

Attainable Housing Through Mixed-Use Development

Background

The following Mixed-use Development Performance Standards are being provided as a guide to developing zoning ordinances to permit mixed-use development in Bucks County. Mixed-use Developments are defined as those in which a variety of principal residential and non-residential commercial land uses, such as retail and eating establishments, are permitted to coexist within a single building or development site. Twenty-four municipalities in Bucks County have adopted mixed-use ordinances, or components thereof, as a way to combat sprawl, promote economic sustainability, and address the looming attainable/affordable housing crisis in Bucks County. The following performance standards have been aggregated from existing Bucks County ordinances and represent the primary objectives that should be achieved in developing zoning ordinances to permit mixed-use development throughout the County.

There is a nationwide housing shortage that is worsening and not expected to abate any time soon. This issue is particularly evident in Bucks County. According to FreddieMac, the shortage is most significant in the area of starter homes, compounded by increased demand, lack of housing unit production, and, the ability to fund down payments.¹ Starter homes, or “Attainable housing” can be broadly defined as economically affordable housing specifically marketed to working individuals and families whose incomes are too high for subsidized housing and are priced out of market-rate options in terms of rent or home ownership. Attainable housing is not low-income housing. It is housing geared towards professionals such as healthcare workers, teachers, retail salespeople, and EMS workers, regardless of age, physical ability, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or religious beliefs that cannot afford to live near their place of employment. These housing units are generally smaller in size, built on smaller lots, and are often built in a multi-family arrangement.

The lack of attainable housing in Bucks County is cited as one of the main challenges facing employers in Bucks County.² Additionally, Bucks County continues to experience a “brain drain” as our young professionals seek economically affordable housing elsewhere.³ Mixed-use developments are an effective way to increase the supply of attainable housing while also promoting walkability, bicycling, and access to green space.

In Bucks County, 62 percent of the county is zoned for traditional larger lot single-family housing. Ten percent of the County is otherwise preserved through open space and or agricultural preservation. The traditional zoning model of creating multiple but separate zones for housing types reduces opportunities to provide attainable housing units. As our municipalities are responsible for land use and zoning policy and have a history of addressing the unique needs of their communities, one way to combat the issue is to promote and develop mixed-use development projects.

The Bucks County Commissioners want Bucks County to be an ideal, affordable, and accessible place for families to raise children; for young, working adults to buy their first home; for seniors and retirees on fixed incomes to downsize; for veterans to call home, and for people with disabilities to reside comfortably. Therefore, the following mixed-use development performance standards are being provided to encourage municipalities to explore, develop, and pass ordinances permitting mixed-use development and the creation of additional, attainable housing.

¹ <https://www.freddiemac.com/research/insight/20210507-housing-supply>

² <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/Bucks2040Business>

³ [2011 Bucks County Comprehensive Plan](#)

Mixed-Use Development Performance Standards

Mixed-use developments are designed to provide a mixed-use development option that promotes a harmonious combination of residential and non-residential commercial uses incorporating efficient use of land, improved community spaces, and increased pedestrian access.

Mixed-use developments should include the following performance standards to be successful:

1. Be zoned as “by right” or as “conditional use” as part of a designated zoning district or a zoning map overlay. Mixed-use developments (MUDs) are especially suited to commercial corridors, main streets, and suburban centers where existing utility infrastructure is easily accessed. MUDs promote sound land use by consolidating and clustering multiple uses in one project or site. They reduce land consumption and facilitate shared parking.
2. Be required to provide a mix of residential and non-residential uses based on the size of the tract or project being developed.
3. Include a variety of attainable housing types that include both rental and fee simple ownership models geared to a range of income levels. The number and type of units may vary depending on the scale and size of the proposed development. Residential units such as apartments may be built above retail or community space in a single building. Where single homes are proposed, smaller lot sizes ranging from 5,600 square feet to a maximum of 10,000 square feet should be considered as an example.
4. When proposed to be entirely residential it should offer a variety of housing types within one development such as apartments, courtyard townhomes that share a common rear yard, traditional townhomes, and single-family units, as well as other missing middle home types. Lot sizes should be right-sized according to the housing unit they support.
5. Include specifically designated “civic spaces” such as parks, plazas, and other open spaces that encourage public gathering, recreation, and mental wellbeing.
6. Be developed with a “complete streets” approach, where pedestrians, cyclists, and vehicles are all accommodated safely within the roadway corridor.⁴ This includes elements like designated bike lanes, wider sidewalks, and road widths that are built to the minimum safe width allowed by code and safety requirements.
7. Be developed to maximize walkability among the mix of uses permitted through sidewalks, paths, and trails, as applicable. Where possible, connect to existing public sidewalks and trails to foster greater opportunity for walking and less dependency on vehicular travel.
8. Include active streetscapes with wide sidewalks (10 – 14’ wide) which support walkability and the complete streets approach. Wide sidewalks allow for such features as outdoor dining and “mini-parks or pocket parks,” which activate the streetscape and encourage patronage of commercial establishments.
9. Include a coordinated architectural style and visually appealing aesthetic theme.

⁴ <https://www.transportation.gov/mission/health/complete-streets>

10. Include a variety of site furnishings that are coordinated with the architecture and create a visually coordinated theme. This includes features such as site lighting, signage, awnings, benches, bicycle racks, and trash receptacles.
11. Include design guidelines to ensure that current and future development is visually coordinated in architectural styles, building massing, and site furnishings.
12. Include a variety of incentives such as density bonuses, increases in floor area ratio (FAR) reduced parking requirements, expedited land development reviews, or reduced permitting fees to encourage developers to pursue specific projects. Incentives may also include bonuses for preserving additional open space, woodland preservation, “green buildings,” and other sustainable initiatives, such as green roofs and renewable energy inclusions.
13. Include shared parking among appropriate uses and access management techniques to limit unnecessary impervious surfacing and reduce stormwater runoff. Where feasible, on-street parking (parallel parking) should be encouraged to assist with traffic calming and a “complete streets” approach. Allow for parking reductions when uses are within short distances (<400’) of public parking areas and provide electric vehicle charging stations as part of required parking quantities.
14. Allow for parking structures, as applicable, to reduce land consumption and provide for public parking.
15. Require parking lots to be located to the rear and sides of commercial buildings so that buildings may be closer to the street, thereby enhancing the streetscape experience.
16. Include provisions and incentives to promote and encourage historic preservation and inclusion of existing locally historic structures, as applicable.

Mixed-use developments are an important tool for providing attainable housing while reducing land consumption, promoting redevelopment, and creating vibrant community assets.