



City of St. Louis Zoning UPgrade

A Modern Code to Meet the Moment

ZOUP Scoop Issue 01: What is zoning / why does St. Louis need a new code?

The Zoning Section of The Building Division & The Planning and Urban Design Agency of St. Louis

What is The ZOUP?

The City of St. Louis is proud to announce the launch of a comprehensive process to overhaul the City's zoning code—the Zoning Upgrade: a modern code to meet the moment—marking the first major rewrite and map update since the mid-twentieth century. This process is spearheaded by the Planning and Urban Design Agency (PDA) and the Zoning Section of the Building Division.

STAY UPDATED!



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Meet The ZOUP Team
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A word from The City of St. Louis Planning and Urban Design Agency (PDA) and the Zoning Section of the Building Division

We are thrilled to announce the Zoning Upgrade: a modern code to meet the moment. The ZOning UPgrade (ZOUP) is the first comprehensive overhaul of our City's zoning code since the 1950s. There is so much to say about the current state of zoning in our city and the opportunities in this overhaul—we will explore all of that together in the year or so ahead. In this first issue of the ZOUP SCOOP we plan to introduce you to some key zoning topics. We will highlight how zoning affects our everyday life, explain how we got here, and invite you to participate in the process. Please join us as we work together, to build the zoning framework that will shape our community for generations to come.

Earlier this year the City of St. Louis adopted a new Strategic Land Use Plan (SLUP). The SLUP is the portion of the City's Comprehensive Plan that guides land use. It sets out a vision for how we can best use the land in our city in service of advancing community goals. This new SLUP was a big step: the SLUP hadn't been fully updated since 2005. Many neighborhoods have also developed or are in the process of creating their own, more detailed plans. Now, on the heels of the Strategic Land Use Plan and in service of implementing neighborhood plans, it is essential to update the City's zoning code and map. While adopted plans set a vision for our city, zoning regulations are the teeth that translate those goals into rules that govern what, where, and how something can be built.

In recent years, it has become increasingly evident that current zoning policies aren't meeting the needs of our city or its residents. Our city has one of the oldest forms of zoning, adopted in the 1950s.

Over the years there has been a patchwork of amendments and overlays to accommodate modern land uses and try to address the limitations of our underlying code. But the old code and patchy fixes contribute to a development process that is cumbersome and inefficient, and to development outcomes that don't consistently align with community goals. For example, many many projects—from a simple garage to a twenty-story building—require variances (or exceptions

to the zoning code) to move forward to construction. These exceptions are not insignificant: they stay with the land and change what can be built on a particular parcel. The process to receive a variance is complicated to maneuver and highly unpredictable; this is frustrating for both community members and people trying to invest in our city, and ultimately hinders our collective efforts to strengthen our neighborhoods, meet resident needs, and grow our population.

As we move from the SLUP into the technical aspects of the ZOUP, we are supported by a talented team of experts led by Code Studio, a planning firm specializing in zoning. They will guide us through the process, utilizing best practices from across the country. This process will modernize how land use is regulated in our city, improving clarity, consistency, and responsiveness to community priorities.

This is a big step for our city. At times it will be technical, at times exciting, and at times difficult. It's our commitment to work with you on this, and to listen to every voice and perspective. To fulfill our city's potential, we need a new zoning system—one that works for us, not against us. The ZOUP is an opportunity to align our rules with our goals: reducing barriers to the development we want to see, preventing or mitigating uses that could hurt our community, and encouraging the realization of a city that benefits all current and future residents. Please join us!

About The ZOUP

This past winter, the Planning Commission adopted a holistic update to the Strategic Land Use Plan (SLUP) after extensive community engagement. Many neighborhood plans are also formally adopted, underway, or soon to launch. Building upon this momentum, the zoning upgrade will modernize how land use is regulated in the City, improving clarity, consistency, and responsiveness to community priorities. The City has engaged a team led by Code Studio, a planning firm specializing in zoning, to guide the process and embed best practices from across the country into St. Louis's new code.

WHAT IS ZONING & HOW IS IT USED?

What is Zoning

Zoning is a set of local rules that determine what can be built, where, and how. Every property in St. Louis is assigned a zoning district that comes with rules about land use and building form.

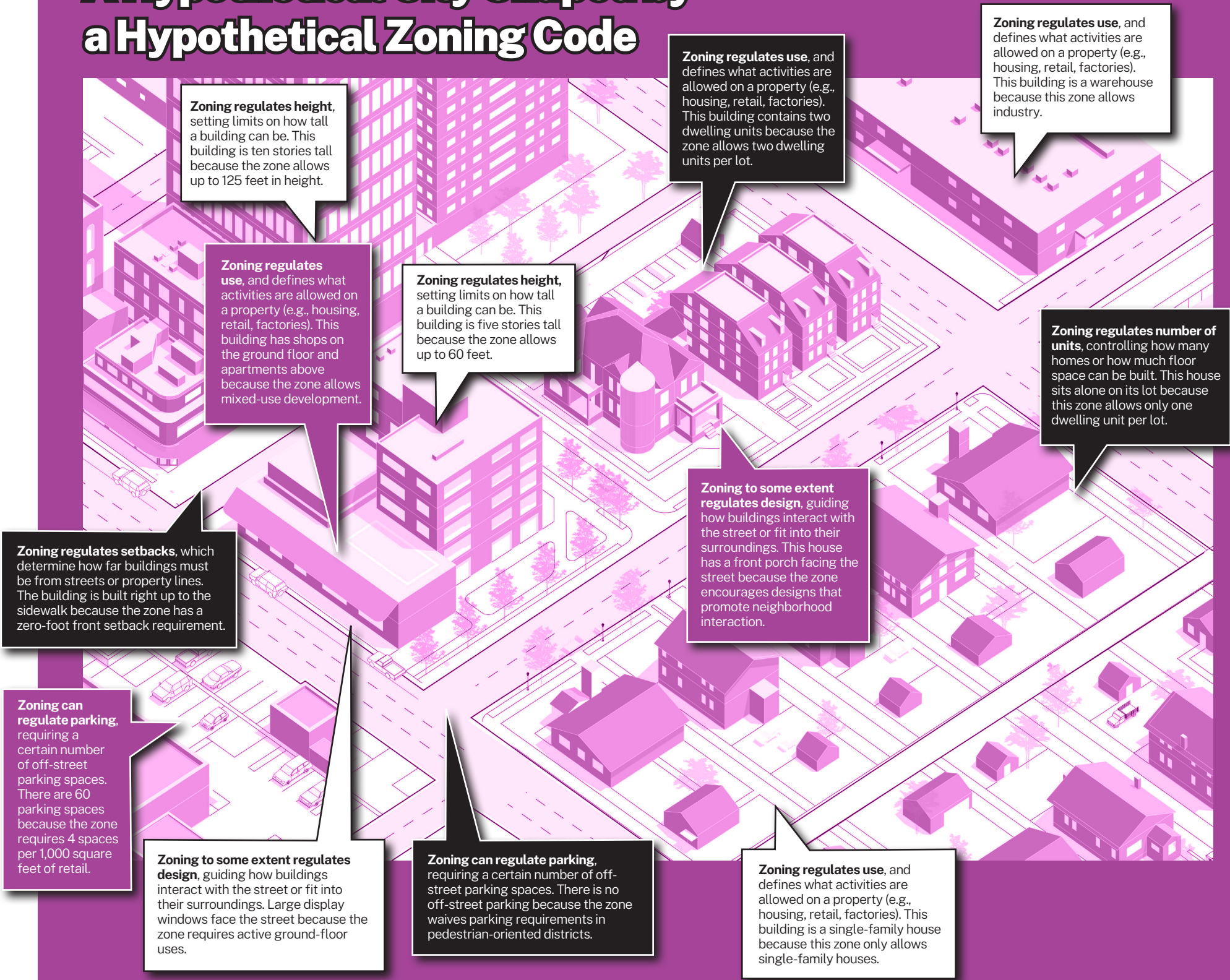
Zoning shapes the way neighborhoods look, feel, and grow over time — but it doesn't control everything. It doesn't determine building safety (that's the building code), or property upkeep (that's property maintenance code).

How is it Used?

Zoning sets the rules for how land can be used. You can think of Zoning as having three parts:

1. The Zoning Map divides all land in a city, except for streets, alleys, and sidewalks, into different districts (i.e., zones).
2. The Zoning Code lays out the regulations (i.e., rules) in each Zoning District. The Zoning rules for each district will lay out what types of uses (e.g., residential, commercial, industrial), sizes (e.g., building height, distance from the front property line, etc.), and building densities (e.g., number of housing units in a given area) are allowed in each district.
3. Zoning Processes describe who makes sure the rules are followed, how Zoning can be updated, and how much flexibility is allowed. These processes are laid out in the Zoning Code.

A Hypothetical City Shaped by a Hypothetical Zoning Code



Alphabet ZOUP

1. Board of Public Service

The Board of Public Service has authority over permits for use of public places, permits for private businesses as provided by ordinance, grants and dedications of property, establishment of (road) grades, and City engineering, construction, and re-construction. The Board of Public Service also reviews all conditional use permit applications.

2. Boundary Adjustment/Consolidation/Subdivision

A boundary adjustment relocates property lines between two or more adjacent parcels. A consolidation combines two or more adjacent properties into a single, larger parcel. Subdivision is the act of splitting a single property into two or more new properties. These processes are governed by local regulations and require a survey and permits.

3. Building Permit

After review by relevant City departments, a building permit issued by the Building Division's Permit Section serves as a formal and legal authorization for the applicant to start construction work. A building permit also represents an agreement between the City of Saint Louis and the applicant in which the applicant agrees to follow all codes and the City agrees to inspect the construction to ensure all codes are followed.

4. Commerical Occupancy Permit

A commercial occupancy permit certifies that a business meets standards of safety and compliance, prior to operation. It is required for all businesses operating within the city limits. It is valid for the life of the business until the business changes, the business owner changes, or the property use changes.

5. Commercial Use

A property generally used for business, retail, restaurant, and/or office purposes.

6. Conditional Use

Some uses that present unique circumstances with respect to their location and relationship with potential surrounding land uses. These conditional uses are not allowed in a particular zoning district "by right" but require special consideration. They may be made compatible by attaching certain conditions to their development. This is accomplished through the conditional use hearing process.

7. Curb Cut

A curb cut for vehicle access is a section of lowered curb that allows vehicles to transition from the street onto a driveway, parking lot, or other off-street areas.

8. Development Review Committee

In St. Louis, development review committees refer to resident-led committees that review and provide feedback on development projects within the footprint of a given neighborhood or geography.

9. Dwelling

Any building, or portion thereof, which is designed for or used for residential purposes.

10. Easement

Legal access to another person's land for a specified purpose.

11. Euclidean Zoning

A traditional system of zoning regulation, in which a municipality is divided into specific districts based on separate and distinct uses (i.e. residential, commercial, industrial, etc.).

12. Floor Area Ratio (FAR)

The total floor area of a building or structure on any lot divided by the total area of that lot. FAR is one traditional method of regulating the density of a use or development.

13. Form-Based District

In St. Louis, form-based districts are a zoning tool which acts as an overlay, providing additional and very specific regulations focused on land use and the physical form of buildings, desired scale, architecture, and connection to the public realm. Form-based zoning also refers to a general approach to development regulation that prioritizes the form and physical characteristics of buildings and the public realm over traditional zoning's focus on land use.

14. Frontage

Frontage is the length of a property line that borders a public right-of-way, typically a street.

15. Grandfathered

Grandfathered uses or structures were in place before a given set of policies, and may continue unchanged under new regulations.

16. Home Occupation

An accessory use of a dwelling unit that contributes to the livelihood of a person living in the home.

17. Home Occupancy Waiver

An agreement that allows certain businesses to operate within a dwelling, under specific conditions, without a commercial occupancy permit.

