



Countryside Conservancy

Land Use Dictionary, 2010

Terms commonly used by planners, zoning commissions, and zoning inspectors. As a citizen, it is imperative to understand and be familiar with the terminology frequently used to create and implement land use policies.

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Access Management Plan: A set of policies and standards that manage the number and location of access points (driveways) on the public road system. (Wayne County, Ohio)

Accessory Structure: A detached subordinate structure or building located on the same lot as and incidental to the principal structure. (Land-Use Lingo: A glossary of land-use terms, Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, 2001)

Adaptive Reuse: The rehabilitation and utilization of existing (typically historical) structures for a different use than the structure was originally built to accommodate.

Agriculture: Includes farming; ranching; aquaculture; apiculture and related apicultural activities, production of honey, beeswax, honeycomb, and other related products; horticulture; viticulture, winemaking, and related activities; animal husbandry, including, but not limited to, the care and raising of livestock, equine, and fur-bearing animals; poultry husbandry and the production of poultry and poultry products; dairy production; the production of field crops, tobacco, fruits, vegetables, nursery stock, ornamental shrubs, ornamental trees, flowers, sod, or mushrooms; timber; pasturage; any combination of the foregoing; the processing, drying, storage, and marketing of agricultural products when those activities are conducted in conjunction with, but are secondary to, such husbandry or production; and any additions or modifications to the foregoing made by the director of agriculture (Ohio Revised Code)

Agri-tourism: Refers to the act of visiting a working farm or any agricultural, horticultural or agribusiness operation for the purpose of enjoyment, education, or active involvement in the activities of the farm or operation. (University of California Small Farm Center)

Balanced Growth: A policy approach to community development seeking to coordinate expansion with infrastructure development, environmental concerns, and services.

Buffering: The use of landscaping or retained native vegetation or the use of landscaping along with berms, walls, or decorative fences that at least partially and periodically obstruct the view from the street or an abutting property in such a manner that vehicular use areas, parking lots, parked cars, detention ponds, and conflicting activity areas will be partially or completely screened. (www.greenlaws.lsu.edu/terms.htm)

Bylaw: A rule or regulation governing the internal affairs of a municipal entity, such as the planning commission.

Community Character: The set of qualities that makes a place distinctive, interesting, and attractive.

Community Indicators: Community indicators are known by different names in the many distinct fields that use them. "Social indicators" and "quality-of-life indicators" are frequently used synonymously with the term "community indicators," and delving into specific subjects uncovers many more. There are community indicators specific to demography, economy, education, environment, health, and public safety, for example. (Association for Community Health Improvement Health Research and Educational Trust)

Comprehensive Plan: Regional, state, or local documents that describe community visions for future growth. Comprehensive plans describe general plans and policies for how communities will grow and the tools that are used to guide land use decisions and give general, long-range recommendations for community growth. Typical elements include land use, housing, transportation, environment, economic development, and community facilities. (Smart Growth Gateway)

Conditional Use (see also [Special Land Use](#)): A land use, construction activity, or structural development, which must be tailored to the site conditions and adjacent property uses through a public and technical review process, that is listed as a conditional use in a zoning district. (Land-Use Lingo: A glossary of land-use terms, Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, 2001)

Conditional Zoning: Special conditions an owner must meet in order to qualify for a change in a zoning district designation. In Michigan, conditions related to a rezoning request must be proposed and voluntarily accepted by the applicant.

Constitutional Limitations: Boundaries or confines, established by the United States Constitution or the state constitution, of governmental power protecting an individual's interest in the use, enjoyment, and productive capacity of his or her land.

Economically Viable Use: A use of land that provides an economic return.

Euclidean Zoning: A land use regulation method that separates land uses into zoning districts, named for Euclid, Ohio after the U. S. Supreme Court legitimized zoning in the Village of Euclid (Ohio) v. Ambler Realty Co. (272 U.S. 365) decision in 1926. The Court concluded that comprehensive zoning is a valid application of a community's police powers – the right to adopt regulations reasonably designed to protect public health, safety, and welfare.

Floodplain: Areas near rivers and/or lakes that are prone to flooding. They are usually designated according to theoretical frequency of flooding. In the U.S., most floodplains have been mapped by the Federal Emergency Management Agency and are shown on the Flood Insurance Rate Maps.

Focus Group: A small group selected from a wider population and queried, as by open discussion, for its members' opinions about or emotional response to a particular subject or area, used especially in market research or political analysis. (The Roper Center for Public Research)

Form-based Zoning: Form-based zoning creates a visually based zoning code that emphasizes the form of the built environment. Traditional zoning regulates the function of land use. This prescriptive approach uses community visioning processes to create a shared physical vision for the community. The community vision is translated into straightforward diagrams that illustrate the zoning code, rather than using lengthy text. A focus on form allows diverse architectural development that can serve multiple and changing functions.

Future Land Use Plan: A plan that guides physical development such as the location of different land uses, open space, circulation, and other important features of a community.

