

Zoning changes to allow for higher residential density overview

Zoning codes and ordinances specify the type of development that is permissible in each zoning district (residential, commercial, mixed-use, etc.), as well as provisions for how each parcel of land within those districts may be developed and used. In residential zones, these provisions generally include limits on residential density—that is, how many housing units may be built in a given land area. Cities, towns, and counties seeking to increase the overall housing supply may wish to revisit their zoning code to facilitate growth by (a) identifying opportunities in existing residential areas to increase density and (b) opening up areas where residential development has not previously been allowed.

In existing residential areas, density levels may have been set well below what the market and infrastructure are capable of supporting. In other cases, zoning codes may prohibit residential development in areas where it would now be appropriate. By modifying zoning policies to allow for residential growth and higher-density residential uses, local jurisdictions can help to increase the number of housing units that can be created and better enable housing supply to keep up with demand.

Cities, towns, and counties may also consider revising occupancy codes that restrict the number of unrelated people permitted to live together in a unit. (Occupancy codes may also classify properties that exceed these thresholds as “rooming houses” that are subject to additional regulation.) Shared housing allows lower-income households to split the costs of rent and utilities and reduce individual housing costs.^[11]

- Zoning codes also define the conditions under which housing is considered overcrowded. This is a separate issue that has implications for resident safety and well-being.