18. Housing Conservation Certificate

A residential occupancy permit that ensures a dwelling meets certain standards of safety and compliance.

19. Incidental Business Waiver

An agreement that allows certain small businesses to operate without their own commercial occupancy permit, so long as they are affiliated with and subordinate to an existing business' occupancy.

20. Industrial Use

Industrial uses include a broad spectrum of uses involving manufacturing, processing, and production.

21. Local Historic District

Designated by ordinance, local historic district regulations are developed in partnership with neighborhood residents and elected officials to create a unique set of rehabilitation and/or new construction standards that help preserve and/or enhance the historic character of the place.

22. Local Historic District, Certified

These are Local Historic Districts that have been determined by the Keeper of the National Register to be eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places. This designation includes protection from Federally-funded projects that may negatively impact the district and offers the ability to qualify for State or Federal Historic Preservation Tax Credits.

23. Mixed Use

A "mixed-use" building or development includes some combination of residential and commercial uses.

24. National Historic District

A geographically defined area recognized for its historical, architectural, or cultural significance, and officially listed on the National Register of Historic Places. These districts offer the ability to qualify for State or Federal Historic Preservation Tax Credits.

25. Nonconforming use

Any building or or use legally in place before current zoning regulations, and which is in conflict with one or more of the current regulations of the district it is in.

26. Occupancy Permit

Certification that a business or dwelling meets standards of safety and compliance.

27. Permitted Use

Land uses that are allowed within a specific zoning district.

28. Planning Commission

A citizen-led advisory body made up of both city officials and appointed citizen volunteers which serve an advisory role in adopting zoning ordinances, reviewing rezoning petitions, and guiding development. It also reviews and adopts updates to the City's Comprehensive Plan and neighborhood plans, and reviews blighting studies and redevelopment plans before making recommendations to the Board of Aldermen.

29. Preservation Board

A mayor-appointed board, made up of citizens with specific professional credentials, who review appeals to decisions made by the Cultural Resource Office and proposals for new construction in local historic districts.

30. Preservation Review District

Designated by ordinance, Preservation Review Districts provide for demolition review that considers the impact on a neighborhood or on the the city as a whole.

31. Residential Use

A residential use generally refers to property that is being used for dwelling purposes.

32. Revocation

Revocation is a legal process where a previously-granted land use permit or approval is invalidated and withdrawn. This can happen when certain rules or conditions of operation are violated.

33. Right-of-Way

A legal right established for use or to grant passage along a specific route through property that belongs to someone else.

34. Right-of-Way, Public

Government control of land to construct and maintain roads, sidewalks and other facilities for pedestrian and vehicular movement. For example, streets are public right-of-way.

35. Rezone

A legal process by which a land is changed from one zoning district to another zoning district with different restrictions on land use and development. Rezonings are reviewed by the Planning Commission for consistency with adopted plans before they are considered by the Board of Aldermen and established by ordinance.

36. Setback

The minimum distance a structure or building must be from a property line.

37. Taking

The acquisition of land without just compensation.

38. Taking, Regulatory

When a government regulation restricts the use of private property so severely that it deprives the owner of all or most of the economic value or beneficial use of their property.

39. Transit-Oriented Development

A planning and design approach focused on walkable mixed-use communities centered around high-quality public transportation.

40. Use-by-right

A land use that is permitted within a zoning district that does not need conditional use approval or special exceptions.

41. Variance

An exception to zoning district regulations that allows a property owner to use their land in a way that would otherwise be prohibited. Variances are not a change to the zoning law itself, but rather an exception to its rules for a particular property. Variances stay with the land even if the property is sold.

42. Zoning Administrator

The City official who performs tasks necessary to administer and implement the zoning code.

43. Zoning Code

Land use rules used by cities that regulate how land can be used within specific areas or zones. Zoning helps ensure the health, safety, and wellbeing of the community in a way that aligns with formally adopted plans (like neighborhood plans and the Strategic Land Use Plan).

44. Zoning District

Areas or zones within a city tied to specific regulations that govern land use, building placement, and other development standards (set by the zoning code).

45. Zoning Enforcement

Processes by which the City ensures land uses comply with the zoning code.

46. Zoning Map

The official map that shows each parcel of land within the city and its designated zoning district.

1. Board of Public Service

2. Boundary Adjustment/Consolidation/Subdivision

3. Building Permit

4. Commerical Occupancy Permit

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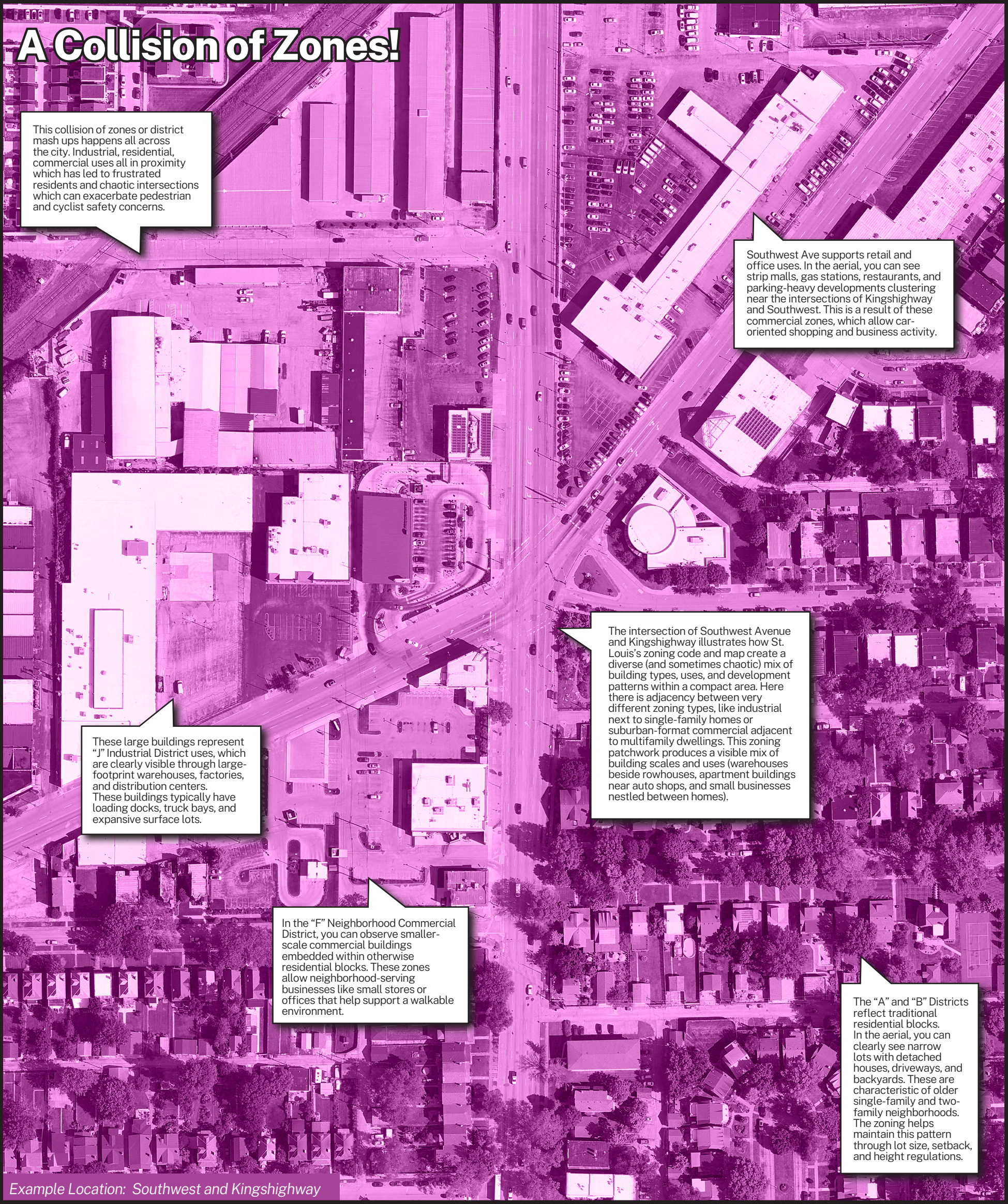
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45. Zoning Enforcement

46. Zoning Map

ZONING MATTERS!

St. Louis — like most cities — looks very different depending on where you are. In some neighborhoods, buildings rise many stories, packed close together, while in others, homes sit on wide lots with big yards and quiet cul-de-sacs. Some areas blend shops, homes, and restaurants on the same block, while others are strictly residential or entirely commercial. This variety isn’t random — it’s the result of zoning, which acts like the city’s DNA, quietly shaping what can be built, where, and how. The following examples highlight familiar places around St. Louis and explain how zoning rules help give them their distinct character. They also illustrate some of the problems with the existing code--problems that we’ll be trying to solve in the ZOUP.



A Collision of Zones!

This collision of zones or district mash ups happens all across the city. Industrial, residential, commercial uses all in proximity which has led to frustrated residents and chaotic intersections which can exacerbate pedestrian and cyclist safety concerns.

Southwest Ave supports retail and office uses. In the aerial, you can see strip malls, gas stations, restaurants, and parking-heavy developments clustering near the intersections of Kingshighway and Southwest. This is a result of these commercial zones, which allow car-oriented shopping and business activity.

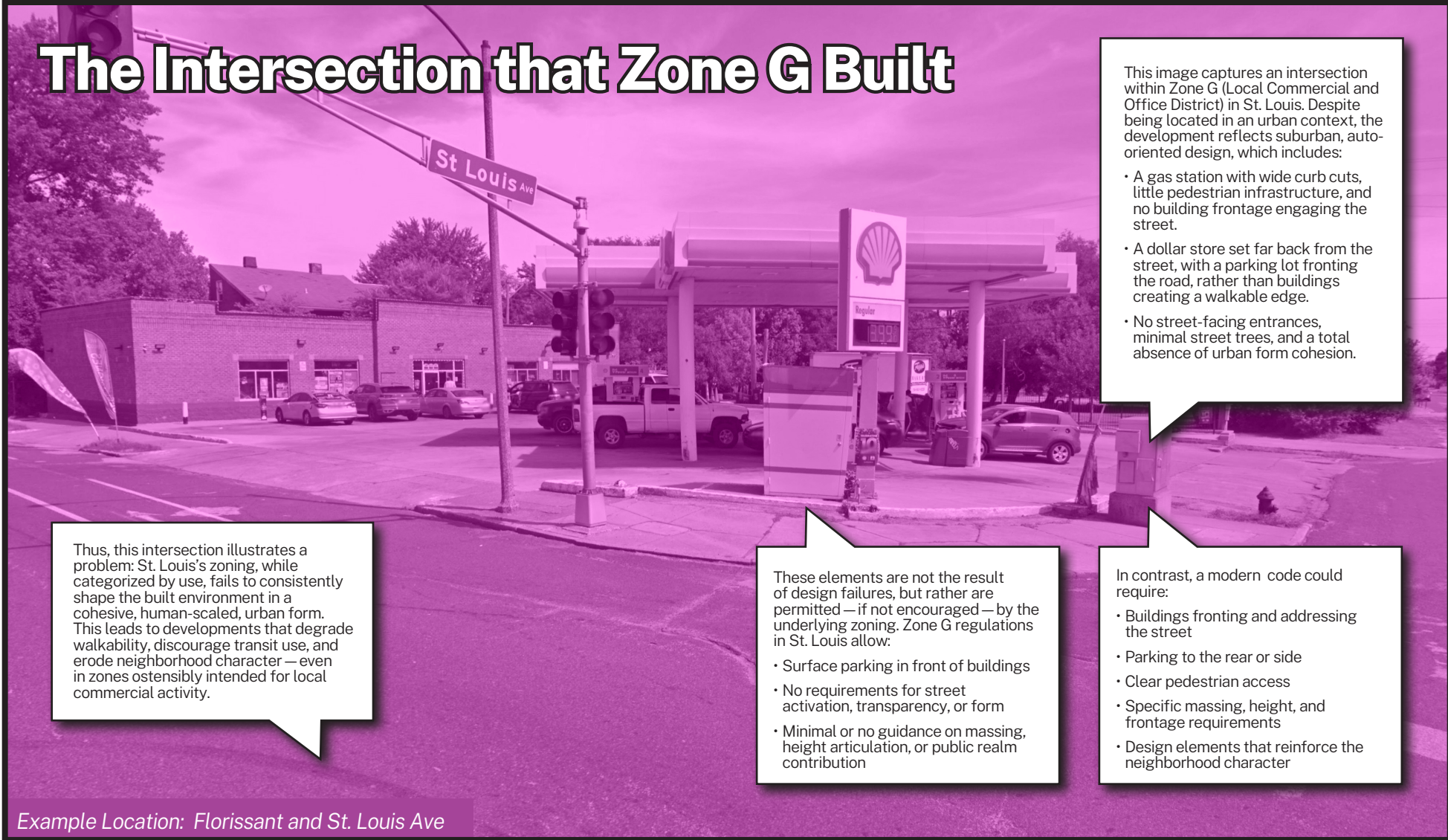
The intersection of Southwest Avenue and Kingshighway illustrates how St. Louis’s zoning code and map create a diverse (and sometimes chaotic) mix of building types, uses, and development patterns within a compact area. Here there is adjacency between very different zoning types, like industrial next to single-family homes or suburban-format commercial adjacent to multifamily dwellings. This zoning patchwork produces a visible mix of building scales and uses (warehouses beside rowhouses, apartment buildings near auto shops, and small businesses nestled between homes).

