

# Metropolitan Planning Council

Building **Equity** in the Built Environment



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Printed August 2025

# ABOUT THIS ZINE

## What is zoning? How does it work here in Chicago? How has it shaped the city we live in today?

If you've ever wondered about these questions, this zine is for you. Designed as a resource to support Chicagoans who want to learn more about zoning, it is meant to help you understand and engage with zoning processes and policies in your neighborhood. This zine is not a definitive or official guide to zoning. Instead, it's a starting point—a toolkit to use, share, and discuss with others in your community.

### A shared vision



This zine is part of Metropolitan Planning Council's (MPC's) Zoning and Land Use Assessment and Recommendations initiative. To ground our work developing this zine, the members of the initiative's Community Advisory Group created a shared vision that describes the types of the communities and neighborhoods they aspire to live in and visit in our city. (For more on the group, [see page 50.](#))

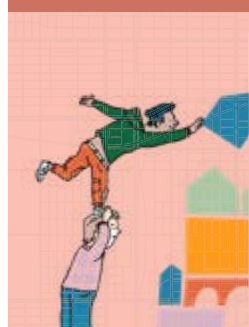


*We want to see access to nature in our neighborhoods—trees and plants, an open, public riverfront, parks, and healthy air. We want to walk down safe and accessible streets that are friendly for pedestrians, bicyclists, children, and people of all ages and abilities. We want the places we live and work to feel welcoming and active, with affordable housing options that prevent displacement, do not compete with sustainability needs, and neighborhoods of a sufficient density to avoid sprawl. We want consistent and reliable transit access, fresh food and clean water, cultural events, schools, and a variety of small businesses that serve the community. We aspire to have people of all ages spending time out and about, in clean spaces filled with uses that meet community needs. Finally, we envision a community that is resilient and adaptive to changing climate, social, and economic conditions.*

The zine's content, including stories, examples, and images, was developed with this statement in mind.

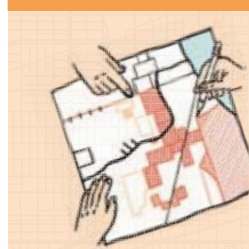
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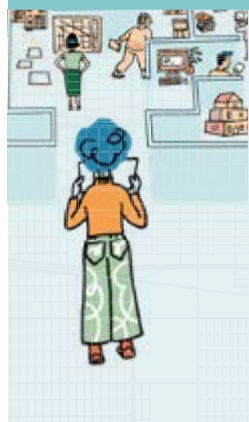
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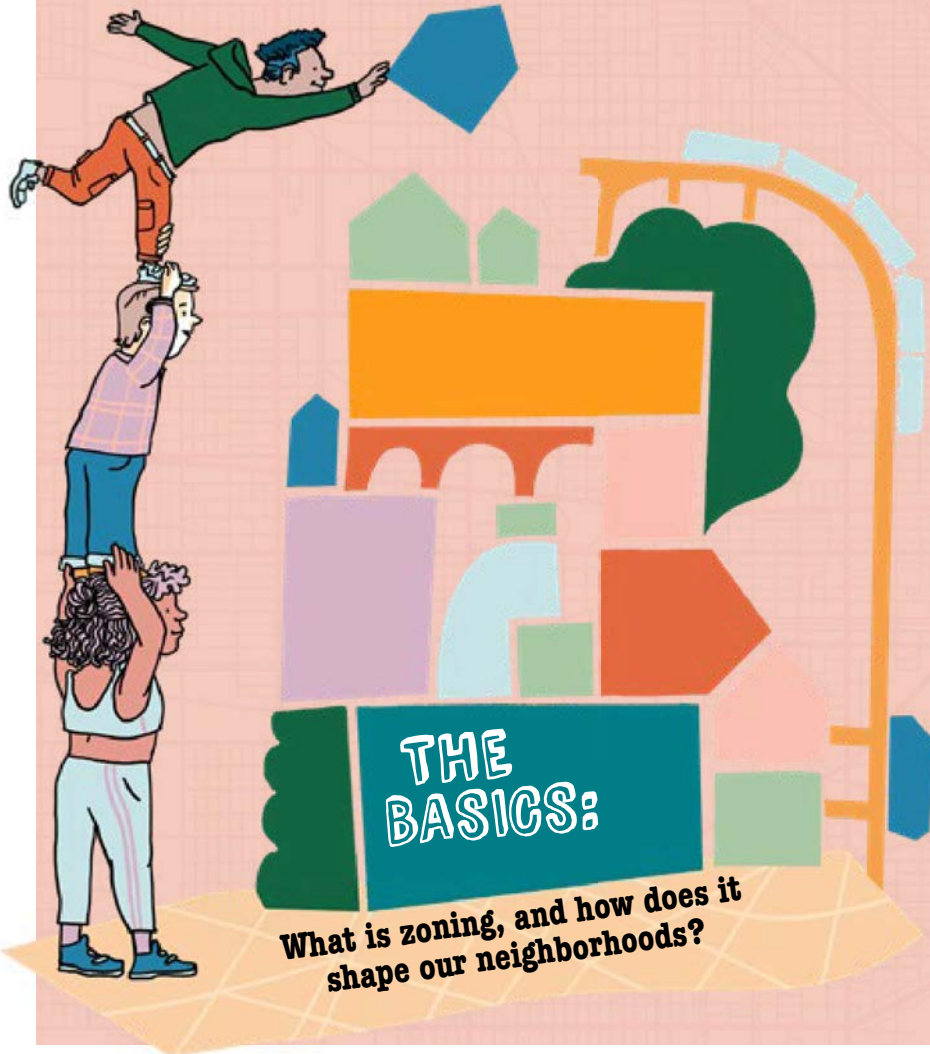
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# ZONING AND LAND USE 101



## HOW IT WORKS

### What is land use?

Land use is everything we see as we move around our city. It's how we experience the places we live, work, and play. That apartment building next door, the nearby park, that favorite corner store or local coffee shop, that empty lot or big-box store, the car wash across the street—these are all examples of different land uses.



### What is zoning?

Zoning tells us what can be built, and where. It's the rules and regulations that tell us which land uses are allowed in specific locations. Zoning sets limits on a new development's size and shape, such as how tall a building can be, how many homes it can contain, and how close it can be to the street (called a "setback"). It also determines many other aspects of development, like how much parking must be included.

**Zoning = Land use + size and shape + other development characteristics**



To do all this, zoning assigns all city land a category called a "zoning district." There are eight zoning districts, as well as areas called Planned Developments, each with its own rules and regulations.

## HOW IT WORKS

### What are the elements of zoning?

When we talk about zoning, we're really describing three different things:

#### 1 Zoning Ordinance

The **zoning ordinance** (or zoning code) is a city law that lays out the zoning districts and the requirements for each one. The ordinance, part of Chicago's municipal code, sets out the allowed uses, size and density standards, and other development characteristics. It also contains many of the rules for the zoning process including who is responsible for making decisions and whether meetings with community residents are required or not. The ordinance states that the purpose of zoning includes "promoting the public health, safety and general welfare."



#### 2 Zoning and Land Use Map

The **zoning map** (officially titled Zoning and Land Use Map) is a map that shows how zoning districts are arranged across the city. It's this spatial arrangement of uses that builds the feeling of a neighborhood.



#### 3 Zoning Process

The **zoning process** ("procedures" in the zoning ordinance) is the people and pathways through which decisions about zoning are made. It's the way that changes to the zoning map and ordinance are proposed, reviewed, and decided. This includes whether and how community input is included in decision-making. In Chicago, City Council members —alderpeople—hold much of the authority to make zoning decisions, granted by the zoning ordinance, but there are many other people and groups involved as well.



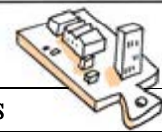
### What shapes a neighborhood?

Zoning determines the type of home you live in, and what surrounds it. It can mean the difference between living near single-family homes, multi-family apartments, a park, a factory, or places to go shopping. Zoning is one of the most direct tools policymakers can use to influence what gets built, where it gets built, and ultimately what neighborhoods look and feel like. **But zoning is not the only thing that determines neighborhood development.** Zoning, along with planning, enforcement, and other market, site, and community characteristics all play a role. If a property is zoned for commercial development—allowing a grocery store to move in, for example—that doesn't necessarily mean that a grocery store will move in. Here are some other factors that shape a neighborhood:

#### Recipe:

Your Neighborhood

Serves: You and all your neighbors



##### Ingredients

1 part	Zoning rules & regulations
1 part	Building code & building permitting
1 part	Business license (as needed)
1 part	Enforcement
to taste	The market for development: Finance and other economic conditions
a pinch	Neighborhood and city-level planning
a dash	Community institutions



##### Directions

(as needed, in no particular order)

Whisk together **zoning rules and decisions** that determine allowed land uses, density, and development characteristics.

Mix in **building code and building permitting**: these are the requirements and processes to approve plans for new construction and renovation, including safety and sustainability regulations.

Add an application for **business licensing** to open and maintain local businesses.

Fold in **enforcement** to make sure all these rules and regulations are actually followed.

Blend with the **market for development**: How much financing is available? Where is there demand (and which areas are perceived as high- and low-demand areas)? Chicago's legacy of discrimination and disinvestment means that these questions are closely tied up with the city's segregation.

Combine **neighborhood and city-level planning** with **community institutions** like churches, community organizations, and schools, which together build and maintain connections between community members.

