



City of Allentown



To: Allentown City Planning Commission

From: Jennifer Gomez, Planning Director
Melissa Velez, Senior Planner
Trevor Tormann, Senior Planner

Date: July 3, 2025

Subject: **ZONE***Allentown* – Zoning Ordinance Rewrite and SALDO Update

We are pleased to distribute the Public Hearing Draft of the Zoning Ordinance, Zoning Map and the SALDO, collectively referred to as **ZONE***Allentown*. **ZONE***Allentown* aims to create a simplified and user-friendly approach that is aligned with the Vision 2030 plan. Specific project goals include:

- Removing obstacles to achievement of the city's economic development goals;
- Streamlining development review and approval procedures;
- Encouraging development in targeted growth locations,
- Incorporating updated design standards and new place-making tools;
- Promoting walkable mixed-use development patterns;
- Protecting stable residential neighborhoods;
- Offering a variety of housing choices for city residents;
- Ensuring consistency with applicable laws; and
- Incorporating illustrations, graphics and navigational features that make the updated ordinances easy to use and understand.

The process of creating the new zoning ordinance began with an analysis of the city's past and current planning efforts, including the comprehensive plan, downtown plans and design guidelines, historic districts, housing plan, and manufacturing plans. Studies were also conducted to gain an understanding of Allentown's existing physical form. This work—particularly the study of Allentown's many unique building types—provides the structure for many of the new regulations, all of which seek to promote development and redevelopment that respects the physical, built form of our city.

The resulting zoning ordinance is sometimes called a "form-based code," which is a modern approach to zoning that uses clear, illustrated regulations to help maintain and enhance the city's physical character or form. In short, the new ordinance has been written to clearly convey the city's expectations for new development and redevelopment activities going forward. Regulations within the ordinance specifically aim to accommodate and promote development that is context-sensitive (i.e.,

respectful of Allentown’s traditional character and compact walkable urban form), housing-supportive (i.e., increasing supply and affordability), and vibrant and walkable. The proposed ordinance is also intended to be employment friendly, green and healthy, and predictable and transparent.

Proposed changes to the city’s subdivision and land development ordinance (SALDO) are far less extensive than those in the zoning ordinance. There are several new regulations relating to complete streets, parkland dedication, master plan development and traffic impact studies, along with various landscape and environmental provisions. Otherwise, the proposed changes are mainly aimed at clarifying current unwritten practices and synchronizing the SALDO with the new zoning ordinance, as well as with state law.

During the first Public Review Draft phase, the city hosted a variety of presentations, community meetings, open house hours, and training sessions. Staff answered questions and received feedback on the Draft ordinances and zoning map. This feedback was used to draft a second set of Public Review Drafts. Additional feedback was used to draft these ordinances and map, which are now subject to the formal review and adoptions process. The goal is for the new ordinances and map to be adopted and become effective by January 1, 2026.

The distribution of the Public Hearing Draft marks the start of our adoption phase. During the adoption phase, there will be a series of public meetings and hearings, the minimum of which are listed in the table below. This Planning Commission meeting is the first of those meetings and constitutes the public meeting required by the PA Municipalities Planning Code.

Allentown City Planning Commission	Public Meeting	July 8, 2025 12:15 p.m. City Council Chambers
Allentown City Council	Introduction of Bill	TBD
Lehigh Valley Planning Commission	Comprehensive Planning Committee Meeting	TBD
Lehigh Valley Planning Commission	Full Commission Meeting	TBD
Allentown City Planning Commission	Public Meeting	TBD
Allentown City Council – CED Committee	Community & Economic Development Committee Meeting	TBD
Allentown City Council	Public Hearing	TBD

Below are some highlights of key changes. Please refer to the full Zoning Ordinance, SALDO and maps for a more detailed description of all changes. A presentation will be provided to the Planning Commission to review the goals of the project and explain how those goals are being implemented.

ZONING ORDINANCE:

ZONES & MAPPING

- During the mapping process, every property in the city was reviewed and zoned based on building type, use, and context of the surrounding area. Many properties will be brought into compliance with the ordinance and no longer be nonconforming.

- All commercial zones are proposed to be mixed-use zones with residential being permitted.
- Many neighborhood commercial and storefront buildings currently zoned residential are proposed to be zoned mixed-use to allow for a variety of commercial uses permitted by right.
- Industrial zones were largely maintained, except where properties were already converted to residential.