These large buildings represent “J” Industrial District uses, which are clearly visible through large-footprint warehouses, factories, and distribution centers. These buildings typically have loading docks, truck bays, and expansive surface lots.

In the “F” Neighborhood Commercial District, you can observe smaller-scale commercial buildings embedded within otherwise residential blocks. These zones allow neighborhood-serving businesses like small stores or offices that help support a walkable environment.

The “A” and “B” Districts reflect traditional residential blocks. In the aerial, you can clearly see narrow lots with detached houses, driveways, and backyards. These are characteristic of older single-family and two-family neighborhoods. The zoning helps maintain this pattern through lot size, setback, and height regulations.

Example Location: Southwest and Kingshighway



The Intersection that Zone G Built

This image captures an intersection within Zone G (Local Commercial and Office District) in St. Louis. Despite being located in an urban context, the development reflects suburban, auto-oriented design, which includes:

- A gas station with wide curb cuts, little pedestrian infrastructure, and no building frontage engaging the street.
- A dollar store set far back from the street, with a parking lot fronting the road, rather than buildings creating a walkable edge.
- No street-facing entrances, minimal street trees, and a total absence of urban form cohesion.

Thus, this intersection illustrates a problem: St. Louis’s zoning, while categorized by use, fails to consistently shape the built environment in a cohesive, human-scaled, urban form. This leads to developments that degrade walkability, discourage transit use, and erode neighborhood character — even in zones ostensibly intended for local commercial activity.

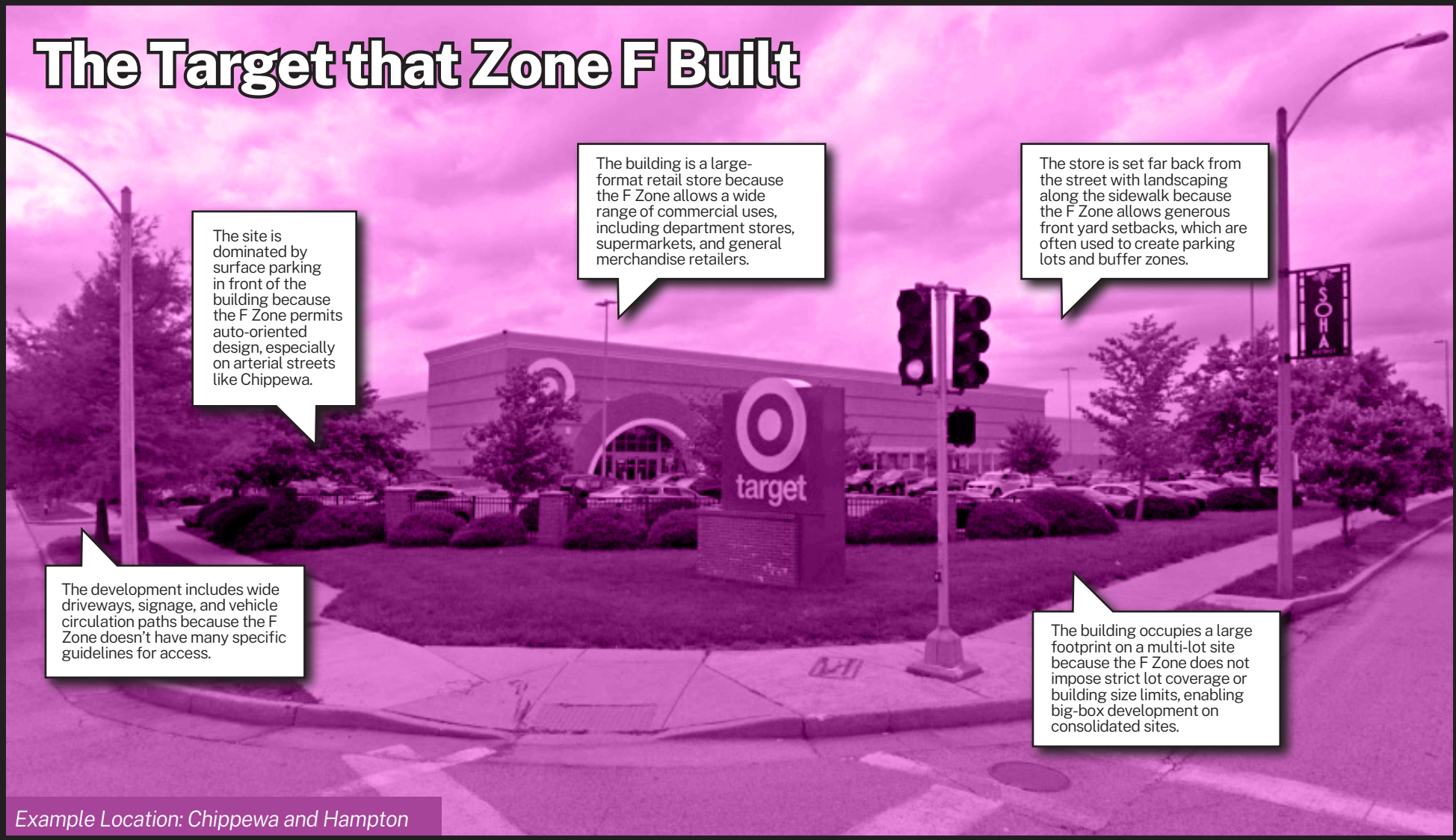
These elements are not the result of design failures, but rather are permitted — if not encouraged — by the underlying zoning. Zone G regulations in St. Louis allow:

- Surface parking in front of buildings
- No requirements for street activation, transparency, or form
- Minimal or no guidance on massing, height articulation, or public realm contribution

In contrast, a modern code could require:

- Buildings fronting and addressing the street
- Parking to the rear or side
- Clear pedestrian access
- Specific massing, height, and frontage requirements
- Design elements that reinforce the neighborhood character

Example Location: Florissant and St. Louis Ave



The Target that Zone F Built

The building is a large-format retail store because the F Zone allows a wide range of commercial uses, including department stores, supermarkets, and general merchandise retailers.

The store is set far back from the street with landscaping along the sidewalk because the F Zone allows generous front yard setbacks, which are often used to create parking lots and buffer zones.

The site is dominated by surface parking in front of the building because the F Zone permits auto-oriented design, especially on arterial streets like Chippewa.

The development includes wide driveways, signage, and vehicle circulation paths because the F Zone doesn’t have many specific guidelines for access.

The building occupies a large footprint on a multi-lot site because the F Zone does not impose strict lot coverage or building size limits, enabling big-box development on consolidated sites.

Example Location: Chippewa and Hampton

ZONING MATTERS!

A good urban infill project that needed variances not considered by current code



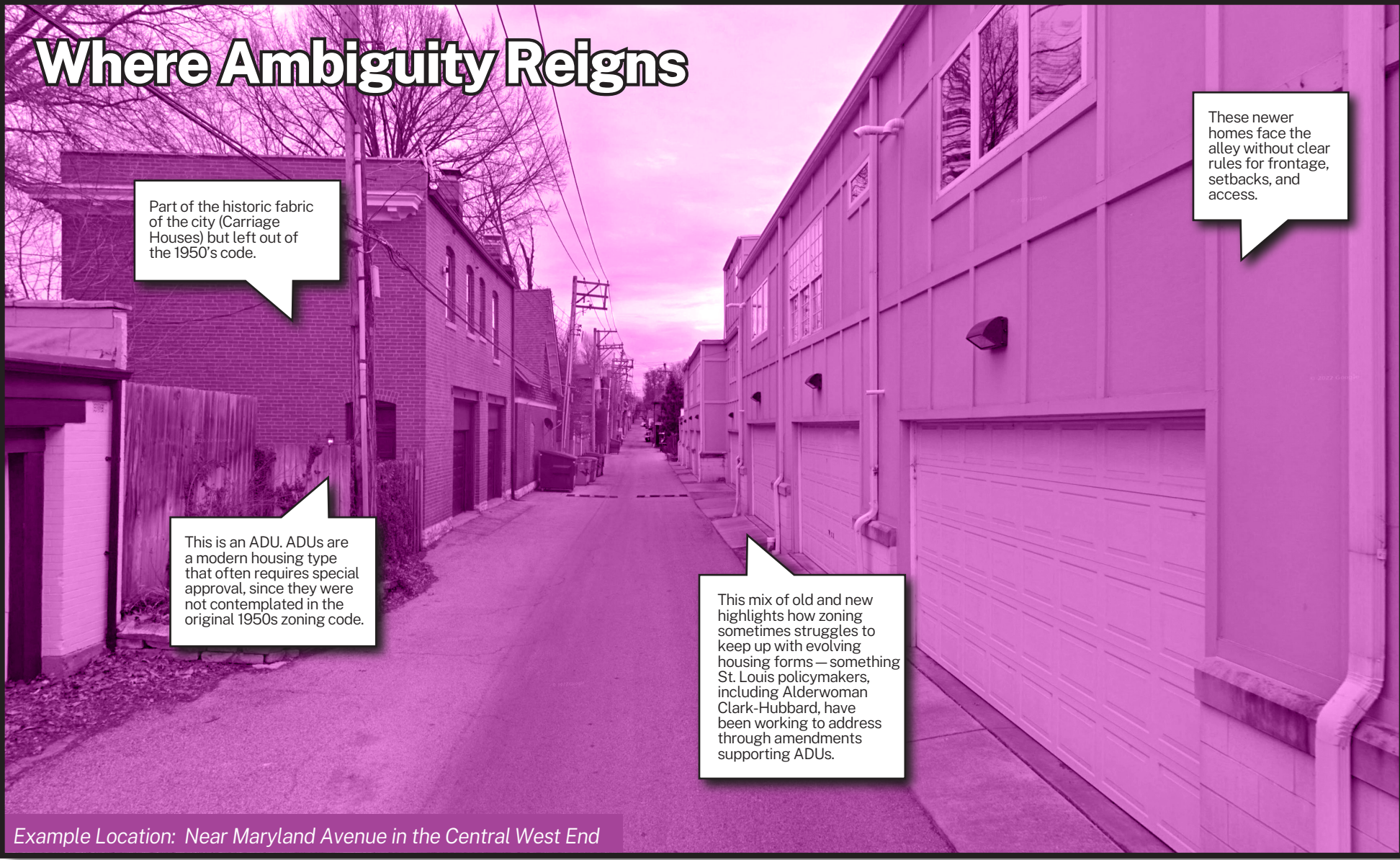
A Mixed Use Building in Zone H



The Apartment Building that Zone H Built



Where Ambiguity Reigns



A Brief History of Zoning and Related Plans & Policies

Zoning has a long and complicated history in the United States, shaped by shifting ideas of what makes a “good” city — and, in turn, shaping the way cities look and function. From the mid-20th century’s prioritization of cars, single-family homes, and strict separation of uses — often underpinned by discriminatory intentions during a period of rapid urbanization and migration — to today’s focus on walkability, sustainability, and equity, each era of zoning has reflected the social values, economic priorities, and political forces of its time. Because zoning has been one of the primary tools for regulating and directing urban development, understanding its history is essential to rethinking how it might better serve cities today.



