

Lessons Learned in Implementation of Pedestrian-Oriented Zoning Provisions: A Research Brief

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Many jurisdictions across the country are exploring more pedestrian-friendly zoning in response to citizen demand for more walkable community areas, a desire to combat sprawl and disinvestment in commercial corridors, and to mitigate unsafe pedestrian conditions. Elements of pedestrian-oriented zoning are unique to the needs of each community, but often include bike lanes and sidewalk requirements, developments with more than one use (e.g. residential, retail, and restaurants), and access to parks or open spaces. This qualitative study explored the implementation of pedestrian-oriented zoning in 15 jurisdictions across the U.S. Information for each jurisdiction was gleaned through key informant interviews with planning officials and documentary/Internet research.

What Did We Find?

Without changes to the zoning code, many key informants noted that pedestrian-oriented visions, like the development or redevelopment of walkable, vibrant community areas, may not have been possible. Communities that adopted and implemented pedestrian-oriented zoning provisions reported a wide range of new amenities in their community including mixed-use developments (e.g. higher density housing combined with restaurants and retail uses); bike lanes and trails; and increased public transit access. One key informant explained that the pedestrian-oriented zoning implemented in their downtown district has “helped create a kind of community living room” where residents can dine, shop, and mingle in walkable and accessible community areas.

Key informants also noted that since implementing pedestrian-oriented zoning, they have observed higher walking rates in their communities, likely as a result of the pedestrian requirements in the zoning code (e.g. connected networks of sidewalks, greenways, and compact development). Aside from new pedestrian amenities and improved community walkability, many interviewees reported increased economic development in areas of the jurisdiction that implemented pedestrian-oriented zoning.

For some communities, the catalyst for implementing zoning changes was not primarily to create a more walkable community, rather, it was enhance public transit access by building rail and bus stations to connect their community to urban cores and existing regional transit networks. Yet, transit development projects often had a positive side-effect of creating more walkable spaces including new mixed use developments surrounding the transit projects.



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Key factors identified as crucial to the process of implementing pedestrian-oriented zoning include: (1) obtaining the support of key champions such as a mayor, council member, and citizen-led advisory groups; (2) engaging with municipal agencies beyond planning and zoning such as economic development, public health, transportation, and parks and recreation; and (3) facilitating partnerships with the business owner and development community.

BEST PRACTICES AND LESSONS LEARNED

This study identified numerous best practice strategies for implementing pedestrian-oriented zoning elements. Many key informants noted that the creation of a more walkable community is best achieved through incremental and small-scale approaches. Small-scale projects such as the creation of public, open-space areas in downtown districts, the provision of street furniture (e.g., benches and planters), improved lighting, widened sidewalks, and bike lanes can serve as budget-friendly starting points for creating more inviting, walkable community areas. Importantly, key informants urged interested communities to be patient and flexible throughout the process of adopting and implementing pedestrian-oriented zoning provisions as large scale projects and long range visions take time to come to fruition. Additionally, interviewees noted the importance of having planning practitioners that are well-versed in the range of strategies that can be undertaken to create more walkable community areas (e.g., New Urbanist design principles).

ADDRESSING GENTRIFICATION AND DISPLACEMENT

Pedestrian-friendly zoning fosters vibrant communities by encouraging upgrades to existing areas or the construction of new features like a public plaza where community members can gather. Because new development and redevelopment can signal changes in a community's socioeconomic make-up, this study sought to determine if gentrification was a concern for communities that have implemented these changes to the zoning code. Several communities stated that their redevelopment efforts were focused in areas that were previously vacant, and therefore did not have significant impacts on low-income neighborhoods or residents. Other communities have met gentrification concerns with targeted strategies to keep their communities affordable for all residents, such as requiring affordable housing within new residential building or at an off-site location. While some communities have observed displacement as a result of new development, most communities stated that they have not experienced significant gentrification as a result of introducing pedestrian-friendly zoning.

Why Focus on Zoning as a Tool for Creating More Walkable Communities?

Zoning is a regulatory land use tool available to jurisdictions that are interested in creating a more pedestrian-friendly and walkable community. Zoning determines what land uses are permitted in certain areas of the community, such as commercial, residential, open spaces, and industrial areas. While planning documents tend to be aspirational, codification of pedestrian-friendly requirements in a zoning code provides developers with more insight on the community's priority: walkable and accessible pedestrian environments.

Pedestrian-oriented zoning is related to the trend towards New Urbanism, which seeks to limit the historic separation of uses within a zone to focus on the overall form and design of the community. For purposes of this study, "pedestrian-oriented zoning" was defined to include form-based codes; New Urbanist zoning (e.g., [SmartCode](#), transects); transit- and pedestrian-oriented developments or districts; and traditional neighborhood development districts or zones.