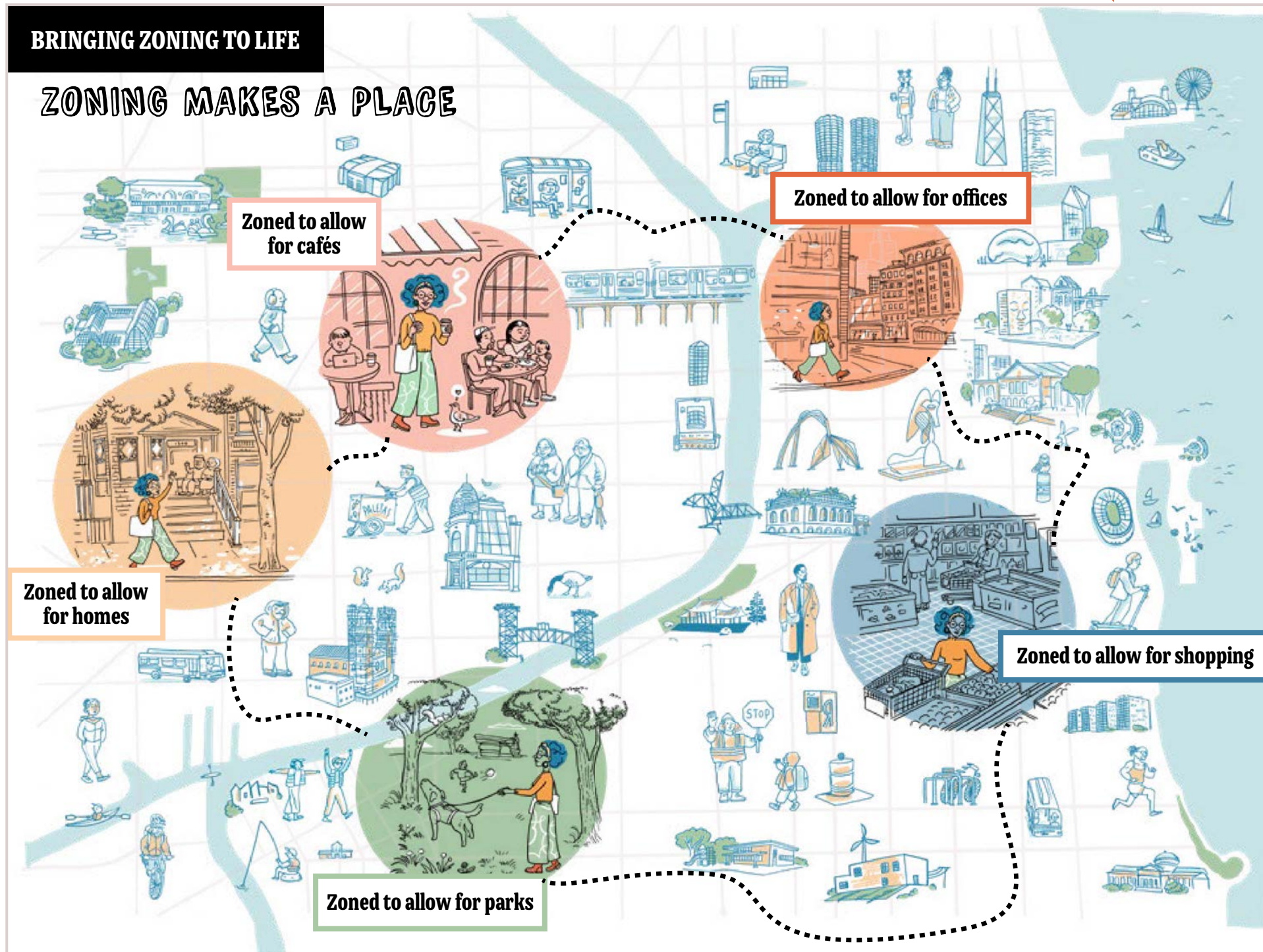
Prepare with equal parts information and planning.

Bake until complete.





# ZONING MAKES A PLACE





## HOW IT WORKS

### Picturing the zoning districts

In Chicago, there are eight zoning districts as well as areas called Planned Developments. The five main zoning districts are: Residential, Business, Commercial, Downtown, and Manufacturing, and the three special purpose zoning districts are: Parks and Open Space, Transportation, and Planned Manufacturing District (PMD)\*. Pictured here are the five main districts, plus Parks and Open Space and Planned Developments. These districts are defined by their general type of intended land use.

#### Planned Development

(see page 40) A zoning designation for certain developments that meet thresholds to qualify as major proposals, allowing for flexibility in land use, bulk, and development standards.

#### Downtown (D):

Used only in the designated “downtown” area; allows a variety of uses with high density, including public, civic, commercial, and residential.

#### Business (B):

Allows retail and service uses (such as cafes and dry cleaners), some public and civic uses, and some residential uses.

#### Parks and Open Space (POS):

Preserves, protects, and enhances land set aside for public open space, public parks, and public beaches; also includes cemeteries.

#### Commercial (C):

Allows retail and service uses, and more intensive commercial uses that tend to be larger and more oriented to users in cars (such as banks and car washes), with some residential, public and civic uses, plus manufacturing allowed in some districts.

#### Residential (R):

Allows residential uses (housing) as well as some public and civic uses (such as libraries, fire stations, and schools).

#### Manufacturing (M):

Allows manufacturing, warehousing, wholesale, and industrial uses (such as factories, grocery wholesalers, and waste disposal facilities).

\* PMD is a zoning classification generally applied to manufacturing districts that are part of specific industrial corridors. PMDs do not allow residential uses.

\*\* Transportation, not depicted, is a small percentage of total zoning and only allows uses related to roads, rail, bus, pedestrian and bicycle trails, and minor utilities.



## HOW IT WORKS

### Zooming in to the main zoning districts

Within each main zoning district, there is an additional level of specificity that corresponds to different levels of bulk, density, and intensity. These zoning district designations affect how we experience a place by allowing different types, sizes of buildings, and intensities of land uses. (For more on density, [see page 14](#)).

#### Residential

**RS Residential Single-Unit:** Detached houses on individual lots, and limited two-flats

**RT Residential Two-Flat, Townhouse and Multi-Unit:** Townhouses and low-density multi-unit residential buildings

**RM Residential Multi-Unit:** Multi-unit residential buildings with moderate to high density



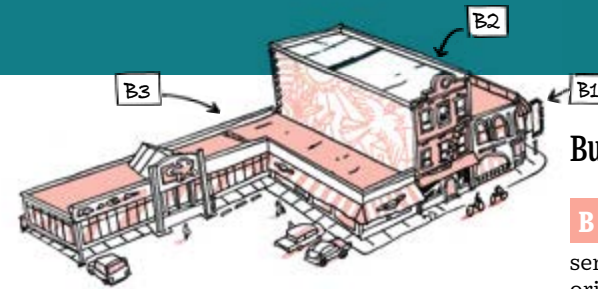
#### Downtown

**DC Downtown Core:** Accommodates a broad mix of office, commercial, public, recreation, and entertainment uses, along with mixed-use and residential

**DX Downtown Mixed-Use:** Supports office, commercial, public, institutional, and residential with vertical mixed-uses that contain active ground floors

**DR Downtown Residential:** Accommodates residential and small-scale commercial uses on lower floors, with residential above

**DS Downtown Service:** Allows a mix of small-scale office, commercial services, public use, transportation and communication services, and industrial uses



#### Business

**B1 Neighborhood Shopping:** Small scale retail and service uses with a pedestrian orientation, permits residential above the ground floor

**B2 Neighborhood Mixed-Use:** Same as B1, but allows ground-floor residential uses

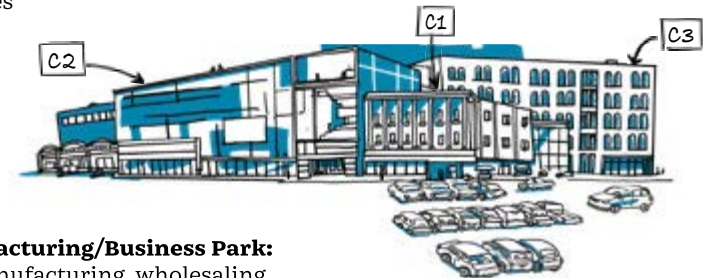
**B3 Community Shopping:** Shopping centers, larger buildings, destination oriented for cars

#### Commercial

**C1 Neighborhood Commercial:** Similar to B3, plus more intensive, car-oriented uses

**C2 Motor Vehicle-Related Commercial:** High intensity business or commercial, allowing virtually any type of business, service, or commercial use

**C3 Commercial, Manufacturing, and Employment:** High intensity commercial use intended to serve as a buffer district to manufacturing districts; does not permit residential uses



#### Manufacturing

**M1 Limited Manufacturing/Business Park:** Low-impact manufacturing, wholesaling, warehousing and distribution within enclosed buildings

**M2 Light Industry:** Moderate-impact manufacturing, wholesaling, warehousing, and distribution, including storage and work-related activities outside of enclosed buildings; more land-intensive activities