1904: First Zoning Ordinance

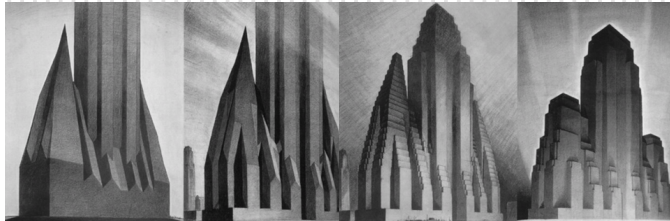
In 1904, the City of Los Angeles passed what is widely considered the first US zoning ordinance, a law banning “wash-rooms and laundries” from residential neighborhoods. This was a thinly-disguised attempt to enforce racial segregation by keeping Chinese residents (many of whom owned and operated laundry businesses) out of white neighborhoods. This separation of residential and commercial land uses was a precursor to Euclidian Zoning, which would become the norm in the 1920s.

1910: First Racial Zoning Code

In 1910, African American lawyer W. Ashbie Hawkins bought a house in an all-white affluent neighborhood in Baltimore. He rented the house to his brother-in-law and law partner, George McMechen, whose family then became the target of harassment and violence from their neighbors. Fearing the “invasion” of Black residents, white residents pressed the City to do something to stop it. In response, Baltimore passed the country’s first explicitly racial zoning ordinance, making it illegal for African Americans to move to any block where the majority of residents were white, and vice versa. Inspired by this legislation, cities throughout the country quickly instituted similar racial zoning codes of their own.

1916: First City-Wide Zoning Ordinance

New York City established the first city-wide zoning code in 1916 as a response to the city’s rapidly increasing population and issues caused by unregulated high-rise construction. The law separated the city into districts by land use in order to protect residential populations from harmful industrial activity. It also regulated building form through setback and height restrictions in an attempt to allow more light and air into the condensed city street grid. This led to the stepped-pyramid shape recognizable in high-rise buildings constructed across New York and other cities at the time. An illustration by architect Hugh Ferriss shows how the maximum mass allowed by the zoning ordinance could be transformed into a constructable building with the most marketable real estate possible.



1916: First Single-Family Zoning

Berkley, CA is thought to be the first US city to adopt a zoning code that designated a zoning district exclusively for single-family housing. While not explicitly intended for racial exclusion, this ordinance aimed to preserve affluent, white neighborhoods from being integrated with multi-family housing and commercial uses, effectively reinforcing segregation. This zoning practice became commonplace throughout the country and has continued to define development patterns in the U.S.



1917: Buchanan V. Warley

In 1917, the Supreme Court overturned a Louisville, Kentucky racial zoning law, ending government enforced racial segregation in residential areas. The case originated when a white Louisville resident, Charles H. Buchanan, agreed to sell his property in a white neighborhood to William Warley, a Black activist and attorney for the NAACP. Warley halted the transaction, citing the City’s ban on Black occupancy in a majority-white neighborhood, which prompted Buchanan to challenge the constitutionality of the existing zoning ordinance, arguing that it violated his rights as a property owner. The Supreme Court sided with Buchanan, recognizing the right of individual property owners as superseding municipal zoning regulations. Buchanan v. Warley helped support later cases challenging racial segregation including Shelley v. Kraemer, a landmark case that prohibited the enforcement of racially restrictive housing covenants in St. Louis.



1926: Euclidian Zoning

In 1926, the village of Euclid, Ohio established a zoning ordinance with use-based designations in an attempt to protect the town from the spread of industrial development in the neighboring city of Cleveland. The zoning code divided the property of Ambler Realty, a local company, into various zoning classes, preventing the company from developing the land for industrial use. Ambler Realty sued the village of Euclid, arguing that the zoning ordinance violated the company’s property rights and diminished the value of its land. The case was eventually brought to the Supreme Court, which sided with the village of Euclid, asserting that the zoning code was within the police power of the local government. Euclid v. Ambler was a cornerstone of zoning policy in the U.S. and even resulted in the use of “Euclidian Zoning” as a term for single-use zoning. This approach has cemented itself as the foundation of zoning and planning throughout the U.S.

1930s: HOLC Redlining

Starting in the 1930s, “redlining” became a common federal housing policy used in cities across the country that denied mortgages and investment in neighborhoods deemed “risky.” Redlining was not a zoning policy, but had a profound impact on cities like St. Louis.

The Home Owners’ Loan Corporation (HOLC) published maps that labeled neighborhoods as one of four categories: A “Best,” B “Still Desirable,” C “Definitely Declining,” and D “Hazardous.” Banks then referred to these classifications to determine who would be eligible for mortgages, and refused to give housing loans within “declining” or “hazardous” neighborhoods. In St. Louis, areas marked as “hazardous” overwhelmingly correlated with Black populations, effectively cutting off access to capital and ensuring that Black residents were locked out of wealth-building opportunities enjoyed in white suburbs. Redlining is considered one of the most destructive planning practices used in the U.S. and while it was finally banned in 1968, its legacy continues to impact social and economic inequality in cities today.



1961: Floor Area Ratio (FAR) Introduced

When New York City revised its zoning code in 1961, it introduced the concept of Floor Area Ratio (FAR) as a tool to regulate building density. Instead of using height restrictions and setback requirements, FAR determines a building’s permitted size using a ratio of total floor area compared to the size of the lot the building sits on. This new regulation significantly reduced the total built density allowed in the city for both residential and commercial development. FAR has since become a common feature in zoning codes across the U.S. as a way to regulate density and form.



1984: First Form-Based Code (FBC)

In 1984, the planning firm Duany Plater-Zyberk developed a new type of zoning code for the town of Seaside, Florida. This code provided guidelines for the massing of buildings and design of the public realm as a way to regulate development rather than focusing on land use. The code intended to promote a more traditional urban development pattern of the early 1900s as an alternative to the autocentric, suburban-style urbanism that predominated throughout the later half of the 20th century. This approach came to be known as a Form-Based Code (FBC). FBCs generally allow for more walkable, mixed-use, and sustainable development, and they have recently become widespread in zoning ordinances across the country.

2018: Minneapolis phases out single-family zoning

In 2018, Minneapolis, MN became the first major U.S. city to eliminate single-family zoning. The Minneapolis 2040 Comprehensive City Plan allows for the development of duplexes and triplexes on lots that had previously been intended exclusively for single-family homes, with the aim of addressing the city’s housing affordability crisis and improving equity. This legislation has prompted many other cities to break with conventional zoning practices that have lauded single-family zoning as a predominant and ideal urban form for decades.



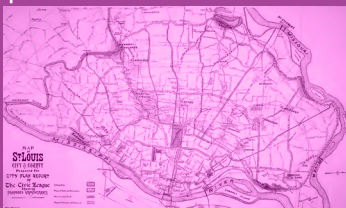
2019: Oregon House Bill 2001

In 2019, Oregon became the first state to ban single-family zoning in large cities state-wide. The legislation, House Bill 2001, allows for the development of duplexes, and in some cases up to fourplexes, in previously single-family only zoning districts. The bill aims to improve housing affordability throughout the state by increasing the supply of “missing middle” housing (housing typologies that fit in between single-detached homes and high rise apartment buildings). Oregon’s law has inspired other states to take similar steps in reducing single-family zoning including California, Washington, Montana, and Maine.

NATIONAL

ST. LOUIS

1900



1907: A City Plan for St. Louis

The St. Louis Civic league created A City Plan for St. Louis, the first attempt at a comprehensive city plan in the United States. This was the first time the city was treated as an integrated whole rather than individual pieces to be planned separately. The plan aimed to attract newcomers with both civic and commercial improvements in order to maintain St. Louis’s status as a major American city. The 1907 plan was never fully realized, but the ideas it presented shaped the city’s development through the 20th century.

1918: City’s first zoning code

Soon after hiring Harland Bartholomew as the City’s first full-time planner, St. Louis became one of the first among major American cities to adopt a city-wide zoning code. The code separated land by use districts with a primary aim of isolating industrial uses from residential areas. However, the code also focused on preserving property values, and was used to enforce segregation by keeping wealthy, white residential areas from areas with other land uses. This was partly in response to the start of the Great Migration, when African Americans were moving to more Northern cities from the South in great numbers.



1925

1920s: The Rise of Harland Bartholomew

Throughout his time as St. Louis city planner (1916-1950), Harland Bartholomew implemented major changes in the city’s infrastructure and open spaces, including clearance of the riverfront space that would eventually become the Gateway Mall. During this time, Bartholomew created plans for many improvements including sewer construction, river channeling, parks and playgrounds, public hospitals, firehouses, rail and auto bridges, powerplants, and public markets. However, one of his greatest impacts was redesigning the city’s transportation system to prioritize the car, resulting in wider streets and a more autocentric cityscape.



1950

1947: Comprehensive Plan

Under Harland Bartholomew, the City Plan Commission adopted a new comprehensive city plan in an attempt to guide the city’s expected growth for the next 50 years. The plan called for urban renewal in designated “blighted” areas, new highway construction through the city to allow for more traffic, and additional parks and recreational spaces. The 1947 plan had some positive attributes, but it also had underlying agendas that contributed to displacement of economically-disadvantaged people, many of whom were people of color, and exacerbated segregation within the city. The lasting, problematic impacts of this plan are still visible in the makeup of St. Louis today.



1950s: Zoning Code Update

As part of the implementation of the 1947 comprehensive plan, St. Louis’s zoning code was overhauled in the 1950s following Bartholomew’s vision. This code established stricter use-base zoning districts and designated much more land for single-family housing in order to disperse residential density.

1973: Team Four Plan

In 1973, an outside firm named Team Four was hired to create a new comprehensive city plan to replace the 1947 plan. This new plan contained policies and recommendations for land use, transportation, public facilities and housing. It also recommended a policy of “managed decline” for much of north St. Louis. While never formally adopted, the plan sent a signal that large parts of the city were not worth saving and exacerbated many Black St. Louisians’ fear and mistrust toward the City. After public criticism, the Team Four plan was ultimately abandoned, and the 1947 plan remained the only comprehensive plan for St. Louis. North City is, in many ways, still healing from the scar left by the Team Four Plan.

1980s and 1990s: New Zoning Tools

While the underlying structure of the zoning code remained unchanged from the 1950s, the 1980s and 1990s saw the introduction of new overlay tools like Special Use Districts (SUDs), Community Unit Plans (CUPs), and Planned Unit Development districts (PUDs) -- three tools that are still in active use today.

2005: First SLUP

The 2005 Strategic Land Use Plan (SLUP) was created in order to improve the quality of life for those who live and work in St. Louis by encouraging appropriate types of development and preservation in clearly defined locations. The SLUP is the primary guide for zoning decisions and other planing efforts.

