



What is Upzoning?

Upzoning is the process of modifying an existing zoning district to allow for increased density and uses. A typical example of upzoning would be revising the zoning ordinance to allow additional housing units over what is currently allowed. In some cases, upzoning might revise the zoning from residential to mixed-use, allowing small retail or office uses as well as residential uses. Depending on the existing land use regulations, upzoning may also include decreasing setback requirements, increasing the allowable height of buildings, or lessening the on-site parking requirements. Through carefully planned upzoning, a city or town can allow new uses that better meet the needs of the community today.

Many communities in Massachusetts established their land use regulations during the mid-20th Century. These bylaws and ordinances often mandated low-density residential and commercial development, resulting in car dependent, suburban sprawl. Decades later, many zoning bylaws today still require homogenous, residential development separated from commercial uses. With every trip from a residential area requiring a vehicle and each commercial location requires its own on-site parking. This inefficient use of land lessens municipal revenue. Recent studies have shown that low-density residential development does not provide adequate tax revenue for required municipal services and capital improvements. Such studies demonstrate the necessity of zoning that encourages financially stable development. Areas of mixed-use, denser development, typically provide a much better tax base than low-density sprawl.

An important aspect of upzoning is that a public process has taken place beforehand to identify the area as a reasonable location for additional growth. Areas that are within walking distance of public transportation are often prime locations for additional housing, especially if they are served by public water and sewer infrastructure. Upzoning may mean creating entirely new zoning districts or it may mean minor adjustments to the zoning map, table of uses, or dimensional requirements.

Benefits of Upzoning

When done through a carefully planned process, there are many benefits to upzoning. This includes encouraging denser development away from sensitive environmental areas.

If the upzoning will result in concentrating development in certain areas, the change could mean additional tax revenue to the municipality. For residents, upzoning might provide housing options that better meet the existing demographics of the community, such as smaller units for young people and senior citizens. Encouraging denser development in appropriate locations can lessen sprawl, save open space and reduce traffic congestion while creating more interesting, vibrant places that focus on pedestrian activity.

BRPC PROGRAM

Community Planning Program
berkshireplanning.org/programs

Examples of upzoning can be obtained from Berkshire Regional Planning Commission.

How to Upzone Existing Zoning Districts

Revisions to zoning, such as upzoning, are accomplished by the local legislative body, town meeting, or city council. A change to a zoning bylaw or ordinance 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. Unzoning is best established as part of a master planning or strategic planning process that has identified certain areas of the city or town as logical locations for greater allowable uses.

Upzoning in Practice

Great Barrington

The town of Great Barrington modified its zoning bylaw to encourage the creation of two-family dwellings throughout the town. Additionally, new zoning districts promote denser housing within their downtown area.

Williamstown

Williamstown upzoned a residential parcel to a multi-family through an overlay zone to allow the conversion of a vacant mill building into housing. The building now contains 61 housing units.

Many of the cherished village centers and neighborhoods of the Berkshires could not be constructed today because the density would be prohibited. Yet, these human-scaled, pedestrian-friendly areas are highly desirable places, sought out by homebuyers.



Cable Mills in Williamstown