

Enabling  
Better  
Places

# A Handbook for Improved Neighborhoods



By **AARP Livable Communities** and the **Congress for the New Urbanism**



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**AARP** is the nation's largest nonprofit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to empowering people 50 or older to choose how they live as they age. With nearly 38 million members and offices in every state, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands, AARP strengthens communities and advocates for what matters most to families, with a focus on health security, financial stability and personal fulfillment. The AARP Livable Communities initiative's programs include the AARP Network of Age-Friendly States and Communities and the annual AARP Community Challenge "quick-action" grant program.



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The **Congress for the New Urbanism's** mission is to champion walkable urbanism. CNU provides resources, education, and technical assistance to create socially just, economically robust, environmentally resilient, and people centered places. CNU leverages New Urbanism's unique integration of design and social principle to advance three key goals: to support complete neighborhoods, legalize walkable places, to design for a climate change. With 19 local and state chapters and headquarters in Washington, D.C., CNU works to unite the New Urbanist movement. (See page 21 to learn more.)

## Enabling Better Places: A Handbook for Improved Neighborhoods

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**FRONT COVER IMAGES** (Top) Main Street, Northport, New York, by Salty Dog Photography

(Bottom) The Wharf, Washington, D.C., by Payton Chung | Romare Bearden Park, Charlotte, North Carolina, by Melissa Stanton, AARP

**Note:** Most of the photographs in this handbook were taken before the need for social distancing and mask wearing due to the global COVID-19 pandemic.

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# Enabling Improved Neighborhoods

**W**hy are so few cities, towns and neighborhoods in the United States walkable? Why is it so difficult to find vibrant communities where people of all ages, incomes and backgrounds can live, work, shop and play?

The answer, in many locations, is that zoning codes and land use ordinances have made the creation of such places illegal. In some communities, the lack of walkability, opportunity and livability stems from zoning and development decisions that intentionally separated people by race, faith, ethnicity or income.

There are 42,000 units of local government with zoning authority in the United States. This guide explains why a community may want to change its zoning codes and rules, and how it can do so in ways that strengthen the local economy, promote equity, and support diversity and inclusion.

The Congress for the New Urbanism — with support from AARP and other partners — launched The Project for Code Reform to support communities that want to revise their zoning codes but don't have the staffing and resources to seek full-fledged change. For these places, the wisest path is often to pursue incremental changes that can nonetheless improve the economy, built environment and residents' quality of life.

***Enabling Better Places: A Handbook for Improved Neighborhoods* provides options for communities to consider as they identify and select small-scale, incremental policy changes that can be made without overhauling entire zoning codes and land use policies.**

This handbook collaboration by AARP and CNU has been created as a reference for discussions among local leaders and community members interested in improving where they live. It is based on work led by the Michigan Economic Development Corporation and Michigan Municipal League that sought to identify incremental zoning code changes to spur economic growth. The publication is not a comprehensive checklist, nor is it meant to serve in lieu of a careful, context-specific code review process to determine and prioritize the best opportunities for beneficial change.



**▲ BAR HARBOR, MAINE:** The Village Green is located in the center of the waterfront community's walkable downtown. It's a Wi-Fi equipped spot for sitting, sunning, people-watching and listening to free summer concerts.

## FROM CNU ABOUT

### The Project for Code Reform

The Congress for the New Urbanism's Project for Code Reform seeks to streamline the code reform process by providing state and local governments with place-specific, incremental zoning code changes that address the most problematic barriers first, build political will, and ultimately create more walkable, prosperous, and equitable places. The project's incremental approach enables jurisdictions to set their own pace for code changes, allowing them to prioritize their coding efforts, respond to the community's vision and needs, and facilitate greater community learning and understanding.

**LEARN MORE:** [CNU.org/What-We-Do/Our-Projects](https://cnu.org/What-We-Do/Our-Projects)

## FROM AARP ABOUT

### AARP Livable Communities

AARP believes that communities should have safe and walkable streets, age-friendly housing and transportation options, access to needed services, and opportunities for residents of all ages to participate in community life. The AARP Livable Communities initiative helps advance the efforts of neighborhoods, towns, cities, counties, rural areas and entire states to be livable for people of all ages. In addition to engaging and providing support at the national, state and local levels, AARP develops resources for use and sharing by elected officials, local leaders, municipal staff, planners, policymakers, advocates and involved residents.

**LEARN MORE:** [AARP.org/Livable](https://aarp.org/Livable)

# Coding for Livable and Prosperous Places

## Understanding places — past and present

**Z**oning codes and street standards are the very DNA of what makes — or breaks — a place, dictating where and how much parking is created, the width and location of sidewalks, and the placement of buildings.

When designed appropriately, good codes can provide housing and mobility options, support economic development and jobs, and encourage the creation of commercial districts and neighborhoods that attract talent and equitably serve residents of all ages, races, physical abilities, incomes and family structures.

Cities, towns, suburbs and even rural regions are shaped by a complex, layered set of standards, codes and zoning requirements. **Building Codes** (which this handbook does not address) regulate the internal workings and safety of structures. **Zoning Codes** (which this publication *does* address) determine where buildings are located, what form they take, how they complement each other and how they can be used.

Conventional or use-based zoning emerged more than a century ago as the environmental consequences of the Industrial Revolution became apparent. Codes were championed as a mechanism for protecting property values, managing growth, and addressing public health concerns related to pollution, overcrowding, and access to fresh air and natural light.

The next generation of codes were written in the mid-20th century to accommodate and guide the post-World War II housing boom. The codes (the majority of which are still in place) reflected the policy preferences and priorities of the federal government, which were to expand the national highway system and facilitate home ownership by returning soldiers.

These and other government, lender and insurer practices, such as redlining, favored certain locations and populations over others. In the 1930s, the Home Owners' Loan Corporation, a federal agency, produced “residential security” maps that deemed neighborhoods with a large amount of racial and ethnic minorities to be “hazardous” for lending, thereby stifling opportunities and the ability of those residents to build wealth. According to a 2018 report by the National Community Reinvestment Coalition, “Redlining buttressed the segregated structure of American cities.”



▲ **HOUSTON COUNTY, GEORGIA:** Owning a car is necessary for residents of most suburban subdivisions.

The result of such policies was the expansion of an automobile-oriented America, turning a nation of largely walkable or transit-supported communities into one dominated by homogeneous suburbs far from urban centers. Among the consequences: an increase in sprawl, freeways that tore apart city neighborhoods, long commutes for workers, worsening racial and income segregation in many parts of the nation, and both a decrease in quantity and a decline in quality of the walkable, vibrant streets and neighborhoods at the heart of many American towns and cities.

The zoning codes adopted during the second half of the 20th century make it difficult or even illegal to create Main Streets and downtowns that feature storefronts with apartments above them. Such mixed-use, work-live properties contribute to the vibrancy and diversity of communities by enabling easy access to goods and services, as well as job and business opportunities that support equitable economic activity.

Many people would like the option of having a small café or market within walking distance of their home. Many would like to walk to work or downsize into a smaller home in the same community where they already live. Yet current rules and zoning codes often prevent businesses from locating in or near residential areas, and they often prevent a mix of housing types (such as multifamily homes in neighborhoods with single-family houses).

