

What is “Zoning” and Why is it Important?

The type, number, design and location of the subdivisions and commercial areas in your city did not just happen by chance. To the contrary, the location, character and look of your city is the result of conscious and deliberate actions, occurring over a number of years.

There are numerous potential uses of land, including; farm land, open spaces, timber land, residential neighborhoods, apartments or condominiums, schools, parks, libraries, commercial areas, office parks, retail and restaurants, and industrial developments.

The use of all private and public land that lies within a city’s boundaries is determined by its zoning laws. These laws extend from a city’s obligation to “promote the health, safety, morals, convenience, order, prosperity and general welfare of the community.” Perhaps, the best way to understand zoning is to consider a sketch of the floorplan of your house. In the same manner that a floorplan delineates each unique space or room of a home, a city’s zoning laws divide the land in the city into separate areas or zones. Each area of the city is assigned a permitted use. The land within each of these areas must be developed consistent with its assigned use. As you would not choose to include a shower in your kitchen, a city’s zoning laws would preclude the inclusion of an industrial development in an area reserved for residential use.

Further, the placement of each room in a home is not random but rather the result of past experiences. Careful consideration is given to the primary purpose of each space, the family’s needs and desires, as well as the practical, logistical implications of the placement. For example, you would not want all of your bathrooms to be located on the opposite side of the house from your bedrooms or your kitchen and eating area located on separate floors. Ideally, you would have rooms with related or complimentary uses located in close proximity to one another. The same is true of a city. Zoning laws help to ensure that a community is laid out in the most convenient and efficient manner and that areas reserved for related and complimentary uses are located in close proximity. For example, ideally, you would want to locate schools in close proximity to the residential neighborhoods they serve. Zoning laws ensure this occurs.

Additionally, the placement, size and amenities included in a given room are going to reflect the family’s priorities and desires. A large family might desire a large kitchen and eating area, while a smaller family might place a greater importance on other rooms. Similarly, the number of uses permitted within a city and the size and number of areas allocated for each permitted use of land are going to reflect the priorities and desires of the residents of that city. Some communities want convenient access to employment opportunities, restaurants, entertainment and retail. Other communities prefer neighborhoods and open spaces. Another prefers a mixture of the nightlife and the quiet life. Zoning laws help to ensure that the residents of each of these communities gets exactly what they desire.

In short, zoning is necessary to ensure a city is developed in the most convenient and efficient manner and that the character, identity, and composition of a city reflects the priorities, desires and preferences of its residents. Zoning is also instrumental in protecting property values, ensuring cohesive and orderly communities, promoting quality of life, and affording privacy and safety for residents.