

New Zoning Approach would help Pittsford grow gracefully

It is often said that if you don't plan for success, you won't succeed. Pittsford has an outstanding track record when it comes to planning ahead. Our previous planning initiatives have enabled the Town of Pittsford to maintain an exceptional quality of life for our residents while managing growth and meeting evolving community needs. However, we face a new set of challenges as our community approaches "build-out" – the point in time where undeveloped land is minimally or no longer available.

To proactively address this issue, and in keeping with priority goals and strategies identified in our current Comprehensive Plan, adopted in 2009, we are proposing development of a new Residential Neighborhood (RN) Zoning District to replace existing standard residential districts.

This proposal is more than a revision to current zoning code – it represents a new and unique approach we refer to as Context Zoning. The new zoning code is context-based, providing a customized and consistent framework for each neighborhood with regard to lot size, setbacks, house size, house style, etc. Unlike our present residential zoning code, this method takes into account the distinctive character of a neighborhood as a whole, cataloguing existing traits and utilizing them as a blueprint for future changes to homes and lots.

Additions and alterations to homes, re-subdivision of residential lots, and infill in neighborhoods would all be subject to Residential Design Standards based upon the neighborhood's qualities. These standards could reflect characteristics of an entire neighborhood, a street, or a cluster of homes, as appropriate.

General design standards and guidelines would apply to new construction or alterations, while specific standards and guidelines for architecturally significant structures would be developed to preserve structures considered significant by virtue of their age, historic nature, or the presence of well-preserved rare or unique architectural style.

All standards and guidelines will be based upon analysis of existing residential zoning districts and extensive study of actual neighborhoods throughout the community. Through the Town's Geographic Information System (GIS), we will develop a database of required dimensions for all parcels in the newly created RN district. This will result in guidelines that are clear, consistent and easily accessible to residents via the town website.

An additional benefit of Context Zoning is that contextually appropriate improvements will be allowed without requiring a variance; therefore "pre-existing, non-conforming" zoning issues will be alleviated.

To implement and oversee this innovative approach we propose the development of a newly created Design Review Board which would ensure a high level of expertise, knowledge of the community, and a coordinated approach to design review. This board would be responsible for the review and approval of all construction of new homes as well as alterations to existing homes, both historic and non-historic. The Historic Preservation Commission will continue for the purpose of maintaining an inventory of historic structures, designation of structures as historic and general education about owning and maintain an historic home.

We have developed a draft proposal that includes context-based zoning and subdivision regulations as well as Residential Design Standards and Guidelines. We have been obtaining feedback on it for the past several weeks from various town review boards, community resources and town staff. We will soon take the next step and open the process to town-wide public input via public input sessions on the proposed new zoning code and the re-zoning of properties affected by it.

As less land is available for development and more pressure is put upon our existing housing stock in the form of rebuild and re-subdivision requests, it is imperative that we balance homeowner needs with the preservation of neighborhood and town character. Development of a new Residential Neighborhood district will allow us to do so while ensuring Pittsford grows gracefully and in character with our community. I look forward to your input as we move along in this process. Should you have any comments please share them with me at bcarpenter@townofpittsford.org or stop in and visit me at Town Hall.