In too many places, the local zoning code no longer serves the needs, vision or goals of the community. ■

# Reinventing Spaces

## Small changes can make a difference

**R**evising a zoning code to suit a community's needs requires the support of a diverse collection of stakeholders, including elected leaders, business owners and residents. When a community has the resources and ability to undertake wholesale code changes, the right choices can result in a great place to live and a stronger economy.

But changing the way a community is designed can pose logistical hurdles and provoke emotions. Communities that have the resources to pursue comprehensive zoning reform often find it to be a contentious and arduous process for all involved. That's why incremental code reform is frequently a better and more effective approach. When the public understands the goals and is involved in the process, there's generally greater support for implementation.

By undertaking a series of immediate first steps, a community can try new approaches and grow into them, advancing to additional changes in an organic way and at a pace that suits that particular place. In some locations, the biggest wins come from simplifying or removing certain requirements, as opposed to overhauling the code completely. Enacting broader, midrange changes might require greater political will and momentum. Regardless of what a community takes on, the formula is as follows:

- Focus on the most problematic barriers first
- Build political will
- Address inequities, including racial segregation
- Assess the priorities and challenges raised by local leaders, residents and influential stakeholders

### What's the biggest little thing that can transform a community?

The incremental code reform process empowers place-specific changes that address the most achievable reforms first and build political will, with the goal of creating places that equitably serve residents, regardless of age, race, sexual orientation or physical ability.

### Getting into the Zone

**Master Plans** and **Downtown Plans** are a community's framework for growth, redevelopment and investment. **Zoning** is the primary tool for the implementation of those plans.

- Zoning, street standards and other codes dictate where buildings are placed, how they are used, where and how much parking is built, and the width and location of sidewalks.
- Zoning can make or break the ability to spur economic growth, meet residents' needs, increase diversity, or respond to local or regional challenges.

## Some Past, Present and Future Reality Checks

### The population of the United States is aging and growing more diverse

- By 2030, 1 in 4 Americans will be a race other than white and 1 in 5 people will be age 65 or older.
- By 2034, older adults will outnumber children younger than 18 for the first time in the nation's history. By that year, people age 80 or older will account for more than 10 percent of all U.S. households. Most will live alone.
- AARP research finds that the vast majority of people 50-plus want to remain in their homes and communities as they age.

Housing tenures and types have an impact on financial security and the growing economic inequality among older adults. "Older renters are less well positioned than homeowners because they have lower cash savings and wealth," notes the Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University, which adds that "longstanding differences in access to well-paying jobs and homeownership opportunities leave older minority households at a financial disadvantage in their retirement years."

An older population will require different options for where and how to live, work and play than what current zoning codes allow. Updating the codes to ensure that communities have amenities and services to support aging will enable older adults to remain independent, engaged and active in community life.



# The Physical Elements of Place

Understanding a community's physical elements can help determine what goes where and why — and what the appropriate and available fixes might be

Communities traditionally have a number of distinct areas, such as a downtown, Main Street or other commercial zones; parks and open spaces; residential neighborhoods; and civic venues, including schools, libraries, and a city or town hall.

To many people, these labels convey a familiar feel and sense of place created through factors including where buildings are located and their design, the types of homes people live in, the businesses and services in the area, and the activities that take place in the streets and public spaces. When a diverse assemblage of residents contribute to decisions that define a place, they help make a community more inclusive and equitable.

To most people, a “downtown” is a place where buildings are close to the street, near one another and at least two stories tall. Downtown is a place where there are shops, services, offices and restaurants. The iconic elements of a downtown might include a movie theater marquee, a street clock, sidewalk cafés and outdoor furnishings. In a thriving downtown, there are a variety of activities, opportunities to safely gather, and ways to get around.

Creating the feel of a place is, in part, the role of zoning. Changing the zoning code can facilitate or hinder a sense of place because zoning codes regulate where and how much parking is allowed, how high and far back from the



▲ **SAN JOSE, CALIFORNIA: A failing strip mall was converted into Santana Row, a mix of retail and housing. The development exemplifies how a location can come alive when the surrounding buildings and streets support pedestrian activity.**

street new buildings can be built, and even if and where sidewalks are required.

Code changes need to be calibrated to a specific area, such as a downtown, and aligned with the broader goals and vision the community has for it. For example, parking requirements might need to change in the downtown area but not in a residential neighborhood.

It's critical to understand *where* in the community a code change will apply — and what kind of place will result. ■

## Incremental code changes can benefit a community by ...

### IMPROVING ...

- Conditions for businesses to open, expand or adapt
- The availability of housing options, such as duplexes, garden apartments and accessory dwelling units (learn more on pages 17 and 20)
- Street design for more pedestrian- and cyclist-friendly conditions

### ELIMINATING ...

- Barriers to creating different types of housing and businesses within neighborhoods
- Underused parking lots — and parking rules that don't add value to the community
- Mandates for street dimensions and conventions that endanger or impede pedestrians





◀ **LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA:** Destination Crenshaw, which broke ground in February 2020, is a 1.3-mile-long, landscaped and tree-lined outdoor art and culture experience celebrating Black Los Angeles. Developed through a three-year community engagement process and designed by the firm Perkins & Will — co-designer of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C. — the project will provide several community gathering spaces. The city’s Crenshaw train line will run nearby. As stated on the project’s website: “Through education, arts and culture, Destination Crenshaw will cement itself as a cultural hub that will facilitate economic security and entrepreneurship for residents as a method of place-keeping and community building.”



◀ **SUWANEE, GEORGIA:** The small city’s downtown was created from scratch in the early 2000s in response to two distinct community goals: “To preserve open space and create more parks, and assemble a stand-out-in-the-crowd, energetic and aesthetically appealing downtown and primary community gathering place.” The picture at left shows the Town Center shops (with apartments above them) and Town Center Park, which features an expansive lawn filled with shade trees, a splash park and a terraced performance amphitheater. Residents and visitors can shop, dine, view the “Suwanee SculpTour” public art installations and participate in special events — including concerts, food festivals, fitness competitions, costume parades and even goat yoga.



◀ **MIAMI, FLORIDA:** Downtown Miami has a playground with a padded surface and enclosure fencing to protect small users with fast little legs. Why? Because mixed among the high-end hotels and office towers on and near Biscayne Boulevard are households with young families. The waterfront Margaret Pace Park includes the pictured play area, as well as tennis, volleyball and basketball courts; fitness equipment; public art; and a now-requisite dog park. Also nearby: a supermarket and the free, elevated light-rail-like Metromover.

# Adapting for the Greatest Impact

Code reform can address various needs, but the concerns that influence the public space experience the most are streetscapes; building forms and uses; and the design and location of facades, frontages and parking. It's in these spaces — the distances from one building to another across the street or next door — that zoning codes have the most significant impact.



## STREETSCAPES

A streetscape is what's seen while looking at a line of buildings and properties along a street. (Think of the horizontal expanse captured by a panoramic photo.)

In downtowns and along Main Streets, streetscapes influence the success of businesses, the flow of vehicular and pedestrian traffic, and opportunities for social interaction.

Well-designed streetscapes can enhance property values, increase safety, reassure pedestrians and bicyclists that their needs are important, and reflect the unique character of a neighborhood.



## BUILDING FORMS and USES

Rules for building forms and uses control the shape and placement of structures, including the height, setback distance from the street, lot size and lot coverage.

Large suburban setbacks were established, in part, to ensure a safe distance for homes and households from busy or high-speed roadways. In urban and downtown areas, minimum setbacks are meant to encourage and strengthen the connection between pedestrians, storefronts and offices.

