

# WHAT IS ZONING?

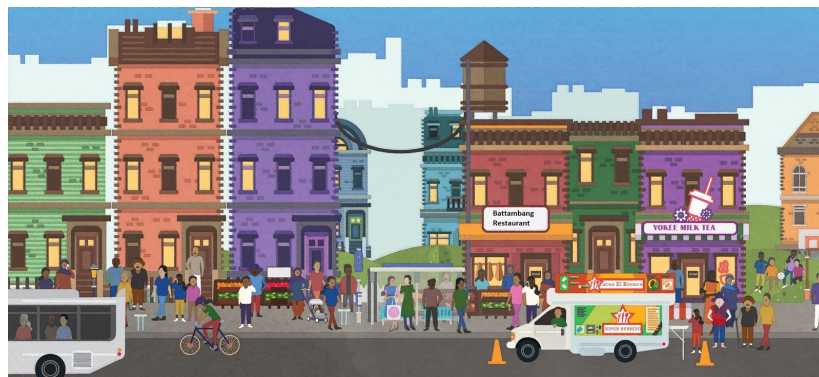
In the U.S., most major cities have zoning laws which regulate what can be built in a city. The only exception is the city of Houston, which has no zoning laws. When establishing laws to govern development in a city, the city divides neighborhoods into areas or “zones,” and sets specific rules around what can be built in each area.

Understanding zoning is critical if you want to organize around gentrification or influence development in your community, because so much of what gets developed in your neighborhood is shaped by zoning laws.

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Zoning exists to protect the health and safety of residents in a community, for example, to protect against overcrowding, to ensure that buildings are built up to safety standards, and to protect residents from being exposed to development which may be hazardous to their health.

Zoning has been used against communities of color more often than it has been used for the interests of our communities. (For further reading, [Zoned Out](#) by Tom Angotti, which discusses how zoning has segregated neighborhoods in New York City.) Still, if you can understand the zoning process, you will have a much more active role in influencing what gets planned in your community.



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### What does zoning regulate?

Zoning regulates two major things: land use, and the size and shape of buildings.

Land Use Zoning traditionally consists of 3 groups: commercial, residential, and manufacturing zones. Commercial zones include businesses, office spaces, retail, or restaurants. Residential zones include housing and “community facilities” that benefit residents. This includes schools, hospitals, or laundromats. Manufacturing zones are meant for industry, and include things like auto manufacturing, garment factories, or warehouses.

Zoning doesn’t usually allow residential or commercial development within manufacturing zones, but this has changed recently in places where there is a lot of demand for housing and the potential to turn a profit by developing luxury housing.

Zoning also regulates the size and shape of buildings. The main measurement for determining the density of a building is called Floor Area Ratio (FAR). FAR is measured by calculating the Total Floor Area and dividing it by the Lot Area. Zoning also regulates how tall a building can be, how much space there is between buildings, or how far it is set back from the street.

In addition to land use and density, cities often have “special zoning districts,” which exist to preserve a certain neighborhood’s characteristics or promote certain types of development in a community.



“Zones” are usually designated by the city as part of a city’s comprehensive plan. They designate both the “land use” and density allowed in a neighborhood. The size and impact of a building usually increases with a zone. For example, R1 could designate a residential zone with a FAR of 1 (a single family home), whereas a R10 could designate a residential zone with an FAR of 10 (a large high rise building).

Developers have to conform with existing zoning laws in the neighborhood. If they want an exception to the current rules, they can

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apply for something called a “variance.” A variance can be granted very easily if the local planning commission is controlled by development interests or if they believe a development project will be “good for the community.” Being vigilant about proposed developments will help you and other community members to engage in the process when developments will lead to gentrification or displacement.

### What is a rezoning?

A change to the zoning in a neighborhood is called a “rezoning.” It can also be called a “plan amendment” or a “zone change” or a “variance” depending upon the degree of the change and the process as defined by your city. A rezoning can be proposed by the community, the city, or a developer.

An upzoning is a zoning change, which increases the density of development in the neighborhood (increases the FAR, height limit). Upzoning is often a way for the city to promote development in a neighborhood. Some people believe upzoning a neighborhood is a way to create additional housing and bring down costs of rent for residents. But without adequate affordable housing measures, upzoning usually leads to rapid redevelopment and gentrification in a neighborhood.

A downzoning is the opposite of an upzoning. It regulates the size and density of buildings in a neighborhood and is designed to protect the existing buildings in a neighborhood. It can be a way to restrict development. But keeping the neighborhood affordable isn’t always an outcome. Downzoning can lead to gentrification in a neighborhood because it decreases the amount of housing in the neighborhood.

A rezoning can also change the land use that is allowed in a neighborhood. Currently, many neighborhoods have undergone rezonings that allow residential or commercial development in existing manufacturing zones. This is a way to bring more needed housing into a neighborhood, but it can also lead to a loss in manufacturing jobs for a community.

Without adequate laws requiring the development of affordable housing in your neighborhood, any of these zoning options could lead to displacement.

What zoning solution is best for your community really depends on your neighborhood’s own specific needs. #OurNeighborhoods advocates for zoning plans that are led by and for community residents, and have protections that prevent the displacement of residents, and promote the development of true affordable housing.

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For more information on zoning, we recommend the following resources:

- Center for Urban Pedagogy, [“What is Zoning?”](#) toolkit
- ACT LA, [Community Planning Toolkit](#)