



What is Adaptive Re-use Zoning?

Adaptive Re-use Zoning is implemented to permit new uses for vacant or underutilized buildings and sites. When vacant and underutilized buildings are no longer economically viable, they often suffer from neglect, deferred maintenance, and blight. This can have impacts beyond the property as nearby owners choose not to invest in the area. Finding new uses for outdated industrial properties, vacant churches, surplus municipal buildings, and former schools can be a great benefit to the community. However, it can be challenging if the underlying zoning does not allow some flexibility for a new use.

A new or revised zoning bylaw or ordinance can be the difference in whether an empty building finds a new use or not. Vacant mill buildings can be rezoned to allow residential, office, or a combination of uses. Cable Mills in Williamstown is an example of how a former industrial site can become a desirable place to live. Dozens of former school buildings in Massachusetts, with their hallways and classroom spaces, have been readily repurposed as housing. One local example is the Notre Dame School in Pittsfield. In the Berkshires, several former religious buildings have been converted to apartments such as St. Mary's Church and Holy Family Church in Pittsfield. Constructed in 1906, the Holy Family Church building once provided power to local trolleys. It was repurposed as a church in 1923. When the church became vacant, it was converted to the Powerhouse Lofts. In North Adams, Our Lady of Mercy Church was converted to four high-end apartments.

Adaptive Re-use zoning can be as simple as allowing additional density. In other cases, it may allow entirely new uses, such as a restaurant utilizing a former town hall or medical offices in a vacant fire station. To provide for the possibility of new uses, the new zoning may also need to focus on flexibility from dimensional and parking requirements.

The goal is to make sure that the vacant building can have a new life while still being compatible with its surroundings and the neighborhood.

Adaptive Re-use in Practice

In Great Barrington, town meeting established the Housatonic Mills Revitalization Overlay District to allow for the adaptive re-use of underutilized historic structures with flexibility and sensitivity to neighborhood needs.



Former industrial buildings, Monument Mills is located within the Housatonic Revitalization Overlay District.

Among the goals of this district is to increase the supply of affordable housing. With the zoning options and flexibility now in place, the site is far more marketable to the development community.

BRPC PROGRAM

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Benefits of Adaptive Re-use

With a new use, vacant or underutilized buildings can contribute to the local economy, encouraging new businesses and investment. Additionally, a rehabilitated building will provide additional property taxes to the municipality.

When a vacant historic property is converted to a new use, the unique architectural aspects of the building can remain, contributing to the character of the area and the quality of life for residents.

Apartments, condominiums, and otherwise small-scale market rate residential units are in great demand in Berkshire County. When mill buildings, former religious buildings, and other underutilized properties are converted, they provide housing opportunities for a variety of demographics, including small households such as young adults and senior citizens.

When adaptive re-use occurs in built-up areas, there is the potential for residents to walk to their place of employment or to services and shopping, lessening traffic congestion, encouraging healthy activity, and improving the neighborhood atmosphere.

Establishing an Adaptive Re-use Bylaw or Ordinance

Several options exist for establishing an adaptive re-use bylaw or ordinance. The existing zoning bylaw may be revised to allow additional density in that district. In some cases, a new zoning district is established that includes only the relevant parcel or parcels. Another option is an overlay district where the existing underlying zoning remains. Adaptive reuse zoning will have a variety of names in local zoning codes depending on the aspects of the bylaw or ordinance.

An adaptive reuse zoning bylaw or ordinance is established by the local legislative body, town meeting or city council. A change to a zoning bylaw requires a 2/3 affirmative vote of Town Meeting or City Council. Prior to a vote by the local legislative body, the planning board holds a public hearing and submits a report. An adaptive reuse bylaw or ordinance is best established as part of a master planning or strategic planning process, that considers the challenges to re-use, the needs of the area, develops goals for the community and envisions the potential of a new use at the site.

Adaptive Re-use Example



Cable Mills, Williamstown

Cable Mills Redevelopment District

The town of Williamstown created a special overlay zoning district to allow the adaptive reuse of this historic mill building. Cable Mills includes 61 units of housing, a combination of affordable and market rate units. The intent of the bylaw is included below.

(1)

Intent. The intent of the Cable Mills Redevelopment District (CMRD) is to encourage the redevelopment of the historic Cable Mills site in a manner that:

(a)

Preserves and complements adjacent historic properties;

(b)

Preserves the historic character and viability of the Cable Mills District and maintains its place in Williamstown's history; and

(c)

Promotes diverse housing opportunities and uses including residential, commercial, retail, office, or a combination thereof.