



Michigan Association of Planning
A Chapter of the American Planning Association

Introduction to Zoning

Zoning is an important tool used to bring about the orderly development of cities, villages, and townships. It does this by controlling the way that land can be used. It does this by controlling the way that land can be used. It controls how much development will occur and guides land use in such a way that it makes economic, physical, and environmental sense.

A community's zoning ordinance controls land use by specifying the uses that are appropriate in each part of the community. Residential, business, commercial, and manufacturing areas are separated from each other. Zoning strives to make sure that the uses of land in different parts of a community are compatible. To this end, some areas (residential areas, for example) are protected from some uses (like industry).

Zoning controls the development of properties by controlling two principal aspects of land use. First, the uses permitted within a given zone are identified. Second, the amount of building (bulk) that may be developed on a lot is regulated. Height, lot coverage and, in the case of residential uses, minimum front, back, and side yards are specified.

By controlling use and bulk, development can be arranged so that uses will be more compatible to each other and provide for required light, air, and open space.

Another purpose for these controls is to aid in balancing development so that existing government services such as streets, utilities, and schools will be used adequately and efficiently.

Without zoning, a car repair shop, noodle factory, or high-rise apartment could be built anywhere- even in an area which is primarily developed with single family homes. The result could make living in a home much less desirable and decrease its addition, utilities such as water mains, sewers, streets, or schools might be used beyond their capacities.

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The responsibility for zoning rests with municipalities. This power is granted by the State government. States confer zoning authority to communities from “police powers” granted to states by the Constitution. These powers seek to prevent violations of the public interest. This right of local governments has today been upheld as constitutional in every state, and the U.S. Supreme Court has upheld zoning as an appropriate function of local government.

Zoning is guided by a long-range plan called a Master Plan. The Master Plan has many elements, such as land use, major street locations, and public facilities.