OVERLAY ZONES

- The Traditional Neighborhood Development Overlay (TNDO) and Hamilton Street Overlay (HSO) Districts were built into the ordinance and are no longer overlays.
- The South Riverfront Redevelopment Overlay has been added to the ordinance to maintain zoning amendments that were recently passed by City Council.

BUILDING TYPES

- One of the biggest changes from the existing ordinance is the introduction of building type regulations. The intent of these regulations is to preserve architectural character and identity of areas throughout the city and to improve the pedestrian experience.
- The building form and placement will be more predictable and will encourage walkability with buildings being more human-scale and placed closer to the sidewalk. In most cases, parking will be located to the rear or side of buildings.
- Each building type has a set of regulations, broken up by zone, to make reviewing applications faster and easier.
- The building type and zone clearly determine the number of dwelling units permitted on a property without additional area and yard requirements that currently make residential conversions difficult.

USES

- The use tables were overhauled with individually listed uses being replaced by use groups, categories, and subcategories based on the use descriptions, intensity and other characteristics. Additional flexibility has been added to the use table by building upon the typical permitted by right, special exception and prohibited use classifications by allowing certain uses by right if they are above, below or at the rear of the ground story or either by right or special exception if they are fronting on a mixed-use corridor or small in scale compared to the building footprint.
- Regulations have been added to promote the development of affordable housing. This includes additional height for storefront and general buildings in certain zones, parking reductions, exemptions from certain supplemental use regulations, and reduced minimum floor area.

ACCESSORY STRUCTURES & USES

- The existing accessory structure and use standards have been built upon and expanded, including expanded opportunities for home-based businesses and the addition of accessory dwelling units.
- Accessory dwelling units are allowed based on building type and zone and will add to the City's housing supply while preserving the physical form of existing neighborhoods, efficiently using

existing infrastructure, providing more accessible and affordable housing options and allowing homeowners to age in place.

- Performance standards have been added for accessory uses like food trucks and home occupations to ensure compatibility with surrounding areas.

BUILDING DESIGN

- The building design regulations provide general design requirements for most new buildings and additions, including roof types, entrance types, façade materials and elements, mechanical equipment screening, and high-rise standards.

SITE DESIGN

- The site design regulations detail requirements for site elements like landscaping, tree preservation, walkways, and buffers, aiming to protect property values, enhance aesthetics, increase compatibility of adjacent uses, and manage environmental impacts. It also includes steep slope regulations and performance standards for issues like noise, odors, and glare.
- One of the more substantial additions to this section is tree protection for large lots. The existing tree regulations require significant trees to be surveyed and retained unless, for example, the removal is mitigated by planting new trees. Additionally, heavily wooded sites in the N5 zone have protections modeled after the current R-LC (Low Density Conservation Residential) tree preservation and forestry regulations. R-LC properties are proposed to be zoned N5.
- Buffer requirements are now more detailed and predictable than the current ordinance. A table is included which indicates when side and rear buffers would be required as well as illustrations showing the placement of the required landscaping and/or fencing.

PARKING, MOBILITY & ACCESS

- Parking regulations have been updated to meet the day-to-day needs of businesses, shoppers, employees, residents and visitors while also promoting walking, bicycling and transit use.
- The off-street parking ratio table has been condensed and simplified.
- Specific parking exemptions, reductions and credits have been added to the ordinance, such as exemptions for lane rowhouses, reductions for affordable housing and high-capacity transit, and credits for proximity to public parking and bike-share, etc.
- Alternative compliance methods have been added to allow the ZHB to use data from organizations such as the Urban Land Institute or Institute of Transportation Engineers to make parking requirement determinations.
- Substantial changes have been made to the existing bicycle parking requirement/incentive. A bicycle parking table details the minimum requirements, including the number of spaces and location.

SIGNS

The signage regulations have been updated to be content neutral and to be more specific as to what signage is exempt or prohibited. The other regulations are modeled after the existing ordinance as adapted to the new ordinance structure.

PROCEDURES

- The procedures article provides details of the various zoning processes, including zoning ordinance text amendments, zoning map amendments, curative amendments, zoning permits, special exceptions, variances, and appeals of administrative decisions, outlining the roles of various city bodies like the Zoning Officer, ZHB, and ACPC. Several of these processes include illustrative flow charts that detail the procedural steps.