**M3 Heavy Industry:** High-impact manufacturing and industrial uses, including extractive and waste-related uses





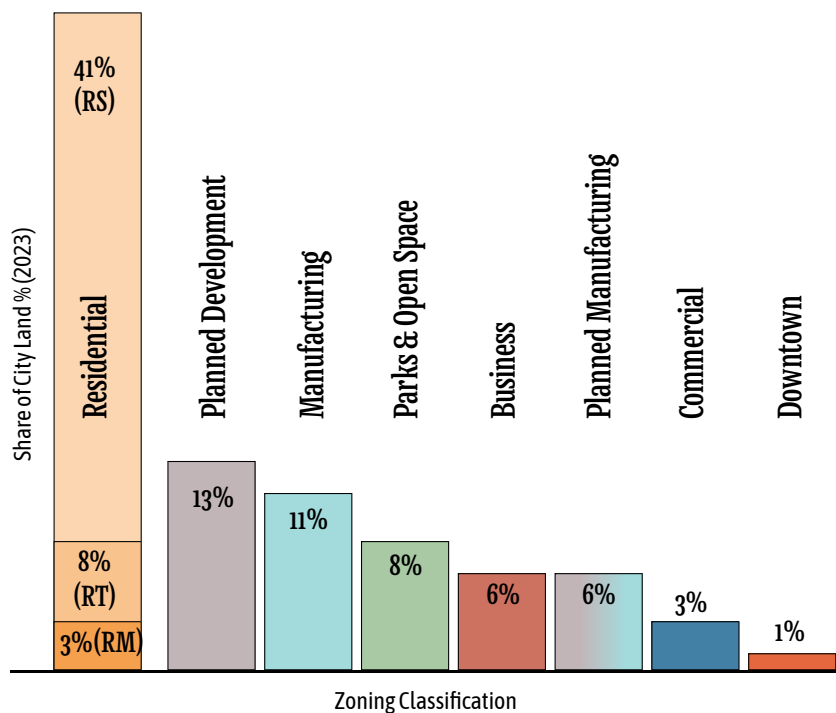
## DATA CORNER

### How common are different zoning districts?

**More than half of all land area in Chicago is zoned for residential use.** The most common type of residential zoning by land area is low-density RS (Residential Single-Unit)—41% of zoned land in the city is designated RS. Types of residential zoning that allow for multiple units are less common, with RT (Residential Two-Flat, Townhouse and Multi-Unit) making up 8% of city land and RM (Residential Multi-Unit) making up only 3%.

**The next most common types of zoning are manufacturing zoning (one sixth of the city) and areas for Planned Developments (PDs) (one tenth of the city).** Manufacturing and Planned Manufacturing Districts combined make up 17% of zoned land, while PDs cover 13%. For more on PDs, [see page 40](#).

**Zoning districts specifically for businesses—Business and Commercial districts—are relatively uncommon, making up 6% and 3% of city land respectively.** Between 2003 and 2023, the amount of land zoned specifically for businesses decreased, while the amount of land that is part of a PD increased.



Note: Shares reflect 2023 zoning map. Land that is part of a Planned Development is included in the Planned Development category, not in the category for the underlying zoning district(s).



## HOW-TO CORNER

### Reading the zoning map and finding your zoning district

Curious to understand how to read a zoning map? Here are some things you need to know.

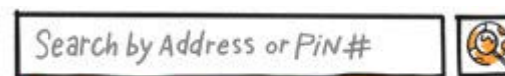


You'll see colors that show which zoning district a property is in. The different colors visually indicate the different districts: yellow for residential, red for business, etc. The map also has labels for each of the districts, like RS1, which gives you the district and its corresponding density and intensity. From looking at the map, you can see which district you live in as well as which districts are next to each other.

### Find the Chicago zoning map

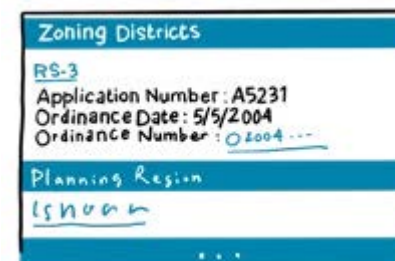
The City of Chicago's zoning map [lives on the city's website](#).

To learn more about where you live, enter your address in the top left hand corner.



### Find your zoning district

To find your zoning district, click on your specific address on the map. A box will pop up that contains the name of the zoning district and additional details about location, such as the ward, community area, and planning region.



### Find zoning district requirements

You can learn more about the requirements attached to a zoning district by [looking up the district](#) in the zoning ordinance.

Now you can learn more about your neighborhood. Happy searching!



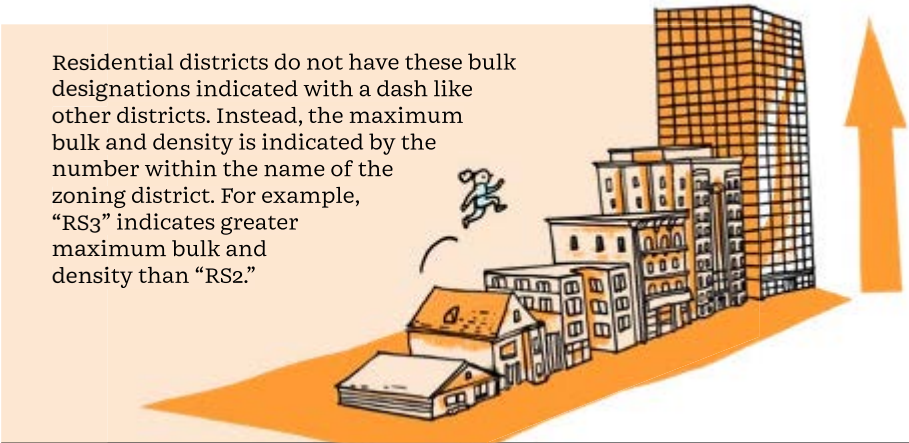




HOW IT WORKS

What are bulk and density in zoning?

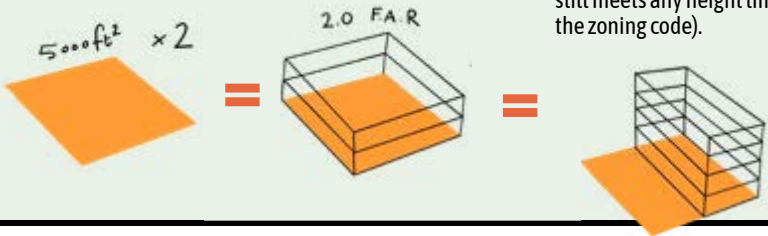
A typical non-residential zoning classification—for example, “B1-2”—contains the abbreviation for the zoning district (B1) plus a number (2), which represents **bulk**, which is a building’s size and shape. As the bulk increases, buildings can be bigger in that zoning district. A bigger building can sometimes mean a denser building. **Density** refers to how compactly things like housing units or storefronts are packed into a space. For example, a property zoned B1-3 is allowed more bulk, and therefore more density, than a property zoned B1-2.



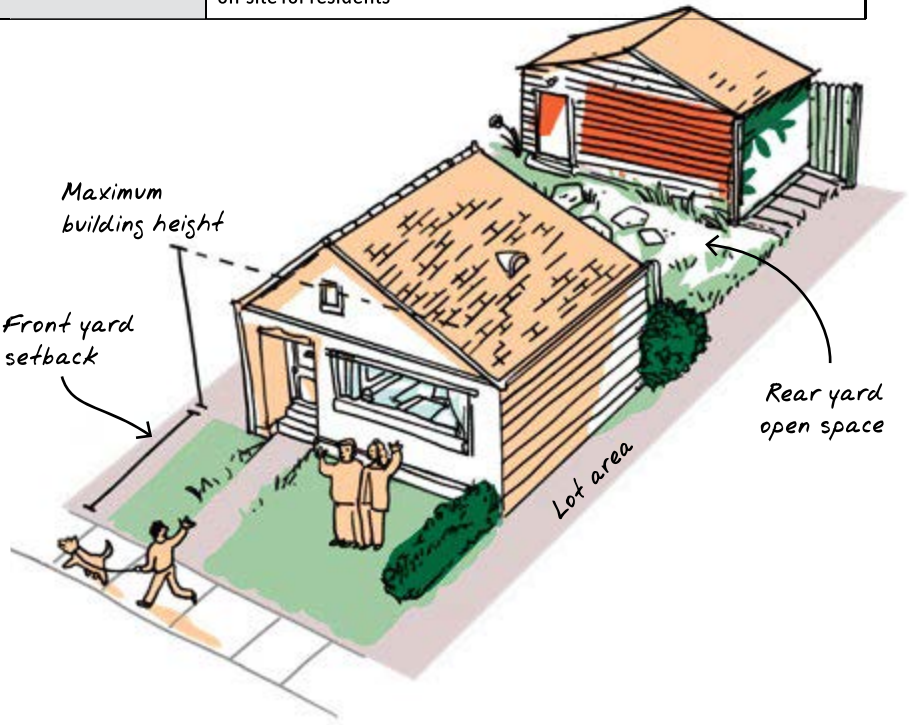
Residential districts do not have these bulk designations indicated with a dash like other districts. Instead, the maximum bulk and density is indicated by the number within the name of the zoning district. For example, “RS3” indicates greater maximum bulk and density than “RS2.”

In zoning, bulk limits are often set using a measure called **Floor Area Ratio (FAR)**. FAR is a number that refers to the maximum total floor area a building can have, relative to the size of the lot it is on. A proposed building can often have fewer stories spread across a larger area of land, or more stories concentrated in a smaller area of land.

A FAR of 2.0 on a 5,000 ft² lot equals a total floor area of 10,000 ft². This allows a 2-story building with 5,000 ft² on each floor... ..or a 4-story building with 2,500 ft² on each floor, or any combination of stories and floor area up to 10,000 ft² (that still meets any height limits in the zoning code).



Standards in the zoning code related to bulk and density		
REQUIREMENT	WHAT IT IS	
Floor area ratio	The maximum total floor area a building can have, relative to the size of the lot it is on	
Lot area per unit	The amount of land required for each dwelling unit on the property	
Minimum lot area	The minimum size a lot needs to be to build on it	
Maximum building height	How tall a building can be	For more on height maximums, <a href="#">see page 51</a> .
Front yard, side, and rear setbacks	The minimum distance between a building and the edges of a property	
Rear yard open space	How much lot area must be kept as open space in the rear yard	
On-site open space	How much outdoor open space large apartment buildings must provide on-site for residents	



## HOW IT WORKS



### The who's-who of zoning

In Chicago, the following groups are typically involved in zoning decision-making. Some of these groups are formal decision-making bodies (**DM**) or reviewers (**R**), as stated in the **zoning ordinance**. See pages [34 to 38](#) for more on who reviews and makes zoning decisions.