Home-based Business: Any business or commercial activity that is conducted, or proposed to be conducted, from property that is zoned for residential use and is clearly incidental and secondary to the use of the dwelling unit for residential purposes. The list of occupations that are specifically excluded from the definition of home-based business include, but are not limited to, bed and breakfast establishments, nursing homes and group homes. (Village of Homewood, IL)

Home Occupation: An occupation, profession, activity, or use that is clearly a customary, incidental, and secondary use of a residential dwelling unit and which does not alter the exterior of the property or affect the residential character of the neighborhood. (Phoenix, Ariz. From American Planning Association)

Infill: Development or redevelopment of land that has been bypassed, remained vacant, and/or is underused as a result of the continuing urban development process. Generally, the areas and/or sites are not particularly of prime quality, however they are usually served by or are readily accessible to the infrastructure services and facilities provided by the applicable local governmental entity. Use of such lands for new housing and/or other urban development is considered a more desirable alternative than to continue to extend the outer development pattern laterally and horizontally thus necessitating a higher expenditure for capital improvements than would be required for infill development. The use of infill development, among others, promotes the best use of resources and also will tend to have a positive impact upon the tax and other fiscal policies. (Topeka, KS)

Land Banking: The purchase of land by a local government for use or resale at a later date. Banked lands have been used for development of low-and moderate-income housing, expansion of parks, and development of industrial and commercial centers. Federal railbanking law allows railroads to bank unused rail corridors for future rail use while allowing interim use as trails. (California Planning Roundtable)

Land Suitability: The determination of appropriateness for the development of a piece of property.

Land Use: How a certain area of land is utilized.

Master Plan: (see also [Comprehensive Plan](#)) A comprehensive long-range plan intended to guide growth and development of a community or region and one that includes analysis, recommendation, and proposals for the community's population, economy, housing, transportation, community facilities, and land use. (Iowa State University Extension Service)

Mixed Use Development: Development that is created in response to patterns of separate uses that are typical in suburban areas necessitating reliance on cars. Mixed use developments include residential, commercial, and business accommodations in one area. (Smart Growth Gateway)

Neighborhood Enterprise Zone: A locally-initiated zone program that provides tax incentives for housing development and improvement. Qualified local units of government may designate one or more areas as Neighborhood Enterprise Zones (NEZs) for the purpose of extending property tax abatements for residential construction and rehabilitation. (Citizen Research Council of Michigan)

New Urbanist/New Urbanism: The process of reintegrating the components of modern life—housing, workplace, shopping, and recreation—into compact, pedestrian-friendly, mixed-use neighborhoods linked by transit and set in a larger regional open space framework. Initially dubbed “neotraditional planning,” the principles that define new urbanism can be applied successfully to infill and redevelopment sites within existing urbanized areas. (Congress for the New Urbanism)

Nonconforming Structure: Any building that does not meet the zoning ordinance limitations on building size or location on a lot for its use and district. (Land-Use Lingo: A glossary of land-use terms, Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, 2001)

Nonconforming Lot: A use or activity which lawfully existed prior to the adoption, revision, or amendment of an ordinance but that fails to conform to the current ordinance. (Land-Use Lingo: A glossary of land-use terms, Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, 2001)

Nonconforming Use: A use (or structure) that lawfully existed prior to the adoption or amendment of an ordinance but that fails to conform to the standards of the current zoning ordinance. (Land-Use Lingo: A glossary of land-use terms, Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, 2001)

Non-Use Variance (also known as a “dimensional variance”): A variance to the dimensional requirements in the zoning ordinance, such as minimum yard setback distances, building heights, required number of parking spaces, etc.

Open Space: A substantially undeveloped area, usually including environmental features such as water areas or recreational facilities. (Land-Use Lingo: A glossary of land-use terms, Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, 2001)

Open Space Development: An alternative site planning technique that concentrates dwelling units in a compact area to reserve undeveloped space elsewhere on the site. (Stormwater Management Resource Center)

Ordinance: A statute enacted by a governmental body.

Outreach: A service that includes involvement in activities designed to educate participants and assist those seeking information on a topic, such as growth and development, strategic planning, environmental protection, community participation, and others.

Overlay District or Zone: A zoning technique that allows for superimposing certain additional requirements upon a basic use zoning district without disturbing the requirements of the basic use district. In the instance of conflicting requirements, the stricter of the conflicting requirement shall apply. (Adapted from Racine County, WI)

Pedestrian Oriented Development: Development designed with an emphasis primarily on the street sidewalk and on pedestrian access to the site and building, rather than on auto access and parking areas. The building is generally placed close to the street and the main entrance is oriented to the street sidewalk. There are generally windows or display cases along building facades which face the street. Typically, buildings cover a large portion of the site. Although parking areas may be provided, they are generally limited in size and they are not emphasized by the design of the site. (Portland, OR)

Planned Unit Development (PUD): A tract of land developed as a unit under single ownership or unified control, which includes one or more principal buildings or uses, and is processed under the Planned Unit Development provisions of the ordinance. Also, a parcel of land planned as a single unit, rather than as an aggregate of individual lots, with design flexibility from traditional siting regulations (such as side yards, setbacks, and height limitations) or land use restrictions (such as prohibitions against mixing land uses within a development). The greater flexibility in locating buildings and in combining various land uses often makes it possible to achieve certain economics in construction as well as the preservation of open space and the inclusions of many amenities. (Gurnee, IL)

Planning Commission: A group of appointed residents who give guidance to the land use, zoning, and planning process in the community. They formulate and adopt the comprehensive plan and make recommendations on, among others, zoning ordinances, condominiums, and vacating of street and alley right-of-ways requests.