MEASUREMENTS & DEFINITIONS

- The measurements & definitions article details the measurement standards used throughout the ordinance and includes updated definitions.

ZONING MAPS:

OVERVIEW

The new zoning map was developed through several thorough assessments of building types, existing uses, and present zoning designations. New zoning designations have been assigned granularly at the parcel level. Contiguous zoning was applied to the best degree possible, while still adhering to the significance which the code places on building types.

Four main zoning categories organize the code: mixed-use, neighborhood, industrial, and public-institutional zones. There are subcategories within these groups, indicating variation in permitted building types, uses, and other regulations. These zoning categories generally follow present zoning boundaries – more specificity is shown on these maps, signaling the importance of variation among existing building types.

MIXED-USE ZONING

Downtown

- The city's downtown core has the largest concentration of mixed-use zoning (MX-D, GX-D, GX-C, GX-N). This area was mapped, generally, within the current B2 zoning boundaries. The edges of the city's downtown were assigned GX-C and GX-N zoning to create a smoother transition to the abutting residential neighborhoods. This is seen most clearly north of Linden Street by Old Allentown, and south of Walnut Street.
- Storefront buildings are intentionally arranged exclusively along the core of Hamilton Street, promoting a vibrant commercial core. General buildings surround the Hamilton Street core, promoting an active residential-office mix downtown.

Corridors

- Beyond downtown, mixed-use corridor zoning (MX-C, MX-S, GX-C) extends to scale in each direction of the city. Prominent mixed-use corridors are west along Hamilton Street, east along Hanover Avenue and Union Boulevard, north along N. 7th Street, and south along Lehigh Street and S. 4th Street.

- Notably, N. 7th Street maintains consistent MX-C zoning, aimed at preserving the commercial corridor's storefront character and vision.
- GX-C: Residential-Office Mix Corridor allows most flexibility with permitted building types. Accordingly, these zoning districts have been carefully kept along several of the prominent corridors mentioned above (e.g., Hamilton, Hanover, Union, Lehigh), to the greatest extent possible, as well as in nodes where there are existing large general buildings, and along the Lehigh River Waterfront.
- The most significant concentrations of mixed-use suburban center zoning are within the city's Southside, along Lehigh Street and S. 4th Street.

Neighborhoods

- Neighborhood scale mixed-use zones (GX-N, MX-N) are located across several areas of the city, found similarly where B1R and other commercial districts are currently. These mixed-use neighborhood center zones are intended for smaller-scale corridors and neighborhood nodes.
- Mixed-use neighborhood center zoning is most clustered around N. 19th Street, and N. Front Street. These zones often create a transition from more intensive corridor zoning to neighborhood zoning.
- These districts are otherwise found, generally, on the corners of residential blocks within the city's historic core, existing commercial uses, and larger existing building types.

NEIGHBORHOOD ZONING

- Neighborhood zones (i.e., "N-zones") generally follow a concentric pattern, with N1 zoning concentrated in the city's core, N5 zoning primarily around the city's outer periphery, and N2 through N4 zoning located in between.
- Neighborhood zones 1 and 2, urban and town neighborhoods, contain Allentown's traditional urban and town rowhouse buildings. These zoning designations are largely found in older parts of the city and the Wards.
- Neighborhood zone 3 accommodates a mix of middle housing types like twin houses, suburban rowhouses, small cottage houses, and occasionally, low scale apartments. This zoning designation fits neatly between N1/N2 zones and N4/N5 zones, creating a natural transition from more compact blocks to house style neighborhoods. N3 zoning is found most prominently on the city's East and Southsides, as well toward the city's West End.
- Neighborhood zone 4 is primarily a twin house zoning district. N4 zoning is most common on the city's West End near N. 19th Street and Muhlenberg College. This district preserves the twin house building type, and creates a smoother transition into the single family N5 neighborhood zone.
- Neighborhood zone 5, house neighborhood, includes house building types B and C, and occupies the outer ring of the city. N5 zoning is most prominent on the city's West End, and it is also considerably concentrated on the East and Southsides.
- Lastly, NX zoning, residential mix neighborhoods, maintains larger apartment complexes across the city, while preserving their purely residential character. These zones are found across the city, but are generally located near major corridors on the city's West End, Eastside, and Southside neighborhoods.