### Elected officials

#### Your alderperson

Your alderperson is the elected official who represents your ward, and is responsible for citywide policymaking. Your alderperson recommends approving or denying any zoning map change within their ward; by tradition, the zoning committee and the rest of City Council almost always follows their lead—this is referred to as aldermanic prerogative. Alderpeople also set their own community process around zoning changes, and often make recommendations on decisions made by the ZBA. In practice, your alderperson has the most authority over zoning changes in their ward.



#### City Council as a whole **DM** and its zoning committee **R**

All 50 alderpeople together make up City Council. Within City Council, the zoning committee (called the Committee on Zoning, Landmarks and Building Standards) is made up of a select number of alderpeople and recommends a decision on any proposal related to zoning to the full City Council. City Council has the power to propose and approve changes to the zoning ordinance and zoning map. It also approves Planned Developments and Planned Manufacturing Districts.



#### The mayor

The mayor's authority over zoning includes introducing proposals to City Council, appointing members of the Zoning Board of Appeals and the Plan Commission, and leading enforcement of zoning laws through the Zoning Administrator. The mayor also selects city department Commissioners and sets the agenda for major developments and policies during their term, which can have significant influence on zoning decisions.



### Other parts of city government

#### Department of Planning and Development (DPD) and the Zoning Administrator's office **DM**

DPD is the city agency that shepherds development proposals through the review process. A division within DPD, the Zoning Bureau, includes the Zoning Administrator and is responsible for enforcing zoning rules on behalf of the city. This includes certifying that proposed developments meet the requirements of the ordinance. DPD can also approve more minor zoning related changes that fall under site plan review and administrative adjustments.



#### Zoning Board of Appeals (ZBA) **DM**

The ZBA is a five-member board appointed by the mayor with the consent of City Council, tasked with approving or denying

certain types of proposed zoning changes (variations and special uses, plus appeals of decisions made by the Zoning Administrator).

#### Chicago Plan Commission **R**

A board appointed by the mayor with the consent of City Council, the Plan Commission is responsible for reviewing certain types of plans, ordinance requirements, and large or high-profile projects like Planned Developments. It makes recommendations for City adoption and approval.



### Outside city government

#### Residents and community groups

Community members can get involved in zoning decisions, by (for example) attending and providing comments at meetings held by alderpeople, Plan Commission, ZBA, City Council, and DPD. For information on how public input is considered in zoning, [see page 44](#).

#### Ward zoning advisory councils

Groups organized by some alderpeople to allow residents to weigh in on zoning decisions in their wards.



**BONUS:** The **Commission on Chicago Landmarks** is made up of nine members appointed by the mayor. This group decides which areas are designated as historic landmarks. Though separate from zoning, landmarking is another lever for the city to influence land use and development.



# ZONING AND EQUITY

A history of zoning,  
and (in)equity in Chicago:

HOW DID WE  
GET HERE?



**At its core, zoning is a way to separate.** More than a hundred years ago, Chicago was growing rapidly, becoming more diverse and complex. From 1900 to 1920, the population of the city grew by about a million people. Residents and land uses were pushed into closer proximity and into conflict. Zoning emerged in the early 20th century—in Chicago and around the country—as a way to separate both land uses and people.

**There were real problems that proponents of early zoning were aiming to solve.** In Chicago, people didn't want their homes directly next to stables, manufacturing, slaughterhouses, and other uses that threatened public health and safety. Regulating challenges like smells, noise, and pollution through zoning was a way to protect the public welfare. The City Beautiful movement in urban planning aimed to create more beautiful and orderly cities, which its founders associated with virtuous and moral behavior.

**But the emergence of zoning also advanced segregation and discrimination, serving the interests of wealthy white property owners in the process.** The development of zoning was shaped by the decision-makers in power—almost exclusively wealthy white men—who wanted to protect their property values by ensuring that people of color, immigrants, and low-income people couldn't live in their neighborhoods.

**Although modern zoning laws are technically “race neutral,” the historical record and an abundance of research shows they are anything but that.** Early zoning in cities like Baltimore was explicitly segregationist, naming block-by-block where Black people were allowed to live and shutting them out of white neighborhoods. Zoning has been repeatedly used in Chicago to place harmful industrial uses in places where people of color, immigrants, and low-income residents live—while elsewhere allowing only single family homes, which tend to be more expensive than denser housing. Three years after Chicago's first zoning ordinance went into effect in 1923, the Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of zoning using racially coded language, labeling apartment buildings “parasites.”

**Zoning combined with many other policies and practices to yield the segregated and selectively disinvested Chicago we see today.** Restrictive covenants designated certain homes for white-only purchase and rent. Redlining—racist federal policies around mortgage lending—and predatory contract sales further restricted the ability of predominately Black residents, but also other communities of color like Latinx Chicagoans, to own homes in specific parts of the city. This impacted people's ability to build wealth, live where they wanted to, and reside near opportunity and resources.

**Though the system we have now is imperfect, the future of zoning in Chicago is something we can choose together as a city.** MPC developed this zine so that more people can understand zoning and shape what happens in their neighborhoods. The hope is that this zine will influence the work of residents, community and civic organizations, and people in government who are advocating for changes that can transform the system and tackle the inequities that were built in from the beginning.

## ZONING & EQUITY TIMELINE: Pre-zoning

Property owners used a variety of strategies to control who and what was allowed in their neighborhoods, setting the stage for Chicago's first zoning ordinance.



**National**

**Late 1800s**

**Chicago**



**Late 1800s**

**Private and public nuisance lawsuits:**

Lawsuits against property owners by other citizens and local governments were an early way to deal with conflicts about "nuisance" land uses that produced odor or noise.

**Late 1800s**

**Frontage consent laws:**

Piecemeal laws allowed residential owners on a block to approve certain "undesirable" uses like stables.



**1910 First race-based U.S. zoning ordinance:**

In Baltimore, an explicitly race-based zoning ordinance made it illegal for Black people to live in white neighborhoods. This practice was struck down by the Supreme Court in 1917.



**1910 The Great Migration begins:**

Millions of Black Americans moved from the South to the North, Midwest, and West, a movement lasting through about 1970.



**Early 1900s**



The Black population of Chicago multiplied more than six times over between 1910 and 1940, from about 44,000 to about 280,000.

**1916 First comprehensive city zoning law:**

The country's first citywide zoning law was adopted in New York City, to keep unwanted uses, and by proxy, people, out of specific neighborhoods. In the same year, Berkeley, Calif. became the first city to zone for single-family homes.



**1910s - 1940s Use of racially restrictive covenants:**

Agreements between homeowners written into deeds to homes prohibited people of color from buying or living in some white neighborhoods.

**1922 Feds make a push for local zoning:**

A sample state law—the Standard Zoning Enabling Act—encouraged the creation of local zoning ordinances, setting zoning on the path to implementation in nearly every city.

**1916**

**1919**

**1922**

**1923**

Chicago was home to the National Association of Real Estate Boards, which encouraged the use of a template covenant, helping this practice spread. Restrictive covenants reached their height in Chicago from the late 1920s through the 1940s—with one estimate stating these covenants applied to at least a quarter of all residential properties on the South Side.

**1919 State law enables partial zoning:**

The Glackin Law authorized Illinois municipalities to develop piecemeal zoning ordinances for neighborhoods, if 40% of the neighborhood's property owners endorsed the plan. It was repealed in 1921 to set the stage for Chicago's first zoning ordinance.

**1923**

**Zoning comes to Chicago:** City Council passes the city's first zoning ordinance.



People had already been making decisions about land use in the region for hundreds of years before the first precursors to zoning came along. Chicago is the home to Indigenous nations, including the Potawatomi, Ojibwe, and Odawa Nations, which were forcibly removed from ancestral lands in the mid-1800s.



# A TALE OF POWER & PROPERTY

## The creation of Chicago's first zoning ordinance

### HOW IT HAPPENED

The commission worked closely with both business owners and the Chicago Real Estate Board—an industry group that had previously argued for an explicitly racial zoning ordinance—to develop its proposal over 18 months, sending agents out into the city to survey land uses.

A Zoning Commission made up of eight alderpeople, six other government representatives, and eight private citizens was charged with zoning the city.

1923



### THE RESULTS



It also created five volume districts. City Council passed the ordinance, then amended it to create the Zoning Board of Appeals, allowing property owners to request changes to zoning. Research examining demographic and land use data before and after the first zoning ordinance suggests that race and immigrant status were key factors that shaped initial zoning maps, locating districts of increased density and industrial uses in Black and immigrant communities.

This embedded racial discrimination into Chicago's zoning from the very beginning.



## ZONING & EQUITY TIMELINE: Zoning takes form

Legal frameworks behind zoning solidified, while discriminatory urban planning policies and market practices shaped Chicago.

### 1926 Supreme Court upholds exclusionary zoning:

A real estate company sued the local government in Euclid, Ohio, saying that zoning—which separated areas for single family housing from apartments—restricted liberty and property interests. The Supreme Court sided with the village: zoning with any connection to the “public welfare” was a constitutional use of local police power.

