Mixed-Use Zoning

In a Nutshell

Mixed-Use Zoning is a specific land-use regulatory tool implemented by units of local government that permits multiple use-types within the same building, district, or corridor. The approach has been used successfully for years in urban settlement design. However, contemporary efforts are in response to 20th Century Euclidean zoning that features a stark separation of uses. Mixed-Use Zoning is an important step for a Mixed-Use Development. Mixed-Use Zoning is one of the many tools that can be used to create dense, unique, and walkable neighborhoods that can spur economic development and provide a sense of "place."

The “How To”

Mixed-use zoning is about blending residential, commercial, cultural, insitutional and even industrial uses. These developments utilize high density zoning to increase land-use efficiency and decrease energy consumption and transportation costs. As with other types of zoning, mixed-using zoning is merely a set of ordinances and paperwork. Communities decide to adopt mixed-use zoning from traditional city planning exercises, such as a community master plan, comprehensive plans, corridor studies and other plans/studies. By adopting mixed-use zoning, a community is only about a 1/3 of way toward building a mixed-use development or transit-oriented development (TOD). Communities will still need to work with private developers and then build the proper infrastructure to make the mixed-use development possible.

Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC), the Boston area’s MPO, published a planner’s guide for mixed-use zoning. That document provides a good overview of how to develop mixed-use strategies well. MAPC stresses the importance of keeping relevant stakeholders involved throughout the process. The Local Government Commission explains in more depth the best way to solicit public participation in the planning process, and how to solicit specific information like the desired height and design of the buildings in the development

If you are wanting to go into further detail on the subject, you can purchase the Mixed-Use Development Handbook by Dean Schwanke. The handbook was developed by the Urban Land Institute, and it provides a lot of detailed information on mixed-use development and zoning.

Planning & Zoning

Adopting mixed-use zoning code is a complex and multi-layered effort. The American Planning Association (APA) provides a Model Mixed-Use Zoning District Ordinance. There is also a Mixed-Use Zoning ordinance from St. Louis County. Your community can use these links as a guide for developing their own mixed-use zoning ordinance. There are several things to consider as you draw up these ordinances. When creating a mixed use zoning ordinance, be aware of these ideas:

1. Decide between an Overlay District, changing underlying zoning, or Planned Unit Development (PUD). MAPC describes the difference (on page 5) between an Overlay District and changing underlying zoning.

2. Selecting the Permit Granting Authority (page 5)

3. Balancing Incentives and Requirements (page 6)

4. Setting the tone and Establishing the Scope (pages 6 and 7)

5. Selecting Area and Boundaries (page 7)

6. Achieving Good Design (page 7)

7. Determining Appropriate Uses

8. Incorporating a Mix of Different Housing Types

Dollars & Cents

Cost to Local Government
The Atlanta Regional Commission's Quality Growth Toolkit provides an estimate of the cost of implementing a mixed-use zoning district. Also, Table 3 on page nineteen estimates how much each step would cost using "High", "Moderate", and "Low" categories. Generally, adding mixed-use zoning to your development code is a relatively inexpensive project, although it will take staff time to draft the ordinance. Certain elements of analysis in designing your mixed-use strategy (i.e. market analysis) could require a consultant and cost thousands of dollars, however, much of the work can be performed by professional planning staff.

Return on Investment
An article from Planetizen on Asheville, North Carolina explains the economic benefits of mixed-use zoning and districts. According to Andrew Jackson (AICP), Asheville saw more than a 800% return on downtown mixed-use development projects on a per acre basis compared to single use developments like Wal-marts. Furthermore, a typical acre of mixed-use downtown Asheville yields $360,000 more in tax revenue to the city government than an acre of strip malls or big box retailers.

Measuring Success

Generally, a mixed-use zoning district should review whether the outcomes of the zoning meet the expectations of the public. The simplest evaluation is to track and monitor mixed-use districts for new investment that features a blend of uses. Easy-to -calculate totals such as the number of projects or total square footage of mixed-use construction can be monitored by the building and inspection department. Annual status report updates is another good approach.

The long-term impact of mixed-use development will yield many benefits. One such example is impacts on public health. The Douglas County Health Department (Omaha, Nebraska Metropolitan area) published a health impact assessment which can be helpful in tracking the health benefits to mix-use zoning.

Discover More

The Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC) provides a section on how to educate the public and address citizens concerns surrounding mixed-use zoning in theirMixed Use Zoning Guide.