INDUSTRIAL ZONING

- Industrial zoning has been mapped similarly to where it is currently zoned, and it has been preserved to the greatest degree possible.
- Buildings within current industrial zones, which are clearly residential or commercial, were given appropriate zoning as such. Similarly, industrial uses within current commercial zones (e.g., BLI, B3) were assigned industrial use where appropriate, typically IX: Industrial-Commercial Mix.

PUBLIC-INSTITUTIONAL ZONING

- Parks and open space largely maintained their zoning, with the exception of properties owned by the Allentown school district, which have all been zoned for institutional use.
- Governmental, schools, and other institutional uses largely maintained their zoning.

MIXED-USE CORRIDORS

- Mixed-Use Corridors are a set of street corridors specifically designated due to their proximity to transit, a mix of uses, and the carrying capacity of the corridor.
- These corridors are found in each section of the city, but they are most common in the city's core, between N. 19th Street and Riverside Drive. The impact of each street corridor will vary by the zoning along a particular street.

ZONING OVERLAYS

- The zoning map includes five overlay zones: Student Residence Overlay, South Riverfront Redevelopment Overlay, Historic Building Demolition Overlay, Riverfront Redevelopment Overlay, and Mixed-Use Overlay. These have been added from the current code.

SALDO:

DESIGN & IMPROVEMENTS

- In order to prevent traffic-related deaths and injuries and ensure safety and convenience for all motorized and non-motorized travelers, the city's vision zero policies and complete street principles have been integrated into the SALDO. This includes regulations for transit facilities, safe and accessible pedestrian connectivity, and bicycle facilities.
- Requirements added to require land developments to incorporate easements for planned trails.
- Parkland dedication regulations have been added to ensure there is adequate parkland to meet future demand and for consistency with Vision 2030 and the Park and Recreation plan.
- Streetscape regulations were added with the intent is to create cohesive landscape designs that enhance the pedestrian experience. The streetscape area includes, at a minimum, the curb, landscape and street tree area and public sidewalk and adhere to complete streets policies.
- Street tree regulations moved from the zoning ordinance to the SALDO to ensure that all streets are consistently lined with trees, establishing a tree canopy for both environmental and aesthetic benefits.

- Waterway and waterfront regulations are proposed to enhance, provide, and protect visibility and access to the city's waterways and the Lehigh River waterfronts. Regulations include specifications for riparian edges, landscape buffers, pedestrian and bicycle paths, water views through the site, public access, and upland connections which connect the waterfront to existing public streets.
- Requirements were added for submittal of transportation impact studies for developments expected to have significant impacts on traffic safety or traffic flow and transportation impact assessments for developments with moderate impacts.
- Additional details and standards were added throughout based on established regulations and protocols of the City's Engineering Office.

MASTER PLAN DEVELOPMENT

- Master plan development regulations were added with the intent to meet the goals of Vision 2030, the Lehigh Riverfront Master Plan, and other city plans. This generally applies to residential/commercial development sites totaling 5 acres or more by:
 - Addressing the surrounding existing and planned context, relationships to other parcels, transportation continuity, and other interactions
 - Resulting in an interconnected system of streets and blocks, extending the city's current grid, which provides access and mobility to all users via multiple modes of transportation
 - Incorporating a variety of smaller, usable, accessible open space for residents and visitors to the sites within walking distance
 - Implementing the Lehigh Riverfront Master Plan, by helping ensure access to and visibility and stewardship of the riverfront
- Master Plan section introduces regulations for Blocks & Streets, Street Configuration, Civic space, and Waterfront Access.

PLAN SUBMITTAL REQUIREMENTS

- Plan submittal requirements were updated to clarify minimum standards. Additions include a project narrative for subdivisions and land developments, and new as-built plan content requirements.

PROCEDURES

- Clarifications were added to define a complete subdivision or land development application and outline the process for incomplete submissions. References to pre-application meetings and electronic submittals were included.
- Flow charts now illustrate the land development review process.
- New regulations clarify how amendments to approved final plans are handled—distinguishing between minor administrative changes, those requiring Planning Commission approval, and those needing a new application.
- To align with the PA Municipalities Planning Code, final plan approval now expires after 5 years (formerly 2), with criteria for staff- and Commission-approved extensions.
- Procedures for finalizing Minor Land Developments were added.

- The City Engineer is authorized to review waivers for Minor Subdivisions and Minor Land Developments, with the option to refer plans to the Planning Commission.

DEFINITIONS

- Specific thresholds and definitions were added to clearly distinguish Major and Minor Land Developments, replacing previous subjective standards.