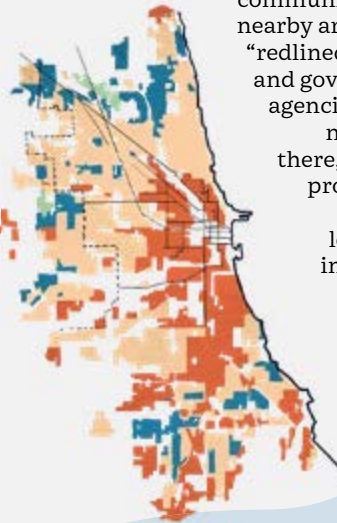


“...the apartment house is a mere parasite, constructed to take advantage of the open spaces and attractive surroundings created by the residential character of the district.”

– Euclid decision

### 1930s Federal redlining emerges:

New federal agencies that refinanced and insured mortgages—the Home Owners’ Loan Corporation (HOLC) and the Federal Housing Administration (FHA)—had a color-coded system of home value based in part on race. Black and Latinx communities, some immigrant communities, and nearby areas were “redlined”: banks and government agencies would not invest there, denying prospective buyers loans and insurance.



1930

National

1926

Chicago

“This is an old district and may be said to be declining due in large measure to the threat of colored encroachment into the area from the north...”

– HOLC description of Greater Grand Crossing area, 1939

### 1930s - 1960s Slum clearance and “urban renewal” displace

**communities:** Clearance of neighborhoods considered to be “slums”—often Black, Latinx, and immigrant neighborhoods—facilitated new developments and highways. Starting in the late 1930s and carrying into the 1960s, federal funds were directed toward these “urban renewal” projects.



1942

1950

1960

### 1942 World War II-era zoning changes:

Updates to zoning set aside more land for heavy industry in response to war production needs. The city also added off-street parking requirements to the code.

In 1942, Chicago’s zoning ordinance was only eight pages long. (Our current ordinance is hundreds of pages long!)



Between 75% and 95% of the homes sold to Black families in Chicago during the 1950s and 1960s were sold on contract, at a price markup one study estimated at 84%.

In Chinatown, new expressways split the neighborhood in the ‘60s, destroying homes, businesses, and parks.

Urban renewal pushed Puerto Rican residents out of the Near North Side into Lincoln Park, where they would later organize a fight against gentrification.

Public housing developments like the Jane Addams Homes (1938) and Ida B. Wells Homes (1941) involved large-scale clearance of neighborhoods. Later, new housing developments and new expressways displaced people in the name of “urban renewal.”





## ZONING & EQUITY TIMELINE: Modern zoning

Changes to Chicago's zoning ordinance made zoning increasingly complex and gave more power to city government to regulate land use and development.



### 1970s and '80s Rise of the “equity planning” and historic preservation movements:

Following the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s—and with a growing awareness of environmental issues nationwide—there was a public push to bring development decisions into the hands of neighborhoods and communities. There was also a move to preserve areas by designating them as landmarks.

## National

Late  
1900s

## Chicago

### 1957 Anticipating growth, city rewrites zoning and creates Planned Developments:

Zoning began to look like what we have today, with downtown districts, density bonuses, and Planned Developments. With an eye toward population growth—and in response to pressure from developers—zoning encouraged high-density development.

1973

**1973 Regulating lakefront development:** The Lakefront Protection Ordinance gave the City more power to control development along the lake.

In a backlash to dense development along the lakefront, community organizations and residents in Lakeview and Lincoln Park put pressure on alderpeople to downzone their neighborhoods in the '70s, limiting their affordability in future decades. Through the '90s, parts of many wards were downzoned and “landmarked” by alderpeople, limiting density.



1987

**Zoning corruption investigation:** The Sun-Times examined more than 400 rezonings, finding “a pattern of campaign contributions for aldermen who held veto powers over rezoning.”



### 2010s - now Nationwide housing affordability crisis:

In the wake of the subprime mortgage crisis and the Great Recession, fewer houses were built across the country. This contributed to a nationwide shortage of affordable housing and rising rents, a trend that only intensified in the 2020s, fueling displacement and gentrification.

Early  
2000s

- Rising housing prices, coupled with the subprime mortgage crisis, drove population loss as people moved out of Chicago, decreasing the city's Black population.

**1990s and 2000s Backlash to development fuels more special districts:** Following a development boom in the '90s, the City began to adopt new Special Districts, many with the goal of controlling density and preserving “neighborhood character.”

2004 was the last time the zoning ordinance was comprehensively revised.



### Pro-density movements gain momentum:

Urban planners, policymakers, and regular citizens have increasingly advocated for allowing more density in response to the affordability crisis—through movements like “Yes in My Backyard” (YIMBY) and equitable transit-oriented development (ETOD).

You can participate in the future of zoning! Go to [page 42](#) to find out more.

2021

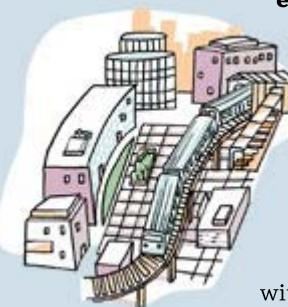


**2021 City strengthens regulation of air polluters:** The Air Quality Ordinance requires that developments expected to pollute go through additional levels of City review and public engagement.

2022

### 2022 Policy change encourages density near transit:

The Connected Communities Ordinance encouraged development in areas with access to public transit by allowing taller and denser buildings with less parking. (See [page 39](#) for more.)





## DATA CORNER

**Residential**
**Planned Development**
**Parks & Open Space**
**Manufacturing**
**Business**
**Commercial**
**Downtown**

- Residential Single-Unit
- Residential Two-Flat, Townhouse and Multi-Unit
- Residential Multi-Unit

**What mix of zoning districts do different Chicagoans experience today?**

**Latinx Chicagoans**

Black and Latinx Chicagoans are more likely to see land zoned for manufacturing, as well as heavy manufacturing, in the neighborhoods they live in.

**Black Chicagoans**

**White Chicagoans**

A greater share of land is set aside for Planned Developments in neighborhoods with white and Asian Chicagoans.

**Asian Chicagoans**

White and Asian Chicagoans are more likely to see land zoned for Parks and Open Space in the neighborhoods they live in...

...as well as land zoned for Downtown.

For this analysis, MPC defined the census tracts with the highest population by demographic as the **top fifth of census tracts by total population from a given demographic group**. Calculations are based on 2023 zoning districts and demographic data from the U.S. Census American Community Survey 2018-2022 5-Year Estimates. Analysis includes only zoned land within each census tract. Residential densities for Planned Developments are not included in the analysis due to data limitations.



# ZONING IN CHICAGO

Following the rules through the maze:

## HOW DOES ZONING HAPPEN?



### HOW IT WORKS

#### Chicago's zoning process

A century after Chicago's first zoning ordinance, our current world of zoning has gotten more complex. The zoning ordinance spells out the rules and procedures that need to be followed, but it can often be hard for everyday people to understand how everything fits together, what is required for a zoning change, and how and when residents can participate. Some zoning situations are complicated enough to require a specialized lawyer or consultant to navigate. That means this section can't cover every situation, but it will outline the broad steps involved in different types of zoning processes. The zoning processes are illustrated through the example of opening a pie shop. (Most pie shops are able to open by-right in business and commercial districts in Chicago, but the example shows how the steps in the zoning process can vary for a development.)

**In general, zoning processes fall into four buckets:** Permit by-right, apply for zoning relief, change the zoning map, and change the zoning ordinance.

#### In order to...

##### REVIEW PROCESS

Build or use a property in a way that follows all existing zoning rules



**Permit by-right**



##### REVIEW PROCESS

Build or use a property in a way that falls outside existing zoning rules



**Apply for zoning relief**



**Change the zoning map**



##### PUBLIC POLICY

Change the zoning rules for everyone going forward



**Change the zoning ordinance**







**Permit by-right**

Sometimes, a project fits into the zoning rules already established where it is located. This is called permitted by-right or by-right development. In this case, the owner or developer receives a certificate from the Zoning Administrator confirming the project fits the zoning. With that document, they're ready to move forward with applying for the additional approvals needed to start construction or open a business (like receiving a business license and/or building permit, which are handled by different City departments).

Permit by-right			
	WHO PROPOSES Property Owner	WHO REVIEWS Zoning Administrator	WHO DECIDES Zoning Administrator

**!** Reminder: The Zoning Administrator is part of the Department of Planning and Development (DPD).

**BRINGING ZONING TO LIFE**

**ZENA'S PIE SHOP**



**OPENING A PIE SHOP BY-RIGHT**

At the first location, I checked the zoning map and the zoning ordinance to make sure that pie shops, a business use, are permitted in this zoning district. Luckily, it looks like they are.



If I bought this property, I'd need to get a document from the **Zoning Administrator** at DPD to show that pie shops are permitted here **by-right**.



Then my pie shop would be ready to open.





### Apply for zoning relief




When the plan for a property doesn't match all the existing zoning rules, a different zoning process is needed before the proposal can move forward.

One way to move forward can be receiving **zoning relief**. These processes allow limited exceptions to zoning rules in specific circumstances, which are different for each zoning district and written into the zoning ordinance. (The ordinance says opportunities for zoning relief are intended to reduce potential adverse impacts on health, safety, or general welfare for surrounding property owners and the general public.) Paths for zoning relief arose alongside zoning, because the City needed a way to give property owners greater flexibility to make changes after a review. Creating a way to seek relief also discouraged property owners from suing the City.

There are a few types of zoning relief.

- **Administrative adjustments** are smaller-scale exceptions to bulk and density requirements like setbacks—these are approved by the Zoning Administrator.
- **Variations** are larger-scale changes to bulk and density requirements
- **Special uses** are land uses which are allowed with additional oversight in a given district (often specific business types like tattoo or cannabis shops).