In many communities, regulations designed for suburban setbacks and buffers have been inappropriately applied to downtowns, Main Streets and adjacent neighborhoods.

Zoning regulations are important for safeguarding public health and restricting noxious or incompatible uses — such as pollution-generating businesses in residential areas. But the overall goal of zoning should be to encourage the types of compatible uses that support successful places and a strong economy.



## FACADES, FRONTAGES and PARKING

A facade is a building's street-facing exterior wall.

The frontage is the space between the facade and the sidewalk.

Both are critical, since a building's facade and frontage area influence whether people will walk alongside the building. Independent of architectural style, zoning changes related to facades and frontages can increase an area's pedestrian activity and economic viability.

Along with frontage, the amount and location of parking can have a major impact on the walkability and vitality of a community. Zoning related to parking should be smart and suitable, balancing the need for access with the desire to create a thriving place.

### KEEP IN MIND

**Overly restrictive zoning can hinder economic competitiveness, undermine goals for diversity and inclusion, and slow revitalization.**



# Building Support for Code Reform

Change is both a technical and political process. To revise a zoning code, advocates need to actively engage, educate and inspire the community.

## 1. Identify needs and how reform can help

Successful code reform has well-defined goals that cannot be achieved under the current code. As a starting point, advocates can cite examples of what isn't working, or what is no longer allowed but could work well.

### • Reverse past wrongs

Conventional zoning has been used as a tool for social and racial segregation. Reform efforts can work to reverse past wrongs and start eliminating inequities by increasing support for local business ownership, housing that's affordable and protections against displacement.

## 2. Linking reforms to community interests and concerns

Who are the decision-makers and what are their interests? Are their goals consistent with the concerns of the general public? For example, the community's elected officials and local leaders might be concerned about:

### • Increasing opportunity

Code reform can allow for more flexible land use, which can contribute to larger community goals, such as rebuilding or strengthening the local economy, increasing housing choices, fostering attractive public spaces, improving safety, and creating opportunities for disadvantaged or underrepresented residents.

### • Focusing on redevelopment zones and areas

Code revisions — such as improved design practices and simplified development regulations — can support community-desired changes for target investment in areas of need.

### • The “plans that sit on the shelf” syndrome

At some point in its past, the community might have invested time and money in plans that were never implemented. Aligning code reform with a community's master planning increases the likelihood of plans becoming a reality and allows the community to adjust to new challenges or opportunities.

## 3. Predicting and addressing potential pain points

The language used to explain code changes should be as transparent and easily understood as possible. But even with misinterpretations off the table as a problem, common challenges include:

### • Costs and capacity

Concerns about price and staffing are why it's important for decision-makers to understand that incremental reform can be incorporated in less time, and with lower risk and cost, than a full overhaul of a zoning code.

### • Legal questions

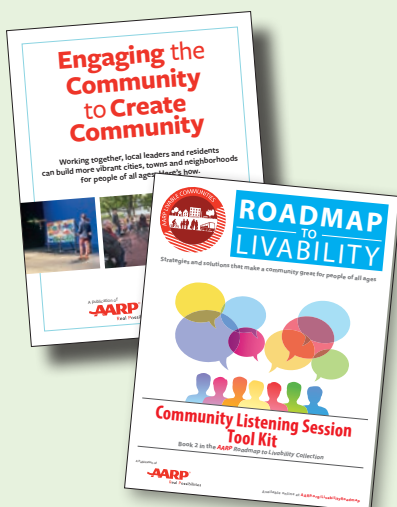
Since code reform efforts are typically vetted by a community's attorney or land use expert before implementation, legal concerns shouldn't prevent a community or its leadership from brainstorming about and considering new approaches.

### • A lack of public support

The code reform approach outlined in this handbook reduces complexities and enables zoning codes to be tailored to local goals. Among the benefits of incremental code reform is that the process is easy for the public to understand — and support!

## LISTEN and LEARN

Visit [AARP.org/LivableLibrary](https://www.aarp.org/LivableLibrary) to order or download these free community engagement guides for local leaders.



# Identifying the Key Players

Zoning affects the everyday lives of all community members — where they live, work and play, how they interact with one another, and what they see along the way



▲ **SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA:** Playful seating helps demonstrate the community benefits of wider sidewalks in the city's Mid-Market neighborhood.

It's important to remember that zoning codes are a highly technical type of regulation that touch multiple layers of governance and involve many levels of decision-making. Because of that, a diverse and inclusive coalition of stakeholders needs to be involved.

When creating advisory and steering committees, or designing civic outreach for code reform, strive for the committees to be multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and open to the community at large. Provide a way to represent the interests of those who are unable to participate or advocate for themselves.

To accomplish incremental code reform, assemble a team of local leaders that includes, or at least solicits input from, individuals and groups with different perspectives on the work being proposed.

This usually involves contacting people from municipal government, the volunteer sector, the business community, social services and philanthropies, as well as, of course, residents.



▲ **LOUISVILLE, KENTUCKY:** Pop-up parklets provide spots for eating and relaxing along Woodlawn Avenue in the city's walkable Beechmont neighborhood.

## THE PUBLIC SECTOR

Elected officials, government staff, educators

## THE PRIVATE SECTOR

Businesses, media, funders

## THE NONPROFIT SECTOR

Faith-based and community-based organizations, volunteers, diversity specialists

## THE RESOURCE SECTOR

Consultants, companies with technical or subject-specific expertise

## THE POLICY SECTOR

Legislators, advocates, think tanks

## THE INFORMAL SECTOR

Neighbors, homeowners' associations, clubs

## THE COMMUNITY AT LARGE

Residents and other members of the public who don't fit into the preceding groups



# Identifying the Right Reforms

For incremental code reform to be effective and enable better places, the right solutions need to be used in the right types of locations

## Planning for Better Downtowns and Main Streets

**T**he downtown or Main Street districts that succeed and become useful destinations offer a sense of place. They don't look or feel like the shopping centers — or roadways dotted with chain eateries, strip malls and big box stores — that are common throughout the nation.

What successful Main Streets and downtowns *do* share with strip malls and shopping centers is that all are set up for effective cross-shopping, which means the customers of one business become aware of other businesses by walking past them. Such areas have the ability to pivot quickly, adjusting to changing conditions and incorporating new services and amenities as needed.

Another similarity many Main Streets and downtowns have with shopping malls is that they can be “park once”

destinations. The difference is that instead of oversized asphalt lots and concrete parking garages, Main Streets and downtowns can provide on-street parking and small lots behind buildings. Both types of in-town parking spots are convenient and can generate parking meter income for reinvesting in the streetscape.

When housing is integrated into downtown areas, local businesses have a built-in customer base, people who can't or don't want to drive can reside in a walkable community, and the added “eyes on the street” enhance neighborhood safety.

The following menu of strategies, elements and interventions can help Main Streets and downtowns become active, vibrant, successful places. ►



▲ **PORTSMOUTH, NEW HAMPSHIRE:** A wide downtown sidewalk on Congress Street provides room for diners, pedestrians, cyclists, bike racks and trees.



▲ **SOUTH BEND, INDIANA:** The West Side Main Streets Initiative improved Western Avenue's sidewalks, reduced crossing distances and added pedestrian-scale lighting.

## The Streetscape

Simple code changes can transform streets from places in service to cars to spaces designed for people.

