing major issues the Council must consider to create a better code.

What this fact sheet covers

This fact sheet looks at zones, also known as zoning districts. All land in the County is placed in a zone, and that zone determines what can be built on the land, the allowed uses, the size of buildings, and the look and feel of development that is allowed. The current code has 74 different zones; the new code will have 43 zones. Some zones are changing very little and some are changing a lot. Some zones are being eliminated and several new zones are being created.

Rural and Agricultural Zones

The County has three Agricultural and Open Space Zones (R-O-S, O-S and R-A), and they will remain. These zones allow farming and homes on large lots (at least two acres) and in public preservation areas. These zones are not changing much; although, the definition of "farming" will expand. The zones will be renamed PL (Public Land), AL (Agriculture, Large Lot), and AR (Agriculture Residential).

Detached Single-Family Residential (SFR) Zones

The County has four Detached Single-Family Residential Zones (R-E, R-R, R-80, and R-55). They allow homes on smaller lots, ranging from 1 acre in the RE zone to one-fifth of an acre in the R-55 zone. The Single-Family Residential Zones are not changing. However, the R-80 zone will be renamed to SFR 4.6 because it allows a maximum of 4.6 homes per acre. The R-55 zone will be renamed SFR 6.7 since it allows up to 6.7 homes per acre.

The Townhouse Zone

Replacing the County's inconsistent approach to townhouses, the new code creates a new townhouse zone: SFR-A (Single-Family Residential Attached). Groupings of up to eight townhouses would be allowed, as would duplexes and triplexes.

Multifamily Residential (MFR) Zones

There will be three multifamily zones for apartments and condominiums with different levels of density: MFR-12, MFR-20, and MFR-48 (the number corresponds to the units allowed per acre). These zones incorporate nine existing multifamily zones, some of which are rarely used, and the R-T Zone. There is one important change; community-serving retail and services (for example, a grocery store) will now be permitted in multifamily zones, which makes these services more accessible to residents.

Commercial Zones

Here is where the big changes begin. Existing zones are being consolidated so that more uses can be allowed in the same zone. Offices, shopping, health care, and apartments will coexist. These zones have density and design standards to control the look and feel of commercial areas. The least dense zone is the NC (Neighborhood Commercial). The SC (Service Commercial) is denser and the GCO (General Commercial and Office) is the densest.

Employment and Industrial Zones

The Industrial/Employment (IE) zone combines the current light industrial and employment zones to allow for warehouses, research and development, and light manufacturing. The County's current I-2 zone for heavy manufacturing, and other truly industrial activities, is carried forward with little change and renamed HI (Heavy Industrial).

Transit-Oriented and Activity Center Zones

This is likely the biggest change in the new code. An entirely new set of zones is created to support mixed-use, pedestrian-friendly development around transit stations (e.g., Prince George's Plaza, Arlington, and Silver Spring) and in non-transit centers (e.g., National Harbor). These zones acknowledge that the County is no longer mostly suburban. Five new zones are being created, ranging from Neighborhood Activity Center (the least dense) to Regional Transit Center-High (the densest). They allow a very broad range of uses; however, development must be attractive, pedestrian-friendly, and amenity-rich.

Planned Development (PD) Zones

Planned Development zones provide alternatives to the Residential, Nonresidential, and Transit-Oriented/Activity Center base zones when increased flexibility in design and density is desired. This comes with the expectation that the development quality will surpass what is achievable in the comparable base zone. A planned development application must be approved through a rezoning and would be subject to a public review process.

Discontinued Zones

The nonresidential and activity center zones will replace mixed-use zones that have become very difficult to administer, these include the Transit District Overlay (T-D-O), Development District Overlay (D-D-O), and the mixed-use zones (M-X-T, M-U-TC, M-U-I). These zones, well-intentioned when first created, no longer represent best practices and have not achieved the County's development goals. Comprehensive Design zones (CDZs), which have been used to create planned developments on large tracts of greenfield, will be replaced with PD zones.