The Zoning Board of Appeals is also responsible for deciding appeals of decisions made by the Zoning Administrator.

Apply for zoning relief	 WHO PROPOSES	 WHO REVIEWS	 WHO DECIDES
Administrative adjustment	Property owner	Zoning Administrator	Zoning Administrator
Variation	Property owner	Zoning Board of Appeals	Zoning Board of Appeals
Special use*	Property owner	Zoning Administrator and Zoning Board of Appeals	Zoning Board of Appeals

\* Although alderpeople don't have a formal role in the process for special uses, they often will send a letter expressing their opinion, and sometimes host a community meeting.

### ZONING RELIEF FOR THE PIE SHOP

For the second location, I've checked the zoning map and the zoning ordinance to make sure that pie shops, a business use, are allowed in this zoning district. They're allowed, but the rooftop patio I want to include is only allowed in certain circumstances.

Here my pie shop would need **zoning relief**.



I'd need to apply for a special use to add a rooftop patio.

If I bought this property, I'd first need to get a document from the **Zoning Administrator** at DPD showing that the pie shop I want to build is *not allowed* because the patio is a special use.



Applying for zoning relief can be pretty complicated, so I'd hire a land use attorney to help me out.



We'd notify the owners of neighboring properties that I intend to apply for zoning relief and then submit an application for a **special use** to the **Zoning Board of Appeals**.



The ZBA would hold a public hearing to vote on my special use application.



If the ZBA voted to pass my special use, **I'd be all set on zoning**.

With zoning covered, I could get my permits to fix up the building, and get my business license.

**Then my pie shop would be ready to open.**





### Change the zoning map

The other way to move forward when the plan doesn’t match all the existing zoning rules is to update the zoning map with a **zoning map amendment**.




Every change to the zoning map requires City Council to pass an individual law called an ordinance.

The most common kind of amendment “**rezones**” one or more properties. For example, if you wanted to open a restaurant on property zoned as residential, City Council would need to rezone the property to a business district. It’s also common to rezone from one level of density to another—such as from a low-density business district to a higher-density business district.

There are also other zoning map amendments: zoning overlays and Planned Developments.

**Zoning overlays** are designations layered on top of underlying zoning districts. They change the requirements for developments within the overlay area. There are various types of overlays with different functions, such as “special character overlay districts” for areas that have “unique or distinctive physical characteristics.”

**Planned Developments** are larger or more complex developments that are required go through a separate city review and approval process to move forward (for more on these, [see page 40](#)).


Change the zoning map	 WHO PROPOSES	 WHO REVIEWS	 WHO DECIDES
Rezone a property	Aldersperson, mayor, property owner, or Zoning Administrator	Zoning Administrator, City Council zoning committee	City Council, usually deferring to aldersperson's decision
Add a zoning overlay	Aldersperson, mayor, property owner, or Zoning Administrator	Department of Planning and Development, City Council zoning committee	City Council
Add or update a Planned Development	Aldersperson, mayor, property owner, or Zoning Administrator	Zoning Administrator, Chicago Plan Commission, City Council zoning committee	City Council, usually taking aldersperson's lead

Some laws require additional review for certain projects, like the Lakefront Protection Ordinance, the Chicago Landmarks Ordinance, and the Air Quality Zoning Ordinance.


### REZONING FOR THE PIE SHOP

Here’s the third location. I checked the zoning map and the zoning ordinance to make sure that pie shops, as a business use, are permitted in this zoning district—but they’re not.

I can only open the pie shop here if City Council **rezones** the property.




First, I need to get the **aldersperson's** support, which can involve a community input process and proposal revisions.




Their decision usually determines City Council's vote.


Applying for rezoning can be pretty complicated, so I'd hire a land use attorney to help me out.




We'd notify the owners of neighboring properties of the proposal, then submit an application to the **Zoning Administrator**.



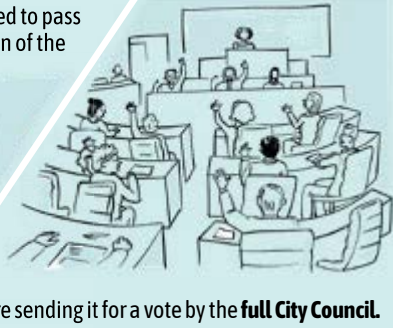
The Zoning Administrator would forward the application to **City Council** with a recommendation of whether it should pass.



In City Council, the **zoning committee** would need to pass the rezoning proposal with the recommendation of the aldersperson...




...before sending it for a vote by the **full City Council**.



If the vote passed in City Council, **I'd be all set on zoning**.

With zoning covered, I could get my permits to fix up the building, and get my business license.



**Then my pie shop would be ready to open.**





## Change the zoning ordinance

There is one final zoning process: the process to change the zoning ordinance. Zoning, like other city laws, is a system that our elected officials have the power to design and amend. If City Council can agree on changes to the zoning ordinance, map, or process, they can make those changes by passing a new law (or getting rid of laws they no longer want).

Change the zoning ordinance	WHO PROPOSES	WHO REVIEWS	WHO DECIDES
	Aldersperson, mayor, or Zoning Administrator	Zoning Administrator, City Council zoning committee	City Council

## A TALE OF CONNECTED COMMUNITIES

### Teaming up to change the zoning ordinance

In 2021, Chicago passed the most significant zoning reform law in decades: the Connected Communities Ordinance. It made it easier to build homes near transit, a big win for the **equitable transit-oriented development (ETOD)** movement. So how did it happen?



#### The pieces were in place in 2019, setting the stage for change:

- Chicago had an existing policy for encouraging development near transit, which needed to be updated. So far, it had led to development mainly on the North and Northwest sides.
- A coalition group called Elevated Chicago had a strong partnership with the City and was focused on bringing ETOD to Chicago.
- The mayor was supportive, and key City staff were ready to champion the reforms. Racial equity was an explicit priority at the City, with the creation of Chicago's first Office of Equity and Racial Justice.
- Awareness was growing around the exclusionary history of zoning and the need for more climate-friendly, transit-oriented cities.

In 2020, the City and Elevated Chicago convened a large group of government agencies, advocacy groups, and community organizations. They worked together to create an initial proposal for reforms, which involved:

- increasing density
- adding affordable housing
- making streets safer
- encouraging development in disinvested neighborhoods

The proposal was wide-ranging enough that it caught the interest of many groups, building a **broad set of supporters**. But there were also opponents. Some alderpeople didn't want to change the status quo on development. They believed the proposal would prevent them from controlling changes in their ward, or homeowners would push back—and some were suspicious of adding more density.



Finally, after months of negotiations, the remainder of the plan was approved, becoming the Connected Communities Ordinance.



## DATA CORNER

### Spotlight on the Planned Development process

Some larger and more complex developments in Chicago are required to go through a specific zoning process called the Planned Development (PD) process. A PD is a type of zoning map amendment that must be passed by City Council to move forward. It gives the City more oversight and mandates at least one public meeting about the project. (For a regular PD, the Plan Commission is required to hold a public meeting to discuss the project. For a Master PD—a more in-depth process for very large “megaprojects” that are especially large or complex, as defined by DPD—multiple community meetings can occur as well.)

The PD process is a required step for some types of developments—like hospitals, airports, universities, and sports arenas—on lots above a certain size. It is also required for buildings that are taller than a designated height or include above a designated number of housing units (the limits vary by zoning district). Some developments have the choice of going through the PD process or opting out of it.



PDs were intended to give developers and architects for unique and very large projects more flexibility for creative design choices, as well as bulk and density, than they have in regular zoning districts. Now, they are a pathway for more everyday development.

From 2003 to 2023, Chicago added more than **600 PDs**, covering about **5.8 square miles** of land.

In recent years, this zoning process has been the main pathway for adding new housing units in the city, according to an analysis by Yonah Freemark at the Urban Institute. **58% of all new homes added in Chicago between 2006 and 2024 were added through the PD process.** The vast majority of denser residential development happens through the PD process: **74% of new housing units added in projects with more than 10 units were developed through a PD.**

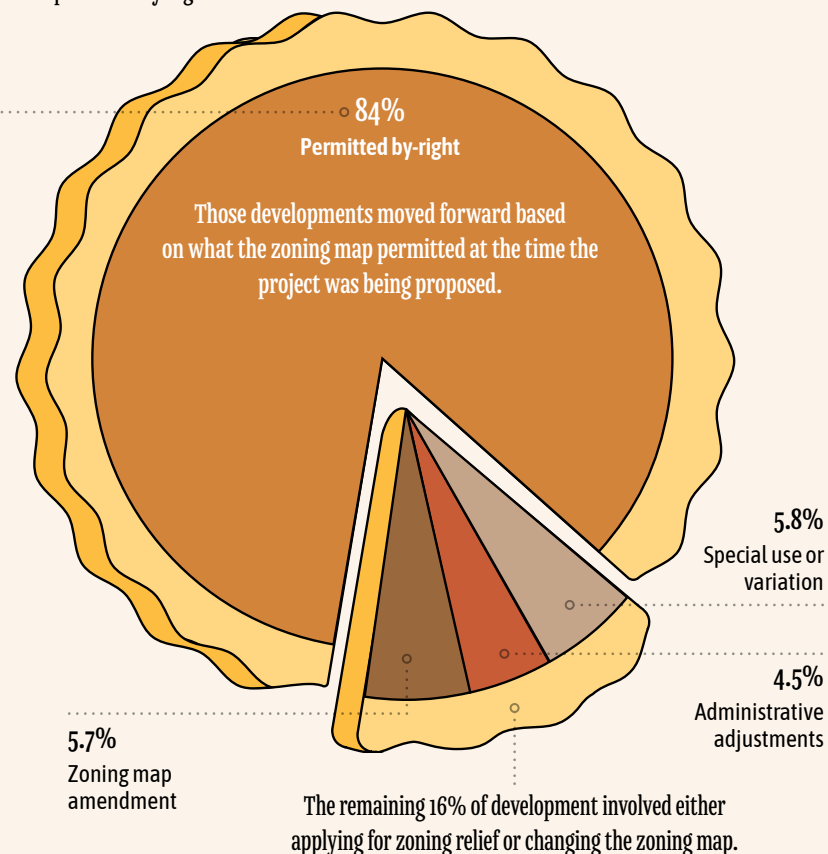
[Check out the City dashboard that tracks PDs here.](#)



### Which zoning processes are most common in Chicago?

Understanding zoning rules and procedures may seem daunting, but it's important to remember that most development in Chicago doesn't go through the most complex zoning processes: most are fairly straightforward.