2012: FBD Enabling Ordinance

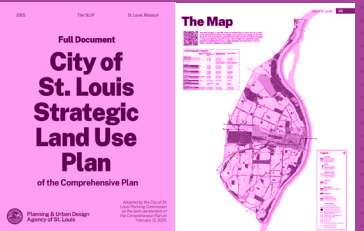
In 2012, St. Louis approved the creation of Form-Based Districts (FBD) as zoning overlays in order to allow more flexibility in development than the existing zoning code permitted. In 2013 the Central West End Form-Based District became the first established FBD with the aim of revitalizing the neighborhood. The addition of FBDs into the code was one of the major innovations in St. Louis’s existing zoning code since its inception in the 1950s.

2017: Eco Devo Sales Tax

In 2017, St. Louis voters approved a 1/2 Economic Development Sales Tax which is providing dedicated funding for transit expansion, neighborhood revitalization, and other priorities. This tax, in part, is providing dedicated funding for community-driven neighborhood planning, which, alongside the SLUP, will shape the zoning overhaul.

2025: Updated SLUP

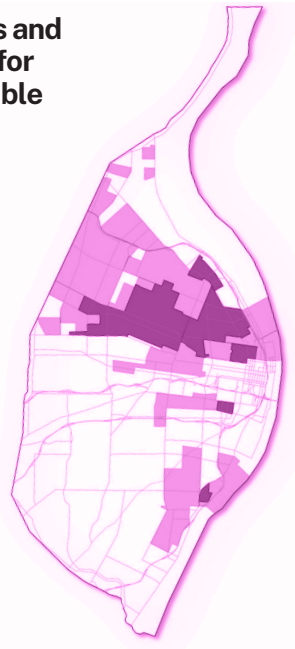
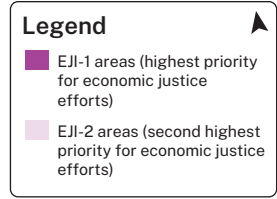
20 years after its initial adoption as the land use element of the St. Louis Comprehensive Plan, the SLUP was holistically updated through a major, community-engaged process. The 2025 SLUP involves an overhaul of land use designations across the city, parcel-by-parcel, providing a guide for what kind of development should happen where. The designations make specific recommendations for use and form that are aligned with contemporary best practices for land use planning as well as the current needs of St. Louisans. The 2025 SLUP also focuses on present priorities such as walkability, climate resilience, and transit-oriented development. The ZOUP will be informed by the high-level recommendations made by the SLUP, but will implement them at a more granular scale.



What Zoning can do vs. can't do

Issue in St. Louis: Uneven Development / Disinvestment

Zoning can remove barriers and create more opportunities for reinvestment through flexible uses, clearer development processes, and a more predictable approach to built form, but can't force investment, fix market conditions, or undo decades of systemic disinvestment on its own.

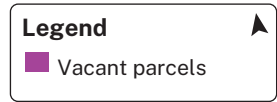


ZONING CAN:	ZONING CAN'T
Legalize a broader mix of uses (e.g. housing, retail, light industrial) in areas that have overly restrictive single-use zoning.	Force or require investment in underdeveloped areas; zoning can only allow or encourage it.
Permit higher-density or more flexible development to make certain types of projects financially feasible in underinvested areas.	Control market forces (e.g., lending practices, developer interest, land speculation).
Remove zoning barriers that make reinvestment harder (e.g. density restrictions or outdated parking requirements).	Guarantee equitable outcomes; zoning can allow opportunity, but it can't ensure uptake or impact.
Make sure that problematic land uses (like badly operated convenience stores) are kept out or otherwise controlled.	Adequately on its own address systemic barriers like access to capital, insurance redlining, or historical disinvestment.

Sources: St. Louis Development Corporation (SLDC) Economic Justice Action Plan 2022

Issue in St. Louis: Vacancy

Zoning can help make it easier to reuse vacant buildings and lots by clearly establishing appropriate uses and forms, but it can't compel property owners to act, maintain their land, or guarantee that development will happen.

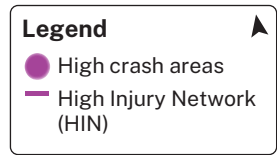


ZONING CAN:	ZONING CAN'T
Legalize a wider range of uses for vacant land and buildings, making it easier to reuse them (e.g. residential, commercial, live/work).	Prevent properties from becoming vacant in the first place, since zoning has no control over private decisions to vacate.
Allow and provide clear guidelines for uses like urban agriculture, renewable energy, or other creative ways of using vacant land.	Compel maintenance or cleanup of vacant buildings or lots.
Establish clearer and more forceful zoning enforcement policies that, alongside other tools can help hold problem property owners accountable.	Fund redevelopment or demolition.
Streamline permitting and approvals in zoning to make reinvestment in vacant sites easier and faster.	Adequately address systemic barriers like access to capital, insurance redlining, or historical disinvestment.

Sources: STL Vacancy Collaborative

Issue in St. Louis: Traffic Safety

Zoning can influence the conditions that support traffic safety such as walkable land use patterns, building placement, and parking, but it can't control actual roadway design or traffic enforcement.



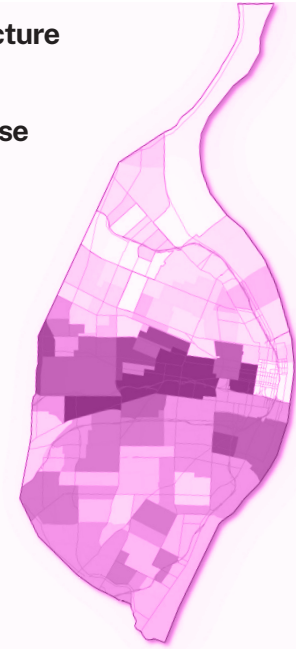
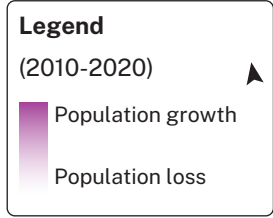
ZONING CAN:	ZONING CAN'T
Encourage compact, mixed-use development that reduces car dependency and shortens trip distances.	Redesign streets, intersections, or crosswalks.
Encourage shared parking or parking behind buildings, reducing pedestrian exposure to cars.	Lower speed limits or enforce them.
Create zoning incentives for developments that include pedestrian and bike infrastructure as part of site planning.	Install or maintain traffic signals, signage, or speed humps.
Reduce parking requirements, which can lower the volume and speed of vehicle traffic in certain areas.	Build or repair sidewalks, bike lanes, or street lighting.

Sources: East-West Gateway Council of Governments (EWGCOG), Missouri Department of Transportation (MoDOT), Missouri State Highway Patrol (MSHP), Missouri Department of Public Safety (MoDPS) (2018 -2022)

Zoning can be powerful tool for shaping a city; but it is just one tool, and it has its limitations. To make the most of zoning in the ZOUP process, we need to understand both what zoning CAN DO and CAN'T DO.

Issue in St. Louis: Population Loss

Population Loss is a big-picture challenge that zoning can influence indirectly by shaping housing options, use permissions, and quality of life. But it's also tied to broader social, economic, and historic factors that zoning alone can't fix.

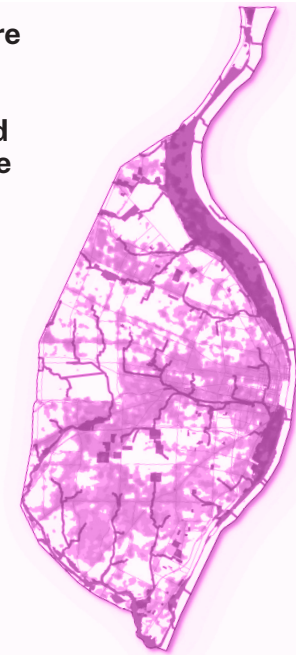
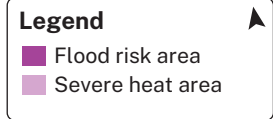


ZONING CAN:	ZONING CAN'T
Legalize mixed-use, walkable neighborhoods that appeal to people seeking urban living with access to services and transit.	Guarantee housing or development is built, even if zoning allows it.
Allow more density near job centers, schools, and transit, making it easier for people to live near where they work or access opportunity.	Address root causes like school quality, job access, or crime.
Reduce regulations (e.g. burdensome parking) that drive up housing costs and reduce new construction.	Control housing market forces such as interest rates, insurance access, or investor behavior.
Support aging in place by allowing accessible housing types like ADUs, senior apartments, or cohousing.	Change perceptions about neighborhood safety, quality, or desirability.

Source: 2020 TIGER/Line features published by the US Census Bureau, 2021

Issue in St. Louis: Flooding / Extreme Heat

Flooding / Extreme Heat are increasingly urgent issues in St. Louis, especially in historically disinvested and environmentally vulnerable areas. While zoning is not an environmental protection tool, it can influence land use patterns and site design in ways that support resilience.

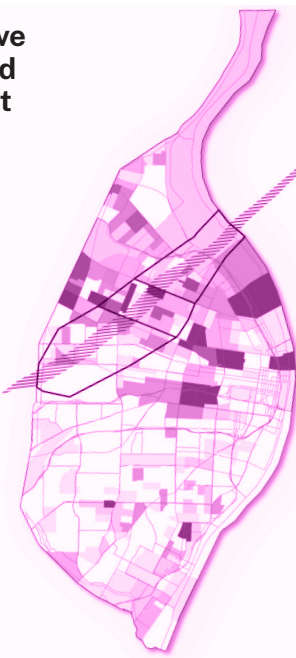
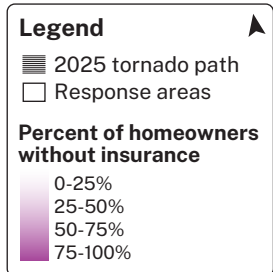


ZONING CAN:	ZONING CAN'T
Carefully regulate development in flood-prone or environmentally sensitive areas through overlay zones or special regulations.	Build or maintain stormwater infrastructure, such as sewers, retention basins, or drainage systems.
Reduce impervious surface requirements and/or set maximum lot coverage limits to promote stormwater infiltration.	Ensure compliance with environmental standards, like EPA stormwater permits, since those are regulated separately.
Allow and incentivize tree preservation or urban canopy requirements, especially in new developments or large sites.	Force existing property owners to retrofit buildings for resilience (e.g., green roofs, cool surfaces).
Coordinate with stormwater utilities or climate plans to align zoning with broader resilience strategies.	Enforce building code changes that improve insulation, reflectivity, or flood resistance.

Sources: National Flood Hazard Layer, FEMA; The City of St. Louis Metropolitan Sewer District, and "Heat Severity-USA 2021." Heat.gov.

Issue in St. Louis: Tornado Recovery and Rebuilding

Zoning can play a supportive role in tornado recovery and rebuilding, by ensuring that future uses and forms are appropriate and by offering temporary relief to property owners from certain regulations. However, it cannot fund redevelopment.



ZONING CAN:	ZONING CAN'T
Establish clear rules for what can be rebuilt by-right, helping property owners act quickly after damage.	Respond to emergencies or manage disaster recovery, since that's the job of emergency management, FEMA, and public safety agencies.
Permit temporary land uses (e.g. emergency housing, staging areas, mobile services) through emergency provisions.	Ensure buildings are structurally safe or disaster-resistant , since that's the role of building codes, not zoning.
Reduce unnecessary zoning barriers (like outdated setbacks or height limits) that prevent rebuilding to previous form.	Provide funding for rebuilding, relocation, or disaster assistance, since zoning doesn't control public or private funding sources.
Guide where and how rebuilding should occur through overlays, planned districts, or flexible zoning tools.	Rebuild infrastructure (e.g. utilities, roads, drainage) damaged by the tornado.

