

This document was prepared by FixItPhilly to highlight some of the key recommendations presented in the following report. For a complete description of the consultants' observations and recommendations, please review the full assessment.

Philadelphia Zoning Code Update Interim Report: Assessment of Existing Code

prepared for the: Zoning Code Commission

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Organization:

- Consolidate rules and regulations into meaningful chapters to make the code more user-friendly.
- Include more tables, graphics, and illustrations to clarify provisions and promote consistency.
- Update terms and uses to reflect a 21st Century city.

Residential and Nonresidential Zoning:

- Reduce the overall number of zoning classifications by consolidating and/or eliminating districts that are seldom used or apply to very small areas.
- Tailor new regulations to fit existing conditions and allow lot size averaging and other flexible design standards so that the number of nonconforming lots is minimized, obstacles to community investment are removed, and the character and density of individual neighborhoods can be maintained.
- Simplify complex setback regulations to eliminate uncertainty about what is permitted and promote creativity in the design of new buildings.
- Create incentives and deregulation that will promote reuse and redevelopment of commercial properties.
- Integrate protections for pedestrian shopping streets into the city's "standard" commercial zoning regulations.
- Re-categorize industrial uses into "general," "heavy," and "special," with the special category applying to industries that use potentially dangerous materials or chemicals or involve dangerous processes.
- Reduce the amount of industrially zoned land by working with the Philadelphia Industrial Development Corporation to modify or eliminate current industrial districts and rezone some land into more flexible classifications to promote reuse and redevelopment.

Special Districts:

- Re-evaluate the use of numerous special districts to control height, urban design, land use, floor area, and signage.
- Eliminate obsolete or unnecessary districts and consolidate districts that regulate identical or very similar land use types.
- Clearly communicate the existence of special controls and where and how they apply.
- Eliminate overly restrictive rules that may be difficult to administer and enforce.
- Introduce a single master plan or planned development-style zoning district to replace the many master plan districts now in the code.

Sustainability:

- Include provisions to address accessory energy generation devices, energy conservation, and the reduction of carbon dioxide emissions.
- Accommodate community food production and access to local produce.
- Promote expansion of tree cover with landscaping and tree protection standards.
- Create incentives to encourage green building technologies.

Sign Regulations:

- Consolidate all the basic rules and regulations that are currently spread throughout the code into the sign chapter.
- Make sign regulations predictable and consistent.
- Avoid discretion in the review and approval of signs.
- Make strategic amendments to sign controls, but a comprehensive overhaul of sign regulations should not be attempted within the context of the zoning code update.

Urban Design:

- Consider creating a Center City zoning classification that consolidates the special rules and special districts to eliminate inconsistency in how urban design issues are treated.
- Refine and coordinate urban design standards so that they are all working to implement the same objectives.
- Develop a targeted approach to design review, building on the proposal recently put forth by the Philadelphia City Planning Commission.
- Modernize bonus systems to be consistent with the city's design goals and standardize more of them.

Parking and Transportation:

- Update parking regulations and design standards to reflect the realities of an urban setting, accommodate shared parking arrangements, and recognize the role of transit and other modes of transportation.
- Create a parking chapter that contains all applicable parking regulations.
- Expand parking exceptions to properties outside of special districts.
- Establish detailed policies on the reuse of older buildings constructed without parking.

Rehab, Reuse and Reinvestment:

- Design regulations to better complement the city's broader efforts at historic preservation and neighborhood revitalization.
- Establish more detailed and flexible policies on nonconformities.
- Make adjustments to standards and regulations that have been chronic stumbling blocks for those seeking to make property improvements.
- Provide contextual development standards that would accommodate redevelopment that is in keeping with existing neighborhood conditions.

Administration and Procedures:

- Make meaningful distinctions between the procedures that apply to major or minor projects.
- Give staff greater authority to approve minor changes to plans and/or to authorize minor modifications of standards in well-defined circumstances.
- Make procedures more transparent and user friendly.
- Reduce the city's heavy reliance on "use variances" by limiting their availability and establishing stricter criteria for their approval.
- Minimize the cost and uncertainty of the development process with the use of contextual zoning standards to accommodate the types of development now "forced" into special review processes.
- Ensure neighbors are notified of proposed development activities, given an opportunity to provide comments to decision-makers, and are made aware of any opportunities for appeals of administrative decisions.