Methods

This study involved 15 small- to mid-sized, primarily Southern communities located in 10 states with a mix of urban and rural densities. The communities were identified from a large nationwide study of pedestrian-oriented zoning. Participants from the communities were recruited for 30–45 minute phone interviews using a semi-structured interview guide developed for purposes of this study that was tailored for each community to also capture information from their long-range planning documents, land use regulations, zoning ordinances and maps, and bike and trail master plans. Key informants for the study included directors or managers of the community development, zoning, planning, and/or building departments. The recorded interviews were transcribed and coded using qualitative analysis methods to determine common themes.

Key Impacts and Takeaways

The findings of this study provide specific best practice strategies and lessons learned for local governments that may be interested in adopting and implementing pedestrian-oriented zoning elements to create more walkable, connected, and active communities. The study findings are relevant to a variety of stakeholders across many sectors including public health practitioners, municipal government officials, the development community, the business community, and community-led advisory groups. By advocating for the implementation of pedestrian-oriented zoning provisions, stakeholders can guide building design, street, and sidewalk improvements that lead to sustained health benefits, such as increased rates of walkability and bike access.

This study links to a growing policy movement towards promoting well-designed cities with pedestrian activity in mind. [Smart Growth America](#), an organization comprised of policy makers, local government officials, and urban planners, encourages compact design, a mix of building uses, and safe, walkable neighborhoods (Smart Growth America, 2006). Similarly, [America Walks](#) is a national nonprofit organization



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that advocates for the creation of accessible and enjoyable pedestrian environments to promote community health. The organization provides funding to communities to install or repair pedestrian-amenities such as sidewalk resurfacing, or crosswalk installation (America Walks, 2019). These programs reflect the growing understanding that the promotion of health and physical activity can be achieved through the built environment.

References

America Walks, Community Change Grantees, 2019.

<https://americawalks.org/america-walks-announces-community-change-grantees/>

America Walks, Who We Are, 2019.

<https://americawalks.org/about-us/who-we-are/>

Smart Growth America, What is Smart Growth? Our Vision, 2006.

<https://smartgrowthamerica.org/our-vision/what-is-smart-growth/>

Relevant Resources

Examples of Pedestrian-Oriented Zoning in Action

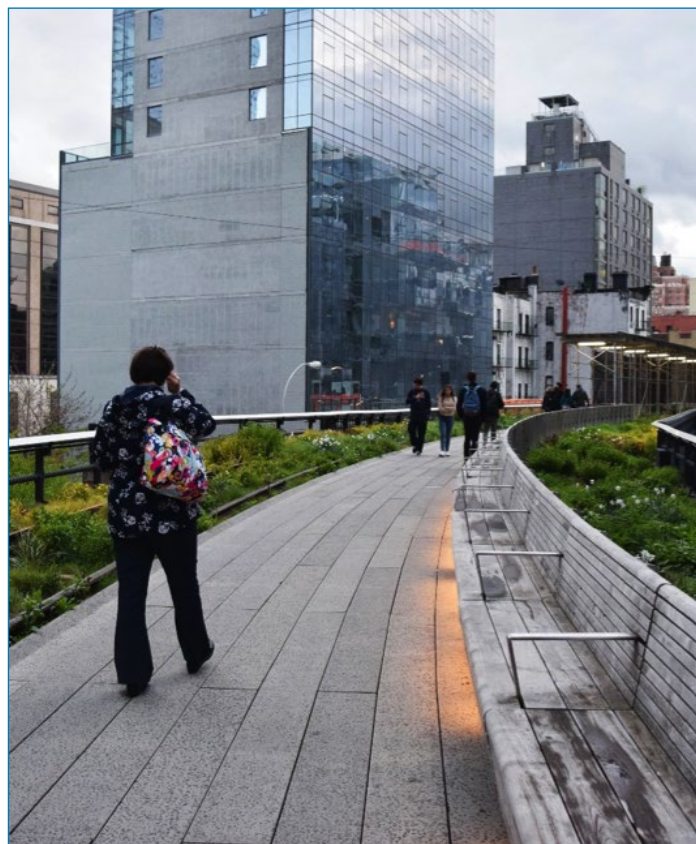
<https://go.uic.edu/zoning-for-walkability>

Form-Based Codes Institute

<https://formbasedcodes.org/>

SmartCode

<https://www.dpz.com/Initiatives/SmartCode>



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