Planning Official: A municipal employee or volunteer appointed by the local legislative body to be a member of a planning commission, zoning board of appeals, or similar municipal planning body.

Purchase of Development Rights: A permanent restriction on the land between the State and a landowner, voluntarily entered into by a landowner, preserving their land for agriculture in exchange for a cash payment for those rights. (Michigan Department of Agriculture)

Residential Development: Areas that provide homes for local residents. Residential development can be categorized differently depending on the number of families per building, density, property rights, price, and architectural style.

Single Family: Land use characterized by lots containing individual residential homes surrounded by yards.

Site Plan Review: Establishes criteria for the layout, scale, appearance, safety, and environmental impacts of multiple family, commercial, or industrial development. Site plan review usually focuses on zoning restrictions, parking, traffic, drainage, roadway construction, signs, utilities, screening, lighting, and other aspects of the proposal to arrive at the best possible design for the location.

Site Plan: A scaled plan showing proposed uses and structures for a parcel of land, including such details necessary to illustrate the final proposed use and development. A site plan includes elements such as the location of lot lines, the layout of buildings, open space, parking areas, landscape features, and utility lines. (Adapted from Smart Growth Gateway)

Special Land Use: Specified land uses that may be appropriate in a particular land use district but may have characteristics that could affect surrounding properties.

Spot Zoning: A change in the zoning code or area maps that is applicable to no more than a few parcels and results in zoning that is markedly different from the surrounding established zoning pattern. Spot zoning is generally regarded as undesirable or illegal because it violates equal treatment and sound planning principles. (Adapted from Land-Use Lingo: A glossary of land-use terms, Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, 2001)

Sprawl: A low-density land use pattern that is automobile dependent, energy and land consumptive, and requires a very high ratio of road surface to development served.

Standards, General: Criterion applied to all special land uses before a permit can be granted.

Standards, Specific: Criterion applied to individual special land uses before a permit can be granted.

Statutory Law: Law enacted by the state government.

Sustainable Development: Development that maintains or enhances economic opportunity and community well being while protecting and restoring the natural environment upon which people and economies depend. Sustainable development meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. (State of Minnesota)

Transfer of Development Rights: Provides for a market transfer of development rights between landowners and developers. These rights are transferred away from areas designated for preservation, such as agricultural and forestry lands, towards areas deemed appropriate for development. (Michigan Department of Agriculture)

Unnecessary Hardship: A unique and extreme inability to use a property in conformance with the use requirements in the zoning district. Generally, it must be shown that the property cannot be reasonably used as one of the uses permitted in the district and that a variance to the allowed uses is the only means of relief.

Use By Right: A use permitted in a particular zone without any special hearing or review procedure, provided minimum lot size, height, setback, bulk, parking and accessory use requirements are met. A single family home in a low density residential district is typically a use permitted by right. (Planning and Zoning Center at MSU, Michigan Zoning Guidebook)

Use Variance: A variance to permit a land use that is otherwise prohibited within the zoning ordinance.

Utilities: Any structures or facilities used for production, generation, transmission, delivery, collection, or storage of water, sewage, stormwater, electricity, gas, or electronic signals. (Adapted from Land-Use Lingo: A glossary of land-use terms, Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, 2001)

Variance: A relaxation of dimensional or use standards by a local zoning board in compliance with statutory criteria. (Land-Use Lingo: A glossary of land-use terms, Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, 2001)

Zoning Administrator: An appointed position to administer and enforce zoning regulations and related ordinances. (Land-Use Lingo: A glossary of land-use terms, Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, 2001)

Zoning Board of Appeals (ZBA): Appointed officials acting in a quasi-judicial capacity under the procedures and requirements of the zoning ordinance, charged with enforcing the ordinance and determining when variances to ordinance requirements are warranted. The ZBA deals with, among others, requests for variances, ordinance interpretations, and the appeal of administrative decisions by the staff or planning commission.

Zoning Districts: Discrete areas within a community designated to permit specific land uses, such as single family residential, commercial, industrial, etc. and to provide requirements specific to development within the district. They are depicted on a zoning map.

Zoning Ordinance: A legal document adopted by the legislative body, including a map that describes the uses of land in different districts in a community, and the regulations pertaining to buildings and uses within those districts.

Zoning: Classification of land in a community into different areas and districts, generally to separate land uses into appropriate locations. Zoning is a legislative process that regulates building dimensions, density, design, placement and use within each zoning district. (Adapted from Smart Growth Gateway)