Source: US Census Bureau, American Community Survey 2023 and The City of St. Louis

ZONING FAQ

What is the purpose of zoning? Why should I care about it?

What happens when zoning changes?

Zoning helps make sure land is used in a way that supports a community’s social, economic, and environmental goals. For example, when communities need more housing, zoning can make it easier to build a range of housing choices. Zoning can support small businesses by allowing new and different kinds of businesses in a variety of places in the city. Zoning can support health by keeping polluting uses away from housing, so residents don’t have to suffer bad air quality. Zoning can help with walkability, by allowing small businesses like restaurants or grocery stores to open near housing. Zoning is also one important tool for controlling where and how challenging land uses can operate (e.g., gas stations, convenience stores, car repair shops).

Zoning also offers the community some predictability. For example, if you live next to a residentially-zoned property, you can rest assured that a factory won’t open there. Zoning can change, of course, but not without a formal, public process of considering a change.

You can think of zoning as a set of rules quietly shaping how the city changes over time — you may not see it at work every day, but the impacts of zoning are all around us.

When the Zoning Map and Zoning Code are updated, it may take awhile before you notice any changes in the city.

One reason is that new zoning doesn’t force anyone to take advantage of the new flexibility it offers; things only really change when a property owner or developer decides to make a change. For example, just because you can build two housing units on a parcel instead of one, it doesn’t mean everyone will want to do that, or that they’ll have the resources to make it happen. (Sometimes, a city will need to offer incentives or other funding to encourage development that aligns with its priorities.)

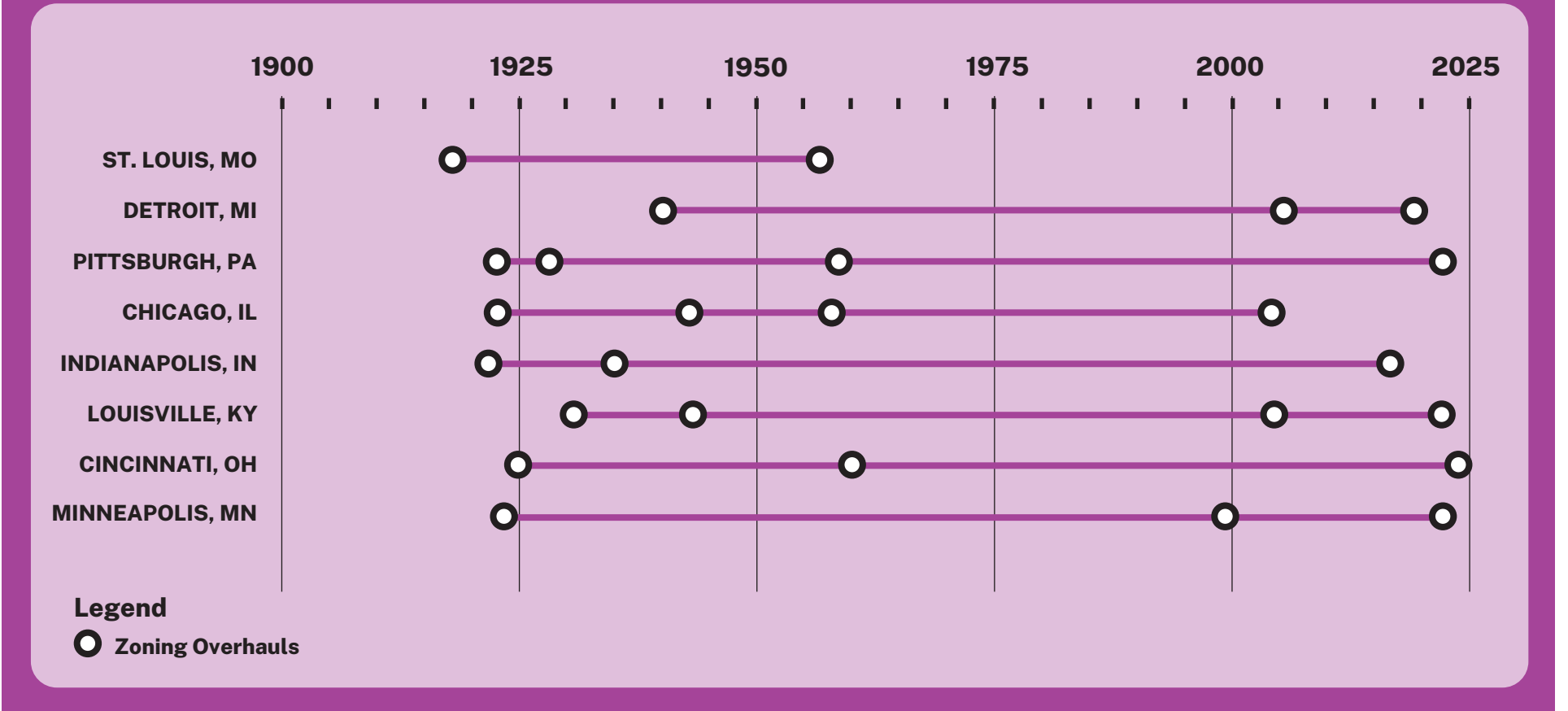
A second reason is that uses allowed under a previous Zoning Code may continue to operate, even if the new rules prohibit them from opening. But every Zoning Code has rules for how these “legal nonconforming uses” are handled. For example, if they close for some period of time (e.g., one year), they must follow the new rules when they reopen.

For these reasons and more, new zoning typically leads to very incremental change in a city. All the better reason to make the updates now — so we can start to see the benefits sooner!

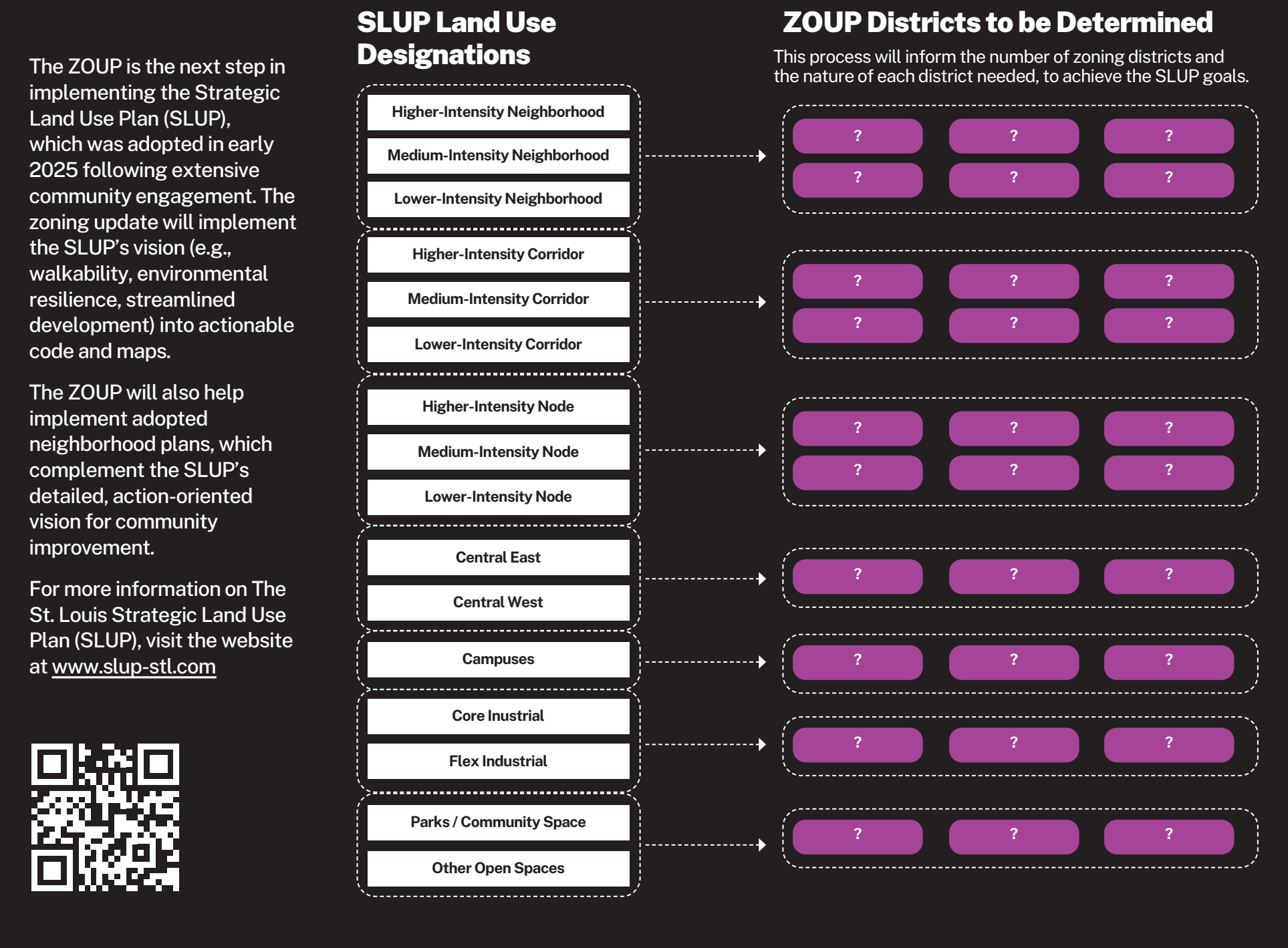
Why is an update important?

The current zoning code is outdated, confusing, and not well-aligned with modern development and climate priorities. Our current zoning systems also contribute to inequitable outcomes and lost opportunities. The ZOUP aims to reorganize the code, remove outdated barriers, improve usability, ensure consistent interpretation, and embed best practices — making the zoning system more responsive and practical. As shown below, St. Louis has the opportunity to catch up to many of its peer cities by updating its zoning code; we can even become a leader!

Peer Cities



THE SLUP AND HOW IT IMPACTS ZONING



How is Zoning different from a land use plan?

Who makes Zoning regulations?

A land use plan is a vision and policy document that establishes community goals and a vision for the city we want to create. It can be pretty detailed; ours, the Strategic Land Use Plan (SLUP), lays out a high-level vision and set of strategies, and applies “designations” to each parcel in the city. These land use designations — you can think of them as types of places — establish general goals and parameters for what should be encouraged and discouraged. Neighborhood plans add to this with more specific goals and priorities that are unique to different parts of the city.

Zoning, by contrast, lays out the specific, detailed rules for what can be built on every parcel in the city. These regulations are established by ordinance. That means they’re more than advisory; they’re actual law. People can be granted exceptions from regulations, but not without specific legal processes, often involving formal hearings and procedures.

Zoning, at the end of the day, is local law. This means that it needs to be approved through the formal legislative process at the Board of Aldermen, and signed into law by the Mayor.

But zoning is a little unique. Because it’s meant to implement formally adopted planning goals and offer a level of apolitical predictability, Planning & Zoning Commissions play a direct role in recommending the regulations and making sure they match the goals. Trained planners, architects, landscape architects, and lawyers help support Commissioners by researching best practices, engaging community members, and drafting regulations.

A complete Zoning Upgrade is a big step and the community’s input is key. In the ZOUP process, the City will go way beyond the legally-required public hearings to engage the community early and often in this process.

Ask Us Anything!

Have a specific question about zoning or the ZOUP? Scan the QR code to our “Ask Me Anything” page. We will be selecting a handful of questions to be featured in the next Zoup Scoop.

What are some of the problems that our current Zoning policies cause now?

Our current code is so outdated that zoning rules are confusing, hard to follow, and simply don't address a lot of modern ideas and needs. This creates a situation where a LOT of approvals in the city happen through lengthy and confusing processes that allow deviations from the rules.

