



COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

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Memorandum on Zoning Code Rewrite Progress – October 7, 2025

As you are aware, the Community Development Department and consultants at Houseal Lavigne Associates have been working on a rewrite of the City's zoning ordinance since early 2024. This project follows directly from the update to the Waukesha Comprehensive Plan, which was completed in 2024. It is intended to make the zoning code consistent with the recommendations of the Comprehensive Plan's Land Use Policy Map, as required by State Law, and to incorporate many of the policy recommendations made throughout the Comprehensive Plan. It also responds to the City's Housing Study, which was completed originally in 2017 and updated in 2024.

The current zoning code was last updated in 2001 and carried over many elements from previous versions. It is a code that is well suited to the development patterns the City experienced in the 1970's, 1980's, and 1990's, when the City had opportunities for growth into the surrounding unincorporated farmland. Following the Great Lakes Water Compact, which prohibits the City from providing water service to areas beyond its current boundaries, City expansion beyond the current corporate limits has been curtailed. This has resulted in the current zoning code not being the most efficient tool for the way the City must now look for growth through new development and redevelopment within our corporate boundaries.

Since the code was last updated, Waukesha, along with many communities throughout the state and country, has undergone a demographic shift towards smaller households resulting in a need for more housing units. The surrounding town areas have incorporated into Villages and Cities, and the areas around the edges of the City have mostly developed, leaving very little open land for new single-family subdivisions. State Law has added strict limits on the City's revenue sources, in a way that incentivizes higher density development.

In other words, if the City is going to continue to grow, continue providing essential services to its residents, and continue to meet the housing needs, significant changes are needed. The update aims to provide more flexibility for development of new housing types, particularly in the Central City, most of which is non-conforming under the current code.

It is also intended to provide more predictability for developers, business owners, and residents. The current code involves many points of discretionary review, with vague or outdated standards, which make development unpredictable and add costs. It is also organized in a way which is not user friendly and has become more difficult to navigate as small changes have been made over the years.

The code rewrite process started in early 2024. Over the course of 2024, the consultants conducted a current code analysis and a community engagement process, which included a survey, stakeholder interviews, and an open house. At the beginning of this year, they presented a Recommendations Report to the Plan Commission, detailing their recommended changes. In May and June, they presented the first large drafts of new code sections, specifically District Standards and Use Standards.

At another joint Plan Commission and Council meeting at the end of October, the consultants will present Development, Landscaping, and Sign standards. The final sections of the code, Administrative Standards,

Procedures, and Development Standards, will be presented in December. And the fully rewritten code will be presented for final approval in late winter to early spring of 2026.

In the sections that have been presented so far, the most significant change is to the residential districts. The current code has nine residential zoning districts, ranging from large lot single family residential, to smaller single family, to two-family residential, to several multi-family districts. Within each type are detailed grades based on variations in density. The variations are confusing even to people who work closely with the code, and do not predictably create desirable neighborhoods. Newer zoning ordinances are typically more prescriptive related to design and form of development types, but less prescriptive when it comes to density.

The proposed update will reduce the nine residential districts to four, all of which are intended to reflect and promote the current neighborhood development patterns as they exist now, and to allow them to develop and grow moving forward. The four districts are RN-1, RN-2, RN-3, and RN-4, where RN stands for Residential Neighborhood.

RN-1 is a combination of the current Rs-1 and Rs-2 Single Family Residential Districts, both of which are mostly made up of large lot subdivisions on the west side of the City. They will continue to be single-family only, although Accessory Dwelling Units will be allowed, and will continue to have larger minimum lot sizes than other districts, although setback requirements will be relaxed somewhat to allow more flexibility for additions.

RN-2 combines most of the current Rs-3 Single Family zones with the Rd-1 and Rd-2 Two Family residential zones. Rs-3 is currently the largest zoning district in the City. It includes newer subdivisions like the River's Crossing, Fox Lake Village, and Skyline neighborhoods, as well as older post-war neighborhoods such as the Tenny-Roberta area surrounding South High School or the Pebble Valley area on the northwest side of the City. Duplex developments are mixed throughout the single-family areas.

RN-3 combines portions of the current Rs-3 zones with portions of the current Rm-1 and Rm-3 Multi-family Residential located in the older neighborhoods of the City radiating out from the downtown. This includes such residential areas as the Carroll University area extending to the south, the Buchner Park area extending north, and the Horeb Park area. These older neighborhoods typically consist of smaller lots, many of which are currently nonconforming, with a mix of housing types including single family, duplex and small multifamily units. The new RN-3 district will lower the minimum lot sizes in these areas, removing the nonconforming designation over many of these properties.

RN-4 combines portions of the current Rm-2 and Rm-3 multifamily residential districts adjacent to our downtown area along with other multifamily districts and duplex districts located adjacent to our main transportation corridors throughout the City. These neighborhoods contain some of the larger multifamily developments in the City along with larger residential Planned Unit Development areas with a mix of single family, duplex and/or multifamily residential units.

MIXED USE COMMERCIAL combines a mix of residential and commercial zoning districts, where the neighborhood has existed or transitioned into a fabric of residential units and commercial properties. While zoning would typically separate such uses, we recognize that these mixed-use areas have successfully evolved and play an important role in the fabric of our City. Examples of such neighborhoods include areas adjacent to the downtown extending out along travel corridors as well as pocket areas mostly found in the older neighborhoods, such as Grand Avenue near Frame and Harrison Avenues, or the areas near the Delafield Street and Summit Avenue areas.

We are not asking for the Council to take any formal action at this time, this information, along with the draft map of proposed residential districts is provided as a progress update, in anticipation of having the completed new Zoning Code document ready for action in the early part of 2026.