Between 2018 and 2022, nearly 32,000 permits were issued by the city for development projects (either new construction or renovation permits). MPC estimates that 84% of this development was permitted by-right.



#### Where did this data come from?

There are multiple ways to calculate and analyze data on development in Chicago; this is MPC's best estimate of the share of development that goes through common zoning processes. MPC estimated the total number of developments by counting unique addresses that were issued at least one building permit for new construction or renovation. The number of zoning map amendments was estimated by counting all ordinances passed in City Council that included the phrase “Zoning Reclassification.” The number of unique addresses with an approved special use and/or variation was estimated based on data that MPC compiled using minutes from ZBA meetings. The number of administrative adjustments is based on annual counts from DPD.



## HOW IT WORKS

### How can residents and community groups weigh in on zoning decisions?

Zoning is part of a larger planning ecosystem that shapes and creates communities (as we mentioned in the recipe on [page 5](#)). Here we lay out ways residents can participate in local planning processes related specifically to zoning, but there are many other ways to participate locally in neighborhood development and investment.



### Talk to your friends and neighbors about zoning

Share what you've learned about zoning. Give a friend a copy of this zine!

### Chat with your alderperson

Your local alderperson controls zoning decisions within their ward, and the rest of City Council normally follows their lead. Many developers and landowners, when seeking a rezoning, first talk to their local alderperson to get support. If they can't get support, many won't move forward with requesting the zoning change. Each alderperson also creates their own process for determining whether they'll support zoning changes: some alderpeople organize committees of residents, some engage formally or informally with local groups and residents, and some make decisions on their own.



#### What questions can I ask my alderperson to learn more about zoning in my ward?

- What is your process for making zoning decisions?
- Do you have a ward zoning committee? How do you decide who is on the committee?
- What are your priorities when it comes to zoning changes and decisions in this ward?

#### How do I find my ward and alderperson?

The City has a website where you can enter your address to [find your ward information](#):

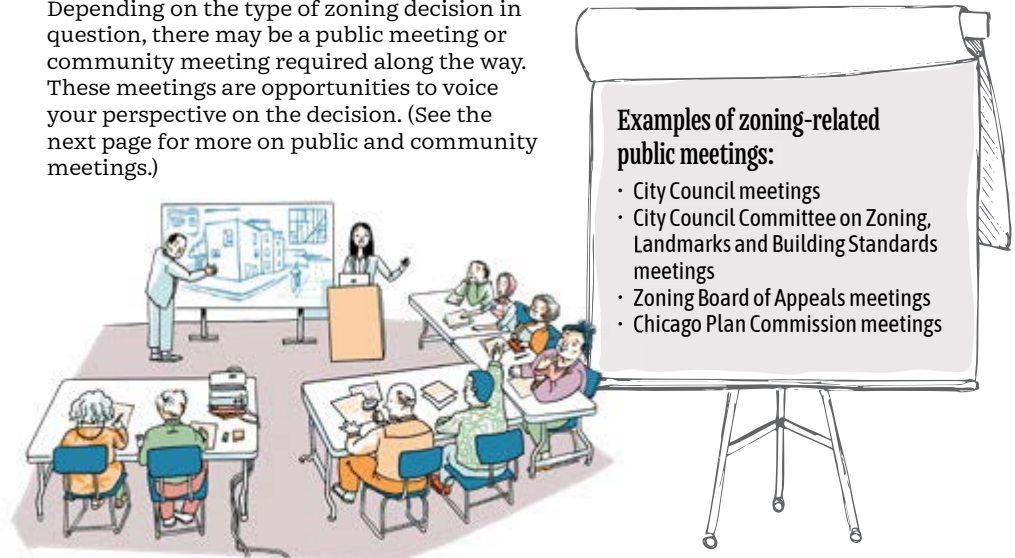


### Connect with local groups and residents involved in zoning

Your alderperson may have a group or process designed to give residents a voice in local zoning decisions. (These have a variety of names, like Zoning Advisory Committees, Zoning Advisory Councils, or Community-Driven Zoning.) This is a direct way to get involved in development in your ward. Your alderperson may also tap neighborhood groups to review development proposals that require a zoning change. Consider reaching out to neighborhood groups to see how you could become involved in their review.

### Attend a public meeting or community meeting

Depending on the type of zoning decision in question, there may be a public meeting or community meeting required along the way. These meetings are opportunities to voice your perspective on the decision. (See the next page for more on public and community meetings.)



#### Examples of zoning-related public meetings:

- City Council meetings
- City Council Committee on Zoning, Landmarks and Building Standards meetings
- Zoning Board of Appeals meetings
- Chicago Plan Commission meetings

### Participate in a local planning process

Local land use plans and neighborhood visioning initiatives also sometimes have opportunities for resident input. Often, these plans are led by the City through DPD, and are a step toward making changes to zoning for an entire area. The area can range from an individual property, to a commercial street, to an industrial corridor, to a whole ward or community area. The engagement processes are different based on the neighborhood and the community groups, stakeholders, and institutions involved. Ways to participate are typically promoted to residents by DPD once the process gets started.



HOW IT WORKS

Do decision-makers consider public input?

A key part of the zoning process is public input—the ways residents and community members learn about a zoning decision, express their perspective, and potentially affect the outcome. There are two types of meetings where this might happen.

What is a public meeting?

Any gathering of government officials that meets to discuss public business, like a City Council meeting or a Plan Commission meeting, counts as a **public meeting**. (A certain share of members must be present.) Public meetings are regulated by the Illinois Open Meetings Act, a state law that gives everyone the right to attend government meetings.

Public meetings must be announced with an agenda in advance, provide an opportunity for public comment (verbal and/or written), and minutes must be published after the meeting. **Public hearings**, legal proceedings required for certain zoning changes, must happen during a public meeting. (For example, a hearing on a special use application is a public hearing, taking place during a ZBA meeting, which is a public meeting.)

What is a community meeting?


**Community meetings** are gatherings that are meant to engage the public but don't fall under the Open Meetings Act. Their structure, hosting body, and public comment policies vary. There are some specific zoning changes in Chicago that require a community meeting by law, including projects undergoing site plan review under the Air Quality Zoning Ordinance (see below). For other zoning changes, property owners, developers, alderpeople, or DPD may choose to voluntarily host one or more community meetings.

	WHEN DO ZONING PROCESSES REQUIRE...	
	A PUBLIC MEETING?	A COMMUNITY MEETING?
PERMIT BY-RIGHT	Not required	Not required
APPLY FOR ZONING RELIEF	Not required for <b>administrative adjustments</b>  Required for <b>special uses and variations</b> , which are decided in a public hearing by the Zoning Board of Appeals	Required for Master Planned Developments, Planned Manufacturing Districts, cannabis businesses, Special Character Overlay Districts, and Site Plan Reviews under the Air Quality Zoning Ordinance
CHANGE THE ZONING MAP	Required for <b>zoning map amendments</b> , which are decided in a City Council meeting	
CHANGE THE ZONING ORDINANCE	Always required; decided in City Council meetings	Not required

ZONING MATTERS


Zoning influences how development plays out on the ground

This section explores four Chicago developments, showing how policy, leadership decisions, neighborhood context, engagement, and individual action all combine with zoning to shape development outcomes. Zoning and development can become contentious, with many perspectives and incentives coming into conflict.



**First, we explore two industrial developments in McKinley Park and Pullman.**

Industrial development brings jobs, but can also bring harmful pollution, particularly in communities of color. Latinx Chicagoans live with the highest levels of exposure to air pollution. MPC's research found that more land zoned for manufacturing in a neighborhood correlates with more pollution, and that Latinx and Black Chicagoans tend to have more land zoned for manufacturing and heavy manufacturing in their neighborhoods than white and Asian Chicagoans.



**Second, we explore two residential developments in Jefferson Park and Logan Square.**

More than 40% of land in Chicago is zoned for low-density housing like single-family homes, which are more expensive on average than multi-family housing. This limits the ability to build more dense housing, which can contribute to worsening affordability for everyone, particularly for populations that need it the most. MPC's research found that between 2000 and 2022, housing affordability worsened for all Chicagoans, but particularly Black and Latinx Chicagoans. Meanwhile, new housing is highly concentrated in a few neighborhoods—most new housing units built between 2006 and 2024 (60%) were located in just five community areas.

For more [details about these findings](#) and more about pollution exposure, housing affordability and zoning in Chicago, go to:





## A TALE OF TWO INDUSTRIAL DEVELOPMENTS

### Outdated zoning allows an asphalt plant to open near a park

In 2018, the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency granted MAT Asphalt a permit to operate in the McKinley Park community. The site was located in a Planned Manufacturing District zoned for manufacturing and industrial use—a relic of the area's history as a meatpacking district and home of the Union Stockyards.