### STAGE 1

*Change can happen with relative speed.*

#### 1. Save Small Streets and Alleys



Small blocks with service access via alleys are often eliminated from historic communities so the spaces can be used in other ways. Doing so typically reduces walkability and a district's potential for success. If small blocks and alleys no longer exist (or never existed), consider adding some.

#### 2. Establish On-Street Parking



On-street parking is public, conveniently located and business-friendly. The spaces can provide a variety of benefits, including a layer of safety to pedestrians by separating moving traffic from the sidewalk. But on-street parking spots are often removed in order to add travel lanes or accommodate curb cuts for driveways. Wherever possible, on-street parking should be maintained or added before creating off-street parking lots or garages at an additional cost.

#### 3. Allow Encroachment



The word encroachment isn't often used in a positive context, but here it is. The space in front of a restaurant for outdoor dining and an awning that projects over the public right-of-way are both beneficial encroachments. A caveat: On sidewalks with significant pedestrian traffic, it might be necessary to ensure a width of at least 8 feet (not including any sidewalk seating, bus stop shelters, planters and other features) so passersby of all abilities can safely navigate the space.

### STAGE 2

*Change requires time and investment.*

#### 1. Restore Two-Way Streets



The one-way streets in many downtowns were once two-ways that were converted to increase vehicular capacity and speeds. But high-speed roadways in downtown districts are dangerous to pedestrians. One-way streets also reduce the number of customers who'll see a shop or business as they drive by. Many towns and cities that converted their two-way streets to one-way are switching back to benefit the local economy.

#### 2. 'Complete' the Streets



The term Complete Streets refers to a transportation policy that considers the needs of all roadway users: drivers, pedestrians, cyclists and transit riders. Increased access and safety for walking and bicycling correlates with an increase in customers for an area's shops, service providers and eateries. While an expressway doesn't need to be suitable for pedestrians and cyclists, a Main Street or downtown does. State governments that want to encourage Complete Streets can incentivize street safety projects by providing funding.

#### 3. Put Roads on a Diet



Communities benefit from slower-moving vehicles. From a safety standpoint, slower speeds save lives. From a business perspective, slower speeds increase visibility and make the sidewalk a more pleasant place for customers. Posting a lower speed limit helps, but it's more effective to reduce the number and width of travel lanes. Each should be no more than 10 feet wide in business districts, except where bus routes or bicycle lanes make more width necessary.

#### 4. Limit the Lanes



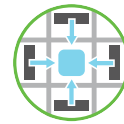
For reasons similar to those of a road diet, the most vibrant Main Streets consist of two travel lanes moving in opposite directions. Two-lane roadways can be easily crossed by pedestrians. While some downtown districts do fine when a third lane is added for turning, additional travel lanes typically reduce safety.

#### 5. Set Public Realm Standards



Although careful attention should be paid to creating an attractive public space, design standards need to be limited and reasonable. Sensible policies establish a minimum sidewalk width, provide on-street parking, and call for street trees, outdoor seating and pedestrian-scale lighting.

#### 6. Provide Stormwater Options



Stormwater that passes over roofs, parking lots, streets and other impervious surfaces carries pollutants into local waterways. Some communities require treating stormwater on-site, which can be done with street trees, bioretention, swales and permeable pavement. When costly underground treatment is the only option, off-site stormwater management should be employed. When a community's stormwater isn't managed collectively over a large area, a fee-in-lieu approach can fund streetscape retrofits to add storage and protect water quality.

#### 7. Remove Highways that Blight or Disconnect Communities



Replacing urban freeways with surface streets is a cost-effective, sustainable option for cities dealing with aging, grade-separated roads. This has the added benefit of healing local street networks and improving regional traffic dispersion. (Learn more on page 21.)



## Building Forms and Uses

Buildings shape the public spaces of Main Streets and downtowns. Minor text changes in a zoning code can go a long way toward ensuring that building forms are in the appropriate contexts. To encourage equitable development and a robust local economy, uses within a building should be changeable without the need for a change-of-use permit.

### STAGE 1

*Change can happen with relative speed.*

#### 1. Permit 100% Lot Coverage



Main Street and downtown buildings usually fill most, if not all, of their lot footprint.

This is especially true with small historic properties. Lot coverage limitations aren't appropriate in historic or downtown areas and should be removed.

#### 2. Set Facade Heights



A street can feel like a comfortable, outdoor room when the height of the buildings is at least half

the width of the street. While this is not always achievable, particularly on larger streets, the “enclosure” of the sidewalk space can be more easily addressed. Along sidewalks it's best to ensure that building facades are no less than 24 feet high. Mandating facade heights can create a sense of enclosure without the economic pitfalls of minimum story requirements.

#### 3. Support Mixed Uses



While ground floor commercial uses are the norm in downtowns, ground-level residential properties can be useful, too. They can, for instance, result in additional customers for area businesses and an around-the-clock presence that helps keep the area safe.

#### 4. Simplify Uses



Since building uses change over time, it's best to regulate them on the basis of broad categories — commercial, residential, industrial, civic — not narrow ones, such as coffee shops or barber shops. Where certain uses need to be restricted, list only those that are disallowed or limited rather than all permitted uses.

#### 5. Allow Short-Term Uses



Temporary structures and short-term permitted uses lower the barrier to success, help businesses adapt, and validate ideas without triggering parking requirements and site development costs. Permission should be granted for at least two years, perhaps with an option to renew.

#### 6. Bust Buffer Requirements



Tree-filled lots or sound-blocking walls are useful for separating housing from busy roadways. In downtowns areas, the adjacency of buildings is key to a street or location's vibrancy and economic success.

#### 7. Don't Dictate the Decorating



Architectural mandates about building styling can be costly and artificial-looking. For shopkeepers, the key to success in downtowns and on Main Streets is an appealing storefront and ground floor space. The creation of welcoming entrances, smart signage and street-level windows can happen without decrees.

#### 8. Plan for Inclusionary Zoning



A market-based strategy for creating mixed-income communities, inclusionary zoning encourages or requires developers to set aside a portion of the units in a new or remodeled residential project for low- and moderate-income households.

### STAGE 2

*Change requires time and investment.*

#### 1. Set Adjacency Requirements



Where downtowns abut residential areas, adjacency requirements can address compatibility issues involving height restrictions, side yard setbacks within 50 feet of residential districts, and more.

#### 2. Say 'Yes' to Mixed Income, Multifamily Housing



Having housing within walking distance of a downtown or Main Street is vital to an area's success, especially outside of peak business hours. Multifamily housing, such as apartment buildings or multi-unit row homes, should be available at different sizes, affordable for a range of income levels and permitted throughout a downtown district, with the possible exception of street-level units in the main commercial hub.

#### 3. Encourage Public Use of Private Parking



Centrally located but underused parking lots and garages are detrimental to the success of Main Street and downtown districts. It's better to devote the space to more vital activities. To do that, private parking lots and structures, such as apartment buildings or offices, can share their parking areas with the public at least part of the time.

#### 4. End Density and Ratio Rules



Per-property-density and floor-area-ratio (or FAR) restrictions aren't needed on Main Streets or in downtowns, where activity and vibrancy are among the goals. These types of mandates often restrain the business and housing market, especially when they're set unreasonably low.