Because we so often allow deviations from the rules, our Zoning does not offer as much predictability for the community as it should. For community members, this means that it's hard to know what to expect, and there are often surprises. Sometimes it's a good surprise: new housing! Sometimes it's a very bad surprise: a gas station is re-opened where it shouldn't be. For developers, this means that the rules of the road aren't very clear, and things can get confusing, costly, or political to the point that many people think twice about investing in the city (or avoid it altogether).

There are also topic-specific shortcomings of our code. For example, it doesn't allow as much housing choice as it could, doesn't address many modern types of land uses, has no consideration for flood resilience or landscape standards, and doesn't reliably support pedestrian-friendly building forms.

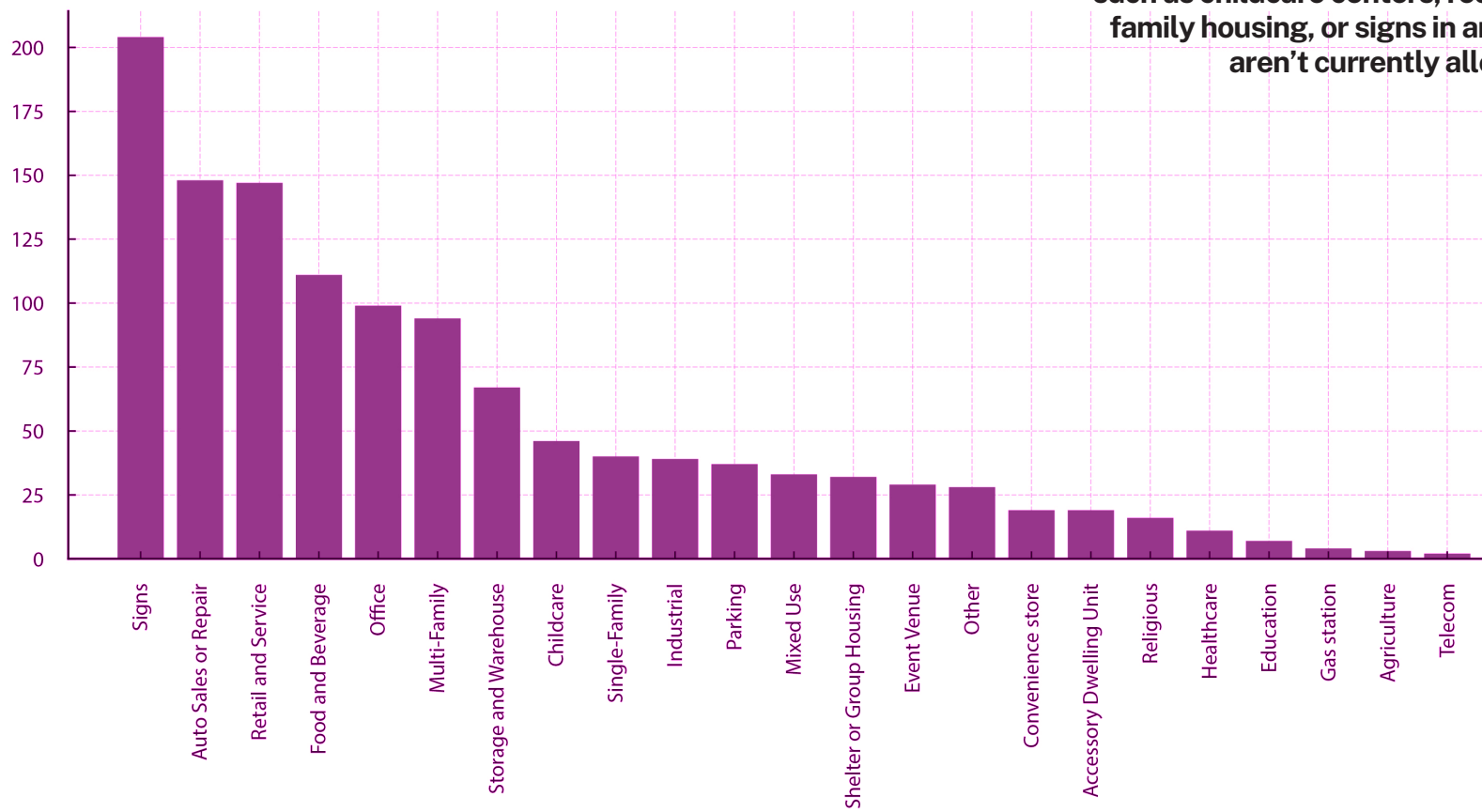
Long story short, there is a lot of opportunity for improvement. At the end of the day, we want straightforward rules that people can understand and reasonably follow, and that help create the city we want to be.

Initial Key Findings:

- 1. Administrative Process**
Current processes are highly inefficient and not transparent to the public.
- 2. Plan Implementation**
The goals of the 2025 Strategic Land Use Plan (SLUP), including allowing for flexible and creative approaches to growth, mixing of uses and promotion of traditional urban forms are not being implemented with the current zoning.
- 3. Use & Adjacencies**
Problematic uses and adjacencies are not being adequately prevented, potentially harming health and quality of life and standing in the way of other development opportunities.
- 4. Form Standards**
Built form and its relationship with the public realm is not adequately addressed.
- 5. Housing Affordability**
Both the local Zoning and Building Codes restrict the ability to provide diverse, affordable options for housing.
- 6. Equitable Policy**
The city's history of systemic injustice is being perpetuated through zoning.
- 7. Climate Change Mitigation**
The impacts of climate change are not sufficiently mitigated.
- 8. Disaster Preparedness**
with respect to zoning, The City is not prepared to cope with the aftermath of natural disasters or other emergencies.

Types of Use Variances Granted

Available data: 2006-2009 and 2015-2024



This chart highlights the categories of Use Variances approved by the Board of Adjustments in recent years. These add uses such as childcare centers, restaurants, multi-family housing, or signs in areas where they aren't currently allowed by zoning.

St. Louis Zoning Appeals

Available data: 2006-2009 and 2015-2024

Variances allow for special exceptions to the rules of zoning. Use variances allow additional uses not otherwise permitted, while area variances allow exceptions for built form.

Although normally intended to accommodate only unusual cases of hardship, they are now required for an enormous share of development in St. Louis, due to the outdated nature of the Zoning Code. This delays the approval of projects, adds cost, creates unpredictability for everyone, and opens the process to subjective and potentially inequitable results.

Appeal #9281
3/18/2009
Use variance granted to operate a convenience store in the "B" Two Family Dwelling District in a mixed-use storefront.

Central West End FBD

Forest Park Southeast FBD

Appeal #11491
6/30/2021
6 area variances and 1 use variance granted to build a single-family home in the Forest Park Southeast FBD.

Legend

1

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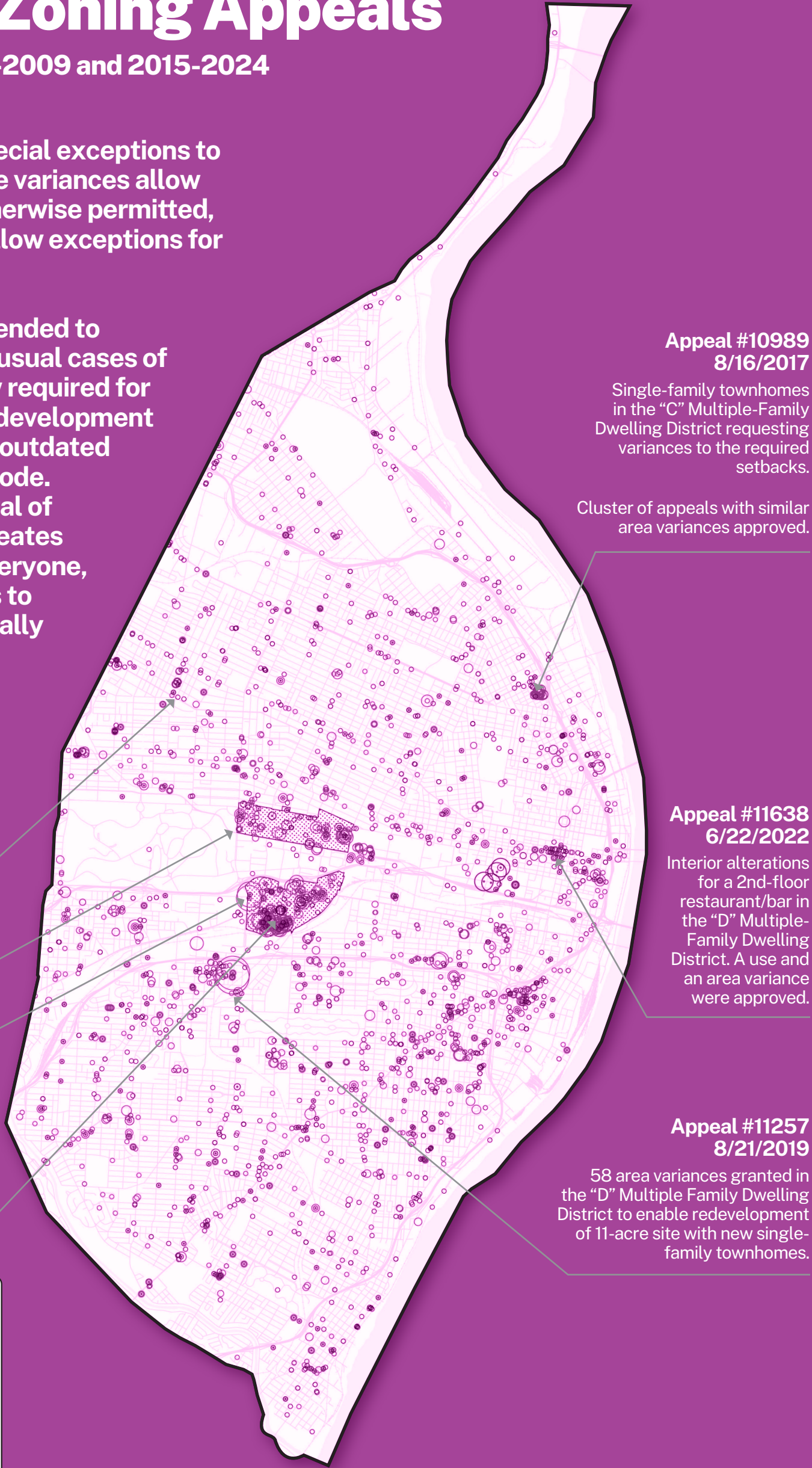
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Qty of Use Variances granted per appeal