The plant itself was developed by-right, but it did require rezoning of nearby residential land to commercial. The local alderperson supported the rezoning, in part because of influence from MAT Asphalt's owners. The plant also received a permit from the Chicago Department of Public Health.

Despite notice requirements, residents were not adequately informed that an asphalt plant would be moving near their local park and not far from their homes. Residents and environmental justice advocates, like Neighbors for Environmental Justice, were deeply concerned about the plant's health impacts, so they organized and advocated for its removal. They submitted hundreds of complaints about the plant's negative health effects, and a class action lawsuit resulted in a settlement in 2023 that imposed fines and additional operating requirements on MAT Asphalt. Advocacy efforts against MAT Asphalt are ongoing.



### The “South Side Soapbox” helps anchor community investment



Method, a company that makes soap products, was interested in moving to the Pullman neighborhood to take advantage of Chicago as a regional shipping hub and draw on the community's cultural and industrial history. To move ahead, they would need a zoning change.

The development had support from the local alderperson and received funding as part of a plan to revitalize Pullman. The site was in a Planned Development, and the zoning needed to be amended to remove residential uses but continue to allow commercial and industrial uses.



Many residents and local groups were engaged with the project. Nonprofit developer Chicago Neighborhood Initiatives helped find a location and multiple community meetings were held to ensure residents and local groups felt included and the plan would benefit the Pullman community. Method's environmentally innovative facility opened in 2015, transforming a former steel plant into an economic hub, prioritizing local hiring and sustainability.





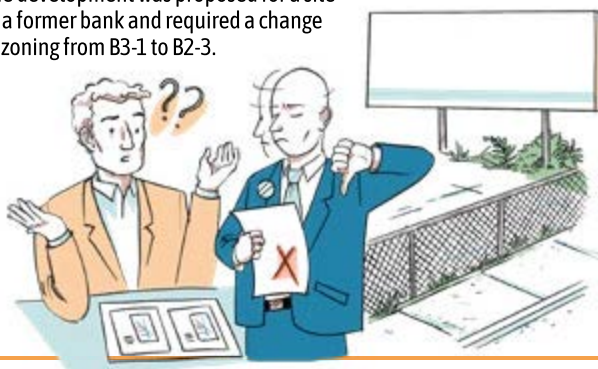
## A TALE OF TWO RESIDENTIAL DEVELOPMENTS

### Multi-family housing blocked by local pushback in Jefferson Park

A housing development was proposed for a long-vacant site in Jefferson Park. The proposal was for 40 apartments: mostly market-rate, about 4 to 8 affordable units, with 61 parking spaces, exceeding the requirements of the zoning ordinance. A zoning change was needed for the development to advance.



The development was proposed for a site of a former bank and required a change in zoning from B3-1 to B2-3.



After input from local groups and a community meeting, the local alderperson did not propose the zoning change needed for the project, meaning it could not move forward.

The developer had reduced the project size over time based on community input (from 52 units to 40 units), but could not overcome the opposition and complaints from community meeting participants and local groups about the project blocking views, bringing in transient tenants, and promoting low-income housing.



Though this was the first proposal the ward had seen in five years, this site remained vacant, as it had been since 2014, instead of housing new neighbors.

### Advocates push for and win new affordable apartments in Logan Square



As part of an early planning process involving local groups and residents, a city-owned parking lot near the Logan Square Blue Line station was identified as a good location for multi-family affordable housing. The project would require support from the City and a zoning change.

City officials and the local alderperson supported the project. The city-owned lot was sold to the nonprofit developer for \$1, and the City provided multiple types of financing.



The zoning change from B1-1 to a Planned Development with underlying zoning of B2-3 was approved by City Council.

Additional community meetings and advocacy from residents and local groups resulted in a development with 100% affordable apartments. Although most neighbors supported the development, a group of nearby property owners unsuccessfully sued to stop the project.



The Lucy Gonzalez Parsons Apartments opened in 2022 after eight years of planning, meetings, and a legal battle—successfully representing the first ETOD developed under the Connected Communities Ordinance in Chicago and replacing a surface parking lot with retail and housing next to a busy transit station.





# BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER

As you’re reading this, zoning is playing a part in shaping how Chicago will look and feel years into the future: **What types of businesses might open in your neighborhood? What buildings will you notice as you walk down the street? Who will feel included?** Zoning is a tool for regulating what goes where—deciding how the land uses that coexist within our city interact with one another. It’s also one piece of a long, ongoing history of laws and practices that have contributed to a segregated Chicago, with disinvestment in some neighborhoods and abundant resources in others. Chicago’s zoning ordinance is a system of interconnected rules and regulations, created over time. It sets out some big objectives: protecting public health, safety, and general welfare, among many other goals. These rules and regulations were created by people. Equipped with the right information, it’s possible for Chicagoans to understand, navigate, and even start to reimagine our city’s zoning system: from its purposes to the outcomes it produces.

## Thanks to our Community Advisory Group for their essential input

This zine was created in partnership with the Zoning and Land Use Assessment and Recommendations initiative’s Community Advisory Group. This Advisory Group included representatives from approximately 25 community and civic organizations across Chicago, meeting six times in 2024 to provide essential input that guided MPC’s work on this zine. We are grateful for members’ thoughtful contributions. For more information on the Community Advisory Group, [please visit](#):



MPC thanks The Chicago Community Trust and Robert Wood Johnson Foundation for funding this work. Without their support this zine would not have been possible.

We also acknowledge the following additional funders:

- U.S. Bank
- Regional Plan Association
- PNC Foundation
- Peoples Gas Community Fund

- Robert R. McCormick Foundation
- John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation
- The Crown Family
- Bowman C. Lingle Trust

## APPENDIX A

### Understanding height maximums in the zoning ordinance

The zoning ordinance sets a maximum height limit for buildings in each zoning district. Sometimes, the height maximum depends on other aspects of the property, such as “lot frontage” (the width of the side of the property facing the street). Not all buildings in a given zoning district will necessarily be constructed to the maximum height. The height maximums listed below are accurate as of April 2025; check the most official zoning ordinance for the most up-to-date information.

RESIDENTIAL DISTRICTS		
Zoning district	Height maximum* *Applies to principal residential buildings; where a range of maximums range is listed, maximum depends on lot frontage	Approx. maximum # stories
RS (all districts)	30ft	3 stories
RT	RT-3.5	35ft
	RT-4	38
RM	RM-4.5	45 - 47ft
	RM-5	45 - 47ft
	RM 5.5	47 - 60ft
	RM-6	None; >110ft requires PD
	RM-6.5	None; >140ft requires PD
BUSINESS AND COMMERCIAL DISTRICTS		
Zoning district	Height maximum* *Where a range of maximums is listed, maximum height depends on lot frontage, ground-floor commercial use, and/or whether the location is transit-served	Approx. maximum # stories
Dash 1 districts (B1-1, B2-1, B3-1, C1-1, C2-1, C3-1)	38ft	3 - 4 stories
Dash 1.5 districts (B1-1.5, B2-1.5, B3-1.5, C1-1.5)	38ft	3 - 4 stories
Dash 2 districts (B1-2, B2-2, B3-2, C1-2, C2-2, C3-2)	45 - 50 ft	4 - 5 stories
Dash 3 districts (B1-3, B2-3, B3-3, C1-3, C2-3, C3-3)	50 - 80ft	5 - 8 stories
Dash 5 districts (B1-5, B2-5, B3-5, C1-5, C2-5, C3-5)	50 - 80ft; PD may be required for buildings >75 ft	5 - 8 stories
DOWNTOWN DISTRICTS		
No maximum height for Downtown districts. If a building height exceeds that district’s threshold for Planned Developments (PD)—district-specific thresholds range from 80ft to 600ft—then that project must go through the PD process.		
MANUFACTURING DISTRICTS		
No maximum height for Manufacturing districts. Large industrial developments may be required to go through the PD process.		

## APPENDIX B

## Sources

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## APPENDIX C

## Glossary of zoning and land use terms

**Administrative adjustment:** Smaller-scale exceptions to bulk and density requirements, approved by the Zoning Administrator.

**Alderperson:** An elected official representing one of 50 Chicago wards in City Council; responsible for constituent services and citywide policymaking. Both laws and norms give alderpeople significant power to influence zoning decisions in their ward; City Council defers to the project ward's alderperson on proposed zoning changes, a power called aldermanic prerogative.

**By-right:** A development that is permitted by-right fits into the zoning rules already established where it is located.

**Floor area ratio (FAR):** A standard used to relate the amount of a building's floor area to the size of the piece of land on which it is built.

**Land use:** The activities that occur in given place; how land is used.

**Planned Development:** A designation for certain developments that meet thresholds that qualify them as major proposals. Allows for flexibility in land use, bulk, and development standards through negotiation between the City and the developer. Uses are typically based on the underlying zoning district.

**Residential density:** The number of housing units permitted on a specific area of land.

**Residential downzoning:** A change in zoning to reduce residential density, decreasing the amount of housing that can be built.

**Residential upzoning:** A change in zoning to increase residential density, increasing the amount of housing that can be built.

**Special use:** A land use that is allowed with additional oversight in a given zoning district, approved by the Zoning Board of Appeals.

**Variation:** Larger-scale exceptions to bulk and density requirements, approved by the Zoning Board of Appeals.

**Zoning map:** A map that shows how zoning districts are arranged across the city.

**Zoning ordinance (or zoning code):** A city law that describes the zoning districts and the requirements for each one.

**Zoning process:** The people and pathways through which decisions about zoning are made.