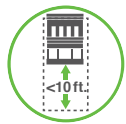
## Facades, Frontages, Parking

Simple changes in the code for how buildings meet the street can make a difference in the economic success of a community.

### STAGE 1

*Change can happen with relative speed.*

#### 1. Establish Sensible Setbacks



When Main Street or downtown buildings are constructed far from the street and sidewalk, such as for a parking lot, the area becomes more car-centric and less lively. Yet, if buildings are too close to the street, the space in front of stores can be too tight for foot traffic and unsafe, undermining passersby who aren't agile enough to dodge obstacles and other pedestrians. While a 10-foot setback works for most Main Streets and downtowns, it's important to be mindful of all users and uses when determining the distance.

#### 2. Require Sidewalk Entrances



Buildings located along sidewalks should have entries that face the sidewalk. This seems obvious, but it's now common for buildings to be accessible only from parking areas. Doorways that face parking lots or are at the rear or side of a building can serve as secondary entrances. Buildings that are more than 100 feet wide can be required to provide additional entrances, such as one for every 70 feet of facade.

#### 3. Ban Blank Walls



People are less likely to use sidewalks alongside buildings that have no street-facing windows or doors. While some blank walls can be mitigated with murals, art isn't a total solution. Blank walls at street level or on the second floor of buildings should not exceed 30 feet in width.

#### 4. Require Transparency



Opaque windows and doors are as uninviting as blank walls. Ground-floor facades should have 50 percent transparency — in other words, clear glass between the bulkhead, at about two feet above ground, and the sign band at roughly 10 feet. (The percentage is calculated in reference to the full facade.) Mirrored and heavily tinted glass should be similarly prohibited, since being able to see into buildings and be seen by the people inside enhances public safety.

#### 5. Be Smart About Parking



Parking should be located behind buildings, inside structures or on the street. When parking lots are located between buildings and the sidewalk, curb cuts interrupt the sidewalk, trees are typically scarce, and pedestrians and drivers are at risk from vehicles pulling into or out of the lot. If parking is near a sidewalk, there should be a visible barrier, such as a wall or evergreen hedge, between the pedestrians and vehicles.

#### 6. Limit Curb Cuts



Driveway curb cuts along the sidewalk interrupt the pedestrian flow and put walkers at risk. In many cases, properties can provide vehicle access from a side street or alley. Another common pedestrian- and driver-unfriendly configuration is when neighboring parking lots don't connect to one other. As a result, drivers need to merge onto the main roadway in order to move from one lot to another — and pedestrians need to protect against a steady stream of vehicles moving into and out of the lots.

#### 7. Allow Shared Parking



Shared parking has been tested in many areas and studied by the Urban Land Institute, which recommends that interested parties start by analyzing overlapping usage patterns. For instance, there's probably not much overlap in peak parking usage for a small apartment building and an office complex. Similarly, lodging, restaurants, retailers, municipal buildings and houses of worship each have distinctive patterns of demand that can be used to optimize the use of parking areas. Shared parking promotes a "park once" experience, in which customers are more likely to find and patronize businesses near their destination and complete more tasks and errands.

### STAGE 2

*Change requires time and investment.*

#### 1. Reduce the Gaps



Empty lots and building vacancies can destroy a downtown. When the gap between businesses is large, pedestrians turn back in the direction they came from rather than explore what's further down the street. To avoid gaps, require new buildings and additions to fill a minimum portion of the lot width along the sidewalk, typically 60 to 70 percent.

#### 2. End Minimum Parking Rules



Parking guidelines are primarily devised for auto-dependent suburban retail centers. Those same standards are rarely applicable to Main Street contexts. Municipalities are recognizing that parking minimums aren't an effective tool for creating great places. Lenders and tenants may still require a minimum number of parking spots but creative solutions — including shared parking and improved pedestrian and bicycle access — can be used to meet those requirements.



# Identifying the Right Reforms

## Planning for Better Neighborhoods

**R**esidential areas that abut downtown or Main Street districts are called “adjacent neighborhoods.”

Most of these neighborhoods were developed before the 1950s and include single-family homes of various sizes along with duplexes, triplexes, fourplexes and small apartment buildings. (For more on that point, see the “Missing Middle Housing” entry on page 19.)

The appeal of adjacent neighborhoods is that most are walkable, with local shops and restaurants frequented by community residents. And due to their proximity to Main Streets and downtowns, they also offer nearness to daily needs and activities, be it by foot, bike or public transit.

Over time, zoning and land use changes discouraged the development of adjacent neighborhoods. Yet the existence of such walkable communities with varied housing options is critical to the success of the nation’s downtowns and Main Streets.

Zoning reform is typically aimed first at addressing streetscape issues that have led to decline. That work is followed by reviving the historic mix of housing types found in older, traditional neighborhoods. Although many of the strategies and elements common in adjacent neighborhoods are similar to those discussed in the Downtowns and Main Streets section of this guide, the location, details and implementation differ. ►



▲ **CINCINNATI, OHIO:** The city skyline is visible behind the “Missing Middle” homes on Betton Street in the West End. According to *WalkScore.com*, the location boasts a 24-minute commute by foot (or 6-minute by bike) to downtown.

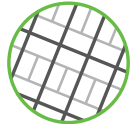
## The Streetscape

Just beyond a downtown or Main Street district, the streetscape transitions into the quieter residential areas of an adjacent neighborhood.

### STAGE 1

*Change can happen with relative speed.*

#### 1. Save Small Streets and Alleys



Common in older neighborhoods, small roads and alleyways serve an important role as informal connectors, providing access to rear lot garages and trash bins. Alleys can also serve as an entryway to an accessory dwelling unit. (See pages 17 and 20 to learn about ADUs.) If an alley is on-site but isn't maintained, consider ways of addressing its use through better maintenance or investments that might activate the space, such as by adding lighting and outdoor tables, seating and games. Activated alleys can become safe and useful community spaces.

#### 2. Implement a '20 Is Plenty' Policy



Neighborhood streets should be subdued and safe, with drivers able to easily stop for slow walkers or kids who dart into the roadway. Safety, and the ability to react quickly, increases as vehicle speeds decrease. At 20 mph, about 10 percent of pedestrian strikes are fatal. That proportion increases to 50 percent at 30 mph. The *20 Is Plenty* campaign has raised awareness worldwide about vehicle safety on neighborhood streets. In the United States, some jurisdictions have adopted 20 mph speed limits on neighborhood streets, accompanied by an information campaign. While posting new speed limits won't influence all drivers, doing so is a positive first step that can be followed by Stage 2 fixes.

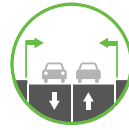


▲ **PORTLAND, MAINE:** To support socially-distant outdoor activities, including dining, during the COVID-19 pandemic, many communities closed streets to traffic.

### STAGE 2

*Change requires time and investment.*

#### 1. Put Roads on a Diet



While posting a lower speed limit on a residential roadway is useful, a driver's speed is more directly influenced by the size and number of lanes — and the smaller and fewer the better. Travel lanes should be sized to reflect a target speed of 20 mph. That typically means nine feet wide in residential areas, with exceptions where bus routes require more room. Roadway re-striping can be timed to coincide with other improvements, such as the installation of bicycle lanes, on-street parking and chicanes, which are serpentine curves added to a street so drivers are forced to slow down.

#### 2. Create Yield Streets



The streets in many historic neighborhoods are so narrow that two vehicles heading in opposite directions cannot pass each other without one pulling into a parking lane. Such yield streets significantly decrease vehicle speeds. When possible, one-way roadways should be reimagined as yield streets.

