

Bond Case Briefs

Municipal Finance Law Since 1971

Cracking the Zoning Code.

Understanding local land-use regulations and how they can advance affordability and equity

Local governments use zoning to control what types of buildings are allowed where and what sorts of uses are allowed within them. But this century-old tool—ostensibly created to separate industrial uses from residential uses—was also used to separate people of different races and classes.

As currently implemented, zoning can hinder progress toward achieving more inclusive communities, shared prosperity, better health, and stronger environmental protections. But when carefully designed and equitably implemented, zoning can help expand the supply of housing, increase housing affordability, and improve racial equity within a jurisdiction. Zoning can be a particularly effective tool when combined with incentives to develop subsidized housing and policies that discourage the displacement of people with low incomes. But zoning has limits: it defines allowed uses, but any change in a community also ultimately reflects the economy of the neighborhood and metropolitan area, which in turn determines whether developers are willing to invest.

In this feature, we explore the components of zoning codes and their implications, investigating not just zoning's role in influencing housing conditions and access but also how zoning rules are created, modified, and enforced—and by whom. We describe how zoning affects housing availability and how that influences the ability of people with different incomes, races, ethnicities, and other backgrounds to live in communities that best meet their needs. We also define key terms related to zoning and land use in the glossary and include a list of additional resources where readers can learn more about key zoning-related research.

[Continue reading.](#)

The Urban Institute

by Yonah Freemark, Lydia Lo, Eleanor Noble, and Ananya Hariharan

May 2022