Qty of Area Variances granted per appeal

Appeals granted with both Use & Area Variances

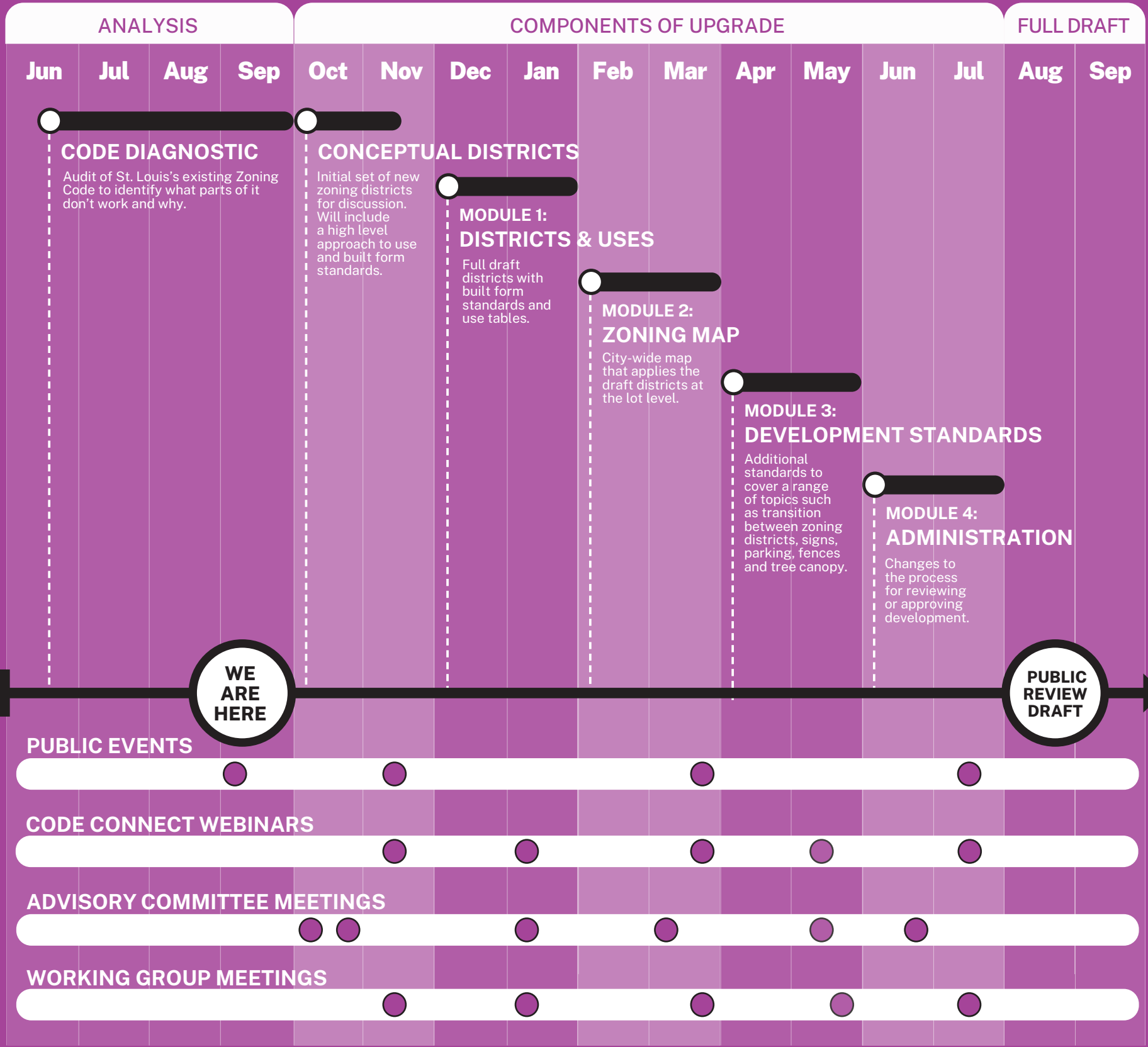
Form-based Districts



ZOUP PROJECT OVERVIEW

ZOUP Phase 1 Timeline

Phase 1 of the Zoning Upgrade is a roughly 15-month process, targeting a complete draft Zoning Code in August 2026. Additional public input and review will continue beyond that, leading to the adoption of the new Code by first the Planning Commission and then the Board of Aldermen.



Project Goals



Drive Successful Implementation

Achieve the visions and goals of ongoing or adopted planning efforts like the SLUP and neighborhood plans.



High Quality Built Form

To improve the built environment, create walkable neighborhoods and support transit use by providing new and improved standards that focus on the urban form of private parcels.



Economic Development

To facilitate development aligned with the community's vision for land use by removing zoning barriers and streamlining the approval process.



Equity & Fairness:

To establish rules and processes that are easily understandable and approachable by everyone in our community, not just the most savvy or experienced.



Organization & Usability

To modernize and improve the organization and user-friendliness of the code to ensure everyone can navigate and understand it.



Recovery & Resilience

To mitigate environmental risks like flooding and urban health island effect and remove barriers to rebuilding after a disaster.

Tools for Outreach



Guided By Community

- Advisory Committee
- Topical Working Groups
- Conversations with Stakeholders and Surveys



Regular Communications

- Website: www.zoup-stl.com
- Social Media: @ZOUP_stl
- ZOUP Scoops
- Press Releases
- News Media



Education & Workshops

- "Code Connect" Webinars
- Expert Panels
- Public Workshops



Internal Collaboration

- Cross-Departmental City Working Group
- Elected/Appointed Officials

Advisory Committee

The Advisory Committee plays a vital role in the Zoning Code overhaul team. Its responsibilities include providing insights and perspectives on how zoning issues impact the community; supporting the overall approach to the overhaul — including education, engagement, and communication efforts; helping to refine documents and review draft materials; offering feedback on the usability of proposed code updates; and facilitating communication between the City, the Consultant team, and St. Louis residents. The Committee will be established in September following an application period and lottery selection.

Working Groups / Technical Advisory Groups

These groups will bring together people experienced with the zoning code and other related topics, including City staff and those working across St. Louis in a variety of relevant sectors and industries. Participants will provide technical review and feedback on drafts of the code, map, and zoning processes as they are drafted to complement the Advisory Committee's review, and to inform broader community discussion. The Planning Team will be forming these groups in the coming months.

ZOUP CHUTES AND LADDERS

How To Play!

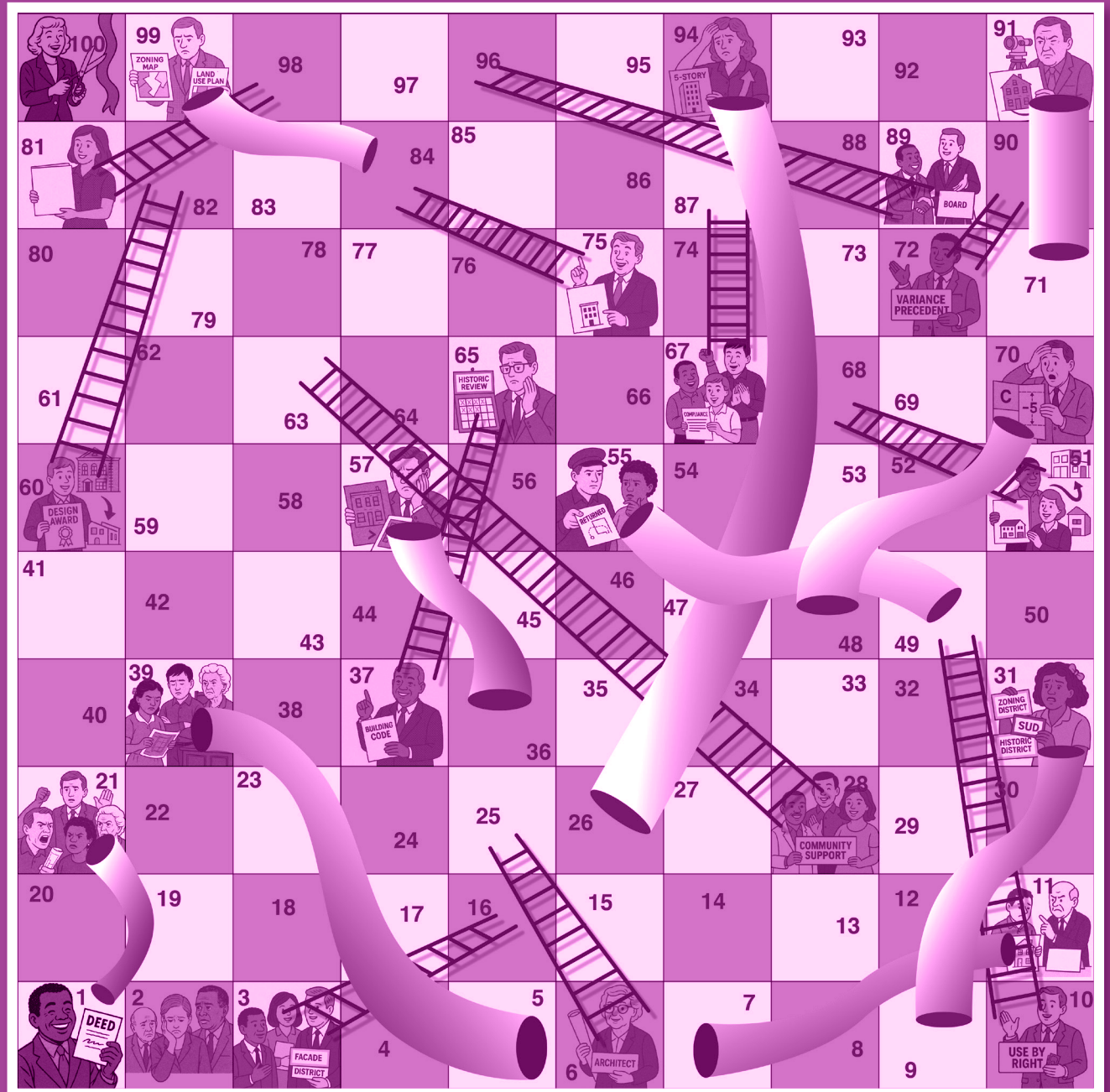
You're trying to build some housing in St. Louis. But before you can break ground, you've got to navigate the twists and turns of St. Louis's development process.

The ladders represent lucky breaks and moments of smooth sailing: an alderperson backs your project, the Board of Adjustment approves a variance, or your plans match the historic guidelines perfectly.

The chutes represent setbacks and delays: your window type doesn't comply with historic standards, you overlooked the Special Use District requirements, or the Board of Adjustment sends you back to revise your site plan.

Your goal is to climb your way through zoning codes and other requirements to reach a final building permit. But beware: in this game, getting to the finish line isn't always as straightforward as laying bricks!

To play, you'll just need a coin or something else to mark your progress and a 6-sided die. Simply put your coin on 1, roll the die, and follow the adventure!



Grid #	Issue	Outcome
2	Variance Hearing Delay	Skip a turn
3	Pre-Application Meeting	You met with CRO, Zoning, and the Building Division early and everything seems good.
6	Experienced Architect	You hire an architect who has completed 20 projects in this neighborhood; the design review passes on first try.
9	Local Historic District Compliance Issue	Your proposed windows are vinyl instead of wood. Your plan is rejected.
10	Use by Right	Your proposed use is permitted by right under zoning and SUD rules. No conditional use or variance review is needed.
21	Public Opposition	A neighborhood meeting turns heated. The Alderperson withdraws support.
28	Community Support	The Neighborhood Association loves your project, and speaks in favor at hearings.
31	Overlay Overload	Your site is in a zoning district, an Special Use District, and a historic district: 3x approvals!
37	Code Whisperer	You hire a consultant who's fluent with Form-Based Districts and the approvals process, resulting in a smooth process.
39	Variance Denied	You needed a height variance to make the project viable. The Board of Adjustment votes "no."
51	Adaptive Reuse Bonus	Your plan to renovate an existing structure avoids setback and parking requirements.
55	Incomplete Application	You forgot to include elevations. Your application is returned.
57	Form-Based District Frustration	The facade articulation standard requires more bays; redesign is needed.
60	Design Award	The neighborhood association loves your historic-compatible design; they speak in favor of approval.
65	Hearing Calendar Clog	Skip a turn
67	Clean Compliance	First plan check finds no zoning violations; go straight to permitting.
70	Density Disappointment	You discover your lot is 5 square feet too small to fit the number of units you want to build in the C Multiple-Family Dwelling District, and need to apply for a variance.
72	Same-Owner Variance Precedent	Your lot is adjacent to a property you developed last year with similar approvals, so there is less pushback this time.
75	Overlay Opportunity	Special Use District (SUD) guidelines actually allow denser development!
81	Perfect Application Packet	Every form, drawing, and fee was submitted correctly the first time, resulting in a smooth review process.
89	Aldermanic Pals	The local Alderperson attends your Board of Adjustment hearing and speaks in support.
91	Survey Says	The survey says your building encroaches into the required front yard setback. A redesign is required.
94	Height Limit Havoc	Your planned 4-story building exceeds the district max by one story. Unless you get a variance, the project no longer pencils.
99	Mixed-Message Mapping	The zoning map says one thing, and the Land Use Plan says another; reconcile before proceeding.