#### 3. Set Public Realm Standards



The vitality of an adjacent neighborhood is a function of its open space, rights-of-way and streetscape. Public spaces should be walkable and have a relatively unified look and feel. While official design standards ought to be few and far between, municipal policies can and should mandate minimum sidewalk widths as well as the presence of on-street parking, street trees and pedestrian-scale lighting.

#### 4. 'Complete' the Streets



As explained on page 10, a Complete Streets transportation policy considers the needs of all roadway users. Such a policy is often easier to implement in small communities than in large municipalities or along large commercial roadways — although government funding for projects can go a long way toward incentivizing its implementation. Adjacent neighborhoods are also able to provide effective, neighborhood- and traveler-friendly routes for connecting Main Streets and downtowns with more distant communities.



## Building Forms and Uses

A primary concern in historic neighborhoods is that zoning regulations enacted in the mid-20th century caused some existing properties and lots to be deemed “nonconforming.” Zoning regulations should match existing conditions. In addition, flexibility regarding use (e.g. allowing home-based businesses) can boost the local economy by enabling entrepreneurship and promoting housing affordability and ownership.

### STAGE 1

*Change can happen with relative speed.*

#### 1. Allow Home-Based Businesses



Working from a home-based office was once a norm for doctors, lawyers and other professionals. When disallowed by a zoning code, some home-based but less visible businesses simply operate under the radar. New technology, delivery services and adapting business practices are expanding the practicality and — during the COVID-19 pandemic — necessity of home-based work. Where home-based businesses are permitted, potential nuisances can be avoided through the minimal regulation of signage, workspace size relative to the size of the residence, the number of employees and customers, the hours of operation, storage, noise, fumes and similar pollutants.

#### 2. Make Existing Lots Conforming



Suburban-oriented lot size and setback regulations commonly label older, preexisting properties and structures as “nonconforming.” Code reform should adopt language specifying that such lots and structures are *in* compliance and can, if desired by the owner(s), be modified without first meeting the standards required by the contemporary code.

#### 3. Let New Buildings Align with Older Buildings



The broad adoption of suburban zoning standards has resulted in front setback requirements that greatly exceed those in older neighborhoods. Setting new buildings farther back than existing buildings can undermine a neighborhood’s character. To address this, allow new buildings to align with the older buildings or let them match the most minimal of the existing setback distances.

#### 4. Support Additional Housing Types



For much of the nation’s history, downtown and Main Street neighborhoods contained a variety of housing types, enabling people to live near areas of employment and activity.

Over time, zoning codes limited or eliminated many housing choices, especially small, multifamily buildings. These forms of housing offer prices and formats that are attractive to both older and younger adults. Adjacent neighborhoods should include town houses and multifamily units. To further meet the need for housing, and to provide homeowners with an opportunity to add an income-generating unit to their property, “Missing Middle” building types and accessory dwelling units should be permitted. (To learn more, see pages 17 and 19 — and visit [MissingMiddleHousing.com](http://MissingMiddleHousing.com) and [AARP.org/ADU](http://AARP.org/ADU).)

### STAGE 2

*Change requires time and investment.*

#### 1. Modify Lot Size and Setback Standards



To protect the historic pattern that established a neighborhood, lot sizes and setback standards should be modified to reflect those used for the area’s original lots and remaining older structures.

#### 2. Reintroduce Neighborhood-Based Shops



There was a time when people could walk from their home — be it an apartment or a detached single-family house — to a corner market, dry cleaner, coffee shop or ice cream parlor. Such businesses were typically located along busier streets that bounded or bisected the neighborhood. Over time, zoning made these commercial-residential adjacencies illegal. As a result, nearly every errand or task, whether it’s to buy a gallon of milk or get a haircut, now requires getting into a car. When revisiting a zoning code, it’s important to allow small, neighborhood-based, service-oriented businesses.

#### 3. Eliminate Specific Design Standards



Design standards requiring there to be, for instance, vertical or horizontal alignment variations in town houses often result in an erratic design that is visually distracting.

#### 4. End These Rules



Eliminate per-property-density maximums and floor-area-ratio (FAR) minimums. Height, setback and footprint standards are better for regulating building placements and size.

## Facades, Frontages and Parking

When zoning is done right, adjacent neighborhoods become places where people can meet their daily needs and stay active and engaged, regardless of their age, income or ability to drive.

### STAGE 1

*Change can happen with relative speed.*

#### 1. Require Sidewalk-Facing Entrances



Commercial buildings are increasingly being designed so all entrances connect to only the parking areas. Require that the main entrances face a sidewalk. Entries in a parking area can be considered subsidiary. (For buildings that are more than 100 feet wide, an entrance should be provided for every 70 feet of facade.)

#### 2. Establish Alley Access



Where an alley exists behind or alongside a building, require all driveways to be accessed from the alleyway and not the street. Eliminating street-front driveways provides more room for trees and on-street parking, reduces the number of sidewalk curb cuts and improves pedestrian safety.

#### 3. Place Parking Behind Buildings



When a parking spot or garage is located directly along a sidewalk in front of a house or office building, movement along the sidewalk is interrupted every time a car is driven to, or away from, the property. In addition to detracting from the home or building's appearance, a garage door-dominated facade can prevent the structure's occupants from seeing or engaging with any activity happening outdoors, which undermines the safety provided by having "eyes on the street." An appealing solution is to require that parking be located behind the building. A second option is for parking to be set back a minimum of 20 feet from the street or sidewalk. That way there's at least a bit of a buffer before a departing vehicle crosses the sidewalk or merges into traffic.

► **LEWES, DELAWARE:** A parking spot for one car is large enough for parking a dozen bicycles. Cyclists heading into town to shop or dine have exclusive access to a coveted piece of Second Street real estate.



### STAGE 2

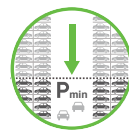
*Change requires time and investment.*

#### 1. Reduce the Gaps



Buildings that don't fully occupy their lot in a commercial district create gaps that detract from the area's liveliness. (Intentionally vacant green spaces or outdoor seating areas are not considered gaps.) To address this problem, a zoning code can require that buildings fill a minimum portion, typically 60 to 70 percent, of the lot width along the sidewalk.

#### 2. Limit Parking Requirements or ...



Parking mandates are often based on standards better suited to suburbs than to urban settings. They are especially problematic where buildings are older, properties are small, and it's difficult or impossible to add new parking. In these conditions many businesses are denied permits or are required to make costly renovations or secure off-site parking. Smaller-lot, single-family town houses and multifamily buildings are also impacted. In adjacent neighborhoods, the minimum required parking should be one off-street spot per unit. On-street spaces can be for visitors or serve as additional parking for residents. The curb front of a single-family detached home typically allows two parking spaces. A town house provides room for one.

#### 3. ... Eliminate Parking Requirements

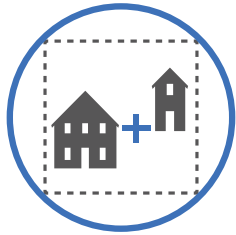


Local governments are beginning to accept that minimums aren't an effective tool for meeting parking needs or producing great places. Lenders and tenants may still require a minimum number of parking spots, but creative solutions (including identifying nearby shared parking options and considering pedestrian and bicycle access) can be employed to address those requirements.



