



### What is Open Space Residential Zoning?

Open Space Residential Zoning (OSRD, also known as Cluster Development) provides for new housing while permanently protecting valuable natural resources on the site.

In a conventional subdivision, all land, aside from the public right of way, is incorporated into a private residential lot. Open Space Residential Zoning provides an alternative to this approach by concentrating the residential lots and preserving the natural resources valued by all residents. The preserved agricultural or forested land is permanently protected through a conservation restriction.

By reducing minimum lot sizes, frontage, and setback requirements, a more traditional neighborhood of homes is allowed. This kind of development is particularly appealing to many homeowners as a smaller lot is easier to maintain. Additionally, it offers a good balance of personal space and privacy but with the social connection of a neighborhood. When the protected open space is available for passive recreation or connects to additional nearby open space, such neighborhoods are particularly sought after.

The bylaw or ordinance may require the preparation of a plan demonstrating the number of lots that could be constructed under a conventional subdivision. This is then used to determine the number of lots allowed through open space zoning. Some bylaws and ordinances may allow additional units over and above those allowed in a conventional subdivision as an incentive to choose the open space option.

While some Open Space Residential Zoning Bylaws allow an open space development through a special permit process, there is good reason to allow this by right within the zoning code. Since a special permit process is a lengthier process and approval by the planning board is not assured, a zoning bylaw that allows by right open space development can help incentivize the use of this tool.

### Open Space Residential Zoning in Practice

For decades, Open Space Residential Zoning has been utilized as a means of encouraging value-added residential development.

However, the creation of new neighborhoods through Open Space Residential Zoning has been limited within the Berkshire region. While used especially within the faster-growing suburban communities of eastern Massachusetts, Berkshire County cities and towns may find it useful to consider this approach that provides additional housing and protects open space.

### BRPC PROGRAM

Community Planning Program  
[berkshireplanning.org/programs](http://berkshireplanning.org/programs)

### EXAMPLES

Examples of open space residential zoning can be obtained from BRPC staff.

### Benefits of Open Space Residential Zoning

There are many benefits to open space residential zoning. A primary benefit is the permanent protection of natural resources. Agricultural land, forested areas, wetlands, and various other open spaces are essential to a community's quality of life. Such critical, irreplaceable areas can remain undeveloped and protected through open space residential zoning.

Depending on ownership and accessibility of the protected open space, there may even be a direct benefit to all residents of the town, particularly if the protected open space links to additional open space through a trail network.

Purchasing open space is a very expensive endeavor for a municipality to take on, even when community preservation act funds are available. Through open space residential zoning, open space is permanently protected without any direct funding from the municipality.

Since the new dedicated public road is likely to be less lengthy than a conventional subdivision, maintenance costs to the town will be lower indefinitely. Many municipalities recognize the need to protect open space but also provide more housing opportunities. Open Space Residential Zoning helps to accomplish both goals.

### Establishing an Open Space Residential Zoning Bylaw/Ordinance

An open space residential 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 open space residential bylaw or ordinance is best established as part of a master planning or strategic planning process that considers critical open space habitat, natural resources, recreational needs, transportation, infrastructure, and goals outlined in the current open space and recreation plan. The bylaw includes language that the open space will be permanently protected through a conservation restriction.

Ice Pond Drive in Northampton is an Open Space Residential Development close to downtown. The houses are sited on traditionally sized, adequate lots that provide privacy without requiring substantial landscaping maintenance. Because of the Open Space Residential Zoning, a greenway connector from the neighborhood includes a path through the woods and wetlands to other nearby neighborhoods.