# Livable Lingo: A Glossary

While planners, architects and developers know what the following terms mean and why they matter, the same isn't true for everyone who will be involved in incremental code reform. For those who might need it, we offer this vocabulary list.



## ACCESSORY DWELLING UNITS (ADUs)

***A small home that is ancillary to a principal dwelling unit on a property.***

ADUs may be located within the same structure as the primary residence, such as in an attic or basement apartment, or in a detached outbuilding, like a remodeled garage or backyard bungalow. An ADU might be occupied by a family member or rented to a tenant, providing additional means of income. Many communities don't allow ADUs, but they should. (Visit [AARP.org/ADU](http://AARP.org/ADU) to learn more about the important needs met by ADUs and to download or order the free AARP publications described on page 20 of this guide.)



## ADJACENCY REQUIREMENTS

***A collection of regulations that address the transition in scale, intensity and density of buildings and uses when moving from one district to another.***

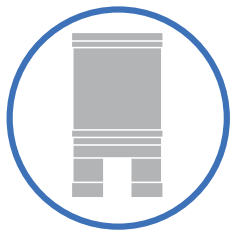
Adjacency requirements often include height, setback and use restrictions when a property lot in a higher-intensity district directly abuts a lot in a lower-intensity district.



## ARCHITECTURAL DESIGN STANDARDS

***Requirements that specify building materials, details and facade variations.***

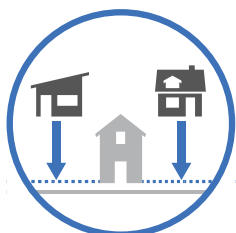
Design standards are commonly used in suburban housing developments with a homeowners' association (HOA) that controls building ornamentation, window orientation, and sometimes stylistic details as specific as paint colors for front doors and window shutters. If a town or city chooses to have architectural design standards, the rules should be specified separately, not as part of the zoning code.



## BLANK WALLS

***In zoning parlance, a blank wall is an expanse of 30 or more feet without openings.***

When situated at the ground level or second story of a Main Street or downtown building, a wall without windows or doors can undermine the appearance and activity of the area.



## BUILD-TO LINE

***A horizontal limit specifying how far a building must be set back from the street.***

Build-to line requirements can be useful, depending on the location type. Sometimes, however, a setback requires a storefront to be located far from the street and sidewalk in order to place a parking lot in front. A better approach is to build the storefront close to the sidewalk and put the parking behind the building. Build-to lines are also used to establish a consistent streetscape with clear sight lines, thus eliminating dark or less visible spaces that can harbor unwanted activities.



### DOWNTOWN DISTRICT

***A dense, mixed-use area greater than four blocks long by three blocks wide.***

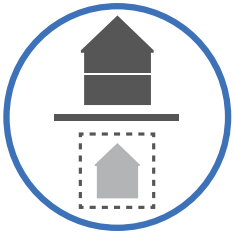
The term downtown district typically applies to the downtowns of cities with a population of at least 30,000. Smaller cities and towns might have a downtown district, but most have a Main Street corridor at their center instead.



### ENCROACHMENT

***A structural attachment that extends into a space or above a height limit.***

“Encroachment” is often used to describe awnings, signs and balconies that project over sidewalks. Encroachments are often allowed in order to establish an alignment of building facades, by permitting porches and similar elements to extend forward, for example. A zoning code might establish how much encroachment, if any, is allowed.



### FLOOR AREA RATIO (FAR)

***The ratio of a building’s floor area to the size of the property.***

FAR is a useful tool when a building is more than eight stories. Controlling shorter buildings is better done with setbacks and height regulations.



### HOME OCCUPATION

***When a business is located within a residence.***

Zoning codes are generally and smartly silent about the accessory use of a residential property by people who do solitary home-based work. However, communities can and do establish zoning rules for businesses that involve clients coming to the home, abnormally high delivery frequencies, noise or aesthetically undesirable elements.



### LINER BUILDING

***A shallow building that obscures parking and service areas from sidewalks.***

Liner buildings help create pleasant, walkable streetscapes. They are sometimes built adjacent to big-box stores or to obscure a parking garage.



### MAIN STREET

***A mixed-use area that runs along a single street or two intersecting streets that are two blocks or more in length.***

For cities and villages with fewer than 30,000 residents, a Main Street corridor may be known colloquially as “downtown.” Those with populations of more than 30,000 might have one or more Main Street corridors in addition to a downtown district.





### ‘MISSING MIDDLE HOUSING’

***A term that refers to small multifamily, live/work and cottage-like residences.***

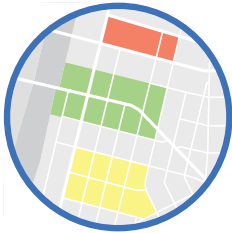
Missing Middle-style dwellings (duplexes, triplexes, etc.) are typically more affordable, and their neighborhoods more walkable, than what’s found in a typical single-family-home subdivision. Missing Middle residences have been missing from the nation’s housing inventory for many decades. Most remaining examples were built in the early 20th century. Visit [MissingMiddleHousing.com](http://MissingMiddleHousing.com) or [AARP.org/Livable](http://AARP.org/Livable) to learn more.



### PEDESTRIAN-SCALE LIGHTING

***Lighting that illuminates sidewalks, crosswalks and paths at an intensity and coverage level that supports pedestrian activity.***

Most street lighting is automobile-oriented, with high-intensity fixtures on tall poles that are spaced far apart and oriented toward travel lanes. Pedestrian-scale lights are attached to shorter poles, typically less than 14 feet tall, that are spaced every 50 to 75 feet on Main Streets and every 100 feet in adjacent neighborhoods. The lower height and reduced spacing allows for the use of lower wattage bulbs. This reduces glare for pedestrians and light spillage into residential buildings.



### PLACE TYPE

***In a regulatory context, a place type is an area subject to regulations and identified by a geographic boundary.***

Main Street and downtown districts are examples of place types. Place type terminology is also used as shorthand to refer to a place or destination. For instance, a place may be called “Main Street” even if the street has different, official name.



### PUBLIC REALM

***Areas that are not privately owned — including streets, other rights-of-way, open spaces, and public facilities such as parks, green spaces and municipal buildings.***

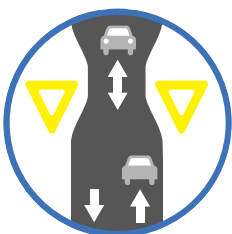
A free, safe and easily accessible public realm is an important community feature that helps create a healthy physical and social environment.



### SHARED PARKING

***An arrangement in which adjacent or nearby parking areas are shared if they have peak use periods that do not coincide.***

Shared parking reduces the number of spaces needed to meet local needs, usually by 20 to 60 percent. Smaller parking lots free up space for other buildings and uses. When parking is provided by individual buildings solely for their own occupants and users, lots are often empty or underused.



### YIELD STREETS

***Low-speed roads on which two vehicles traveling in opposite directions cannot pass one another without one vehicle moving to the side.***

Yield streets are common in residential areas and help ensure that vehicle speeds remain low, which increases the safety of all roadway users.

# Reality Checks

Code reform is not a one-size-fits-all solution, nor is it likely to achieve widespread change quickly. But the right changes and guidelines can point the work in the right direction

## Understand what's possible

- Does the community want change?
- Is there local capacity to administer the changes?
- Is there political will to adopt and enforce the proposed code changes?

## Localize the solutions

- Decisions need to be made within the local context rather than regionally or by some other distant, decision-making body.
- Pay attention to the local market. Is the planned retail space or downtown housing wanted and needed? What is needed to cultivate a strong local economy?

## Keep it simple

- Don't regulate health and safety issues (which are protected by other types of codes) through zoning.
- Don't try to anticipate every possible situation.
- Don't attempt to predict future market demands — or hinder flexibility. Conditions change.
- Don't complicate the code reform by creating design guidelines or architectural regulations.

## Move forward together

- Recognize that “business as usual” will produce the usual results.
- Discard regulations that are no longer relevant. These may include standards that were put in place to manage a specific use or problem that no longer exists.
- Make sure the community and key stakeholders understand and support the reform.

## Focus on the basics

### (A little change can go a long way)

- Get quality buildings into the right places to define the public realm — and be prepared when those buildings' uses change over time.
- Place parking on the street or behind buildings.
- Design for people, accommodate cars.

## This is just a beginning!

Incremental code reform will not address all of a community's aspirations or zoning needs. Many important issues that aren't addressed by an initial reform effort can be considered in the future.

## What Code Reform Can Do



Accessory dwelling units — or ADUs — can play a major role in addressing a national housing need. Many local zoning codes prohibit these small houses or apartments that exist on the same property lot as single-family residences. However, that's beginning to change. Visit [AARP.org/ADU](https://www.aarp.org/ADU) to learn more about ADUs and to order or download the following AARP publications:

- ***The ABCs of ADUs***, a 20-page introductory guide for how towns, cities, counties and states can include ADUs in their mix of housing options.
- ***Accessory Dwelling Units: A Step by Step Guide to Design and Development***, a 113-page catalog featuring ADU policies and projects from Austin, Texas; Denver, Colorado; Oakland, California; and Washington, D.C. This guide contains information about financing and budgeting for an ADU project and how ADUs can be designed to serve people of differing ages and abilities.



# Learn More

## Where to find information about zoning, code reform and community livability

The **AARP Livable Communities** website features information and inspiration for local leaders, from elected officials to involved residents. Among the many free publications created by the AARP Livable Communities initiative is the *AARP Roadmap to Livability Collection*. The six-guidebook series includes worksheets as well as a tool kit (see page 7) for hosting community listening sessions. The *AARP Livability Index* is an interactive tool that helps communities leverage their strengths and identify opportunities to become more livable for people of all ages. Links for the publications, index, annual AARP Community Challenge grant program, and the AARP Network of Age-Friendly States and Communities can be found online: [AARP.org/Livable](https://www.aarp.org/Livable)

The **Congress for the New Urbanism** provides resources, education and technical assistance to create socially just, economically robust, environmentally resilient and people-centered places. CNU works to address the range of land use regulatory barriers to achieving these outcomes, from recommending state and local level coding change through the Project for Code Reform; providing training and education to local governments on alternate code methodologies, including form-based codes; and disseminating information on coding successes and regulatory challenges. Through this work, CNU seeks to support the work of its members to design, plan and build more walkable urbanism. Local leaders interested in bringing incremental code reform to their community can contact CNU by email at [PCRinfo@CNU.org](mailto:PCRinfo@CNU.org): [CNU.org](https://www.cnu.org)

### Highways to Boulevards

The construction of urban freeways during the 20th century cut huge swaths through the nation's cities, segregating and devastating previously vibrant, diverse and functioning communities. Many of these freeways are reaching the end of their lifespans, which presents opportunities for transforming broken liabilities into assets by re-stitching neighborhoods and restoring the dignity and economic vitality of the places “urban renewal” destroyed. Cities including Portland, Oregon; San Francisco, California; and Milwaukee, Wisconsin, have successfully replaced urban highways with boulevards and surface streets, saving billions of dollars in infrastructure costs, increasing real estate values on adjacent land and restoring neighborhoods:

[CNU.org/Our-Projects/Highways-Boulevards](https://www.cnu.org/Our-Projects/Highways-Boulevards)

The **American Planning Association** report *Smart Codes: Model Land-Development Regulations* (Planning Advisory Service Report 556) promotes smart growth principles and makes the development review process more predictable: [Planning.org](https://www.planning.org)

The **Center for Applied Transect Studies** supports the SmartCode, a planning-and-zoning model that focuses on environmental impacts through the use of ecosystem cross sections called transects: [Transect.org](https://www.transect.org)

The **Form-Based Codes Institute** expands the understanding of land-use regulations that employ physical form (rather than separation of uses) as the organizing principle for zoning. FBCI provides best-practice sample codes and technical assistance: [FormBasedCodes.org](https://www.formbasedcodes.org)

**The Project for Lean Urbanism** features the *Lean Code Tool*, a downloadable publication with zoning code “hacks” that can reduce red tape. This compact guide offers quick fix recommendations for making text amendments to existing ordinances: [LeanUrbanism.org/Publications](https://www.leanurbanism.org/Publications)

The **U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's** smart growth website contains coding tools, audit resources, model codes and publications: [EPA.gov/SmartGrowth](https://www.epa.gov/SmartGrowth)

### What is New Urbanism?

New Urbanism is a planning and development approach based on the principles of how cities and towns were built for the last several centuries: walkable blocks and streets, housing and shopping in close proximity, and accessible public spaces. In other words: New Urbanism focuses on human-scaled urban design. The principles were developed to offer alternatives to the sprawling, single-use, low-density patterns typical of post-World War II development, which have been shown to inflict negative economic, health and environmental impacts on communities. These design and development principles can be applied to new development, urban infill and revitalization, and preservation. They can be applied to all scales of development in the full range of places, including rural Main Streets, booming suburban areas, urban neighborhoods, dense city centers, and even entire regions. — Adapted from [CNU.org](https://www.cnu.org)



▲ **ANN ARBOR, MICHIGAN:** An ice cream and donut shop within a walkable distance from housing is a sweet treat.



▲ **MANSFIELD, CONNECTICUT:** Downtown Storrs is a walkable, mixed-use development featuring homes, businesses and civic spaces.



▲ **CHICAGO, ILLINOIS:** Parklets provide places for eating and relaxing along E. 75th Street (aka Restaurant Row) in the city's Chatham neighborhood.

In many cities, towns, suburbs and rural areas, local zoning codes and land use ordinances make it illegal to create the types of vibrant, walkable and diverse communities that foster economic development, inspire job growth and feature a variety of housing options.

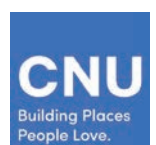
Created for use by involved residents, elected officials, local-government staff and members of policymaking and advisory committees, *Enabling Better Places: A Handbook for Improved Neighborhoods* provides an introduction to how a town, city or county can adapt its zoning code — and in doing so become a more livable community for people of all ages, incomes and backgrounds.

Download or order this free guide: [AARP.org/Zoning](https://www.aarp.org/Zoning)

Learn when AARP publishes new livability resources by subscribing to the free, weekly AARP Livable Communities e-Newsletter: [AARP.org/LivableSubscribe](https://www.aarp.org/LivableSubscribe) or text LIVABLE to 50757

Visit the AARP Livable Communities website: [AARP.org/Livable](https://www.aarp.org/Livable)

Learn about the Congress for the New Urbanism: [CNU.org](https://www.cnu.org).



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