

Mixed Use Zoning

A Citizens' Guide



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Why is Mixed Use an Important Tool for Your Community?



Traditional zoning was developed during a time when factories and many commercial uses were noisy, smelly, and/or hazardous to public health. To protect both public health and residential property values, early zoning focused on separating different uses and buffering them from each other to minimize nuisances.

Many traditional town centers pre-date the advent of zoning as well as the advent of the automobile. They feature a tightly clustered mix of stores, houses, local government buildings, and civic uses within walking distance of each other and often near public transportation. In many cases, this compact mix could not be built today. Certainly in many suburban or semi-rural communities, a mix of this type would not be permitted today.

Mixed use itself is not a new idea. Housing above stores was common in village centers before the advent of zoning, as this 1865 photograph of Harvard Square, Cambridge, shows.



Unlike the factories of yesteryear, much commercial development today is environmentally benign. There is no longer a good reason to separate and buffer different uses. In fact, there are often advantages to locating different uses near each other. Mixed use concentrated development, preferably near transit, is seen as a key “smart growth” tool to reduce auto dependence, preserve green space and natural resources, and promote revitalization, economic development, and modestly priced housing. It offers residents more of a sense of community and opportunities to socialize

¹ This guide is based primarily on the experiences of five suburban communities currently preparing bylaws with assistance from the Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC), supported by grants from the state’s Priority Development Fund. MAPC also investigated the mixed use experiences of other communities in the region and elsewhere in the state. Preparation of this guide and many of the public education materials used to shape the bylaws and educate the public were developed with additional funding from the MAGIC subregion. MAGIC – the Minuteman Advisory Group on Interlocal Coordination – is a subregion of the Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC). MAGIC consists of officials from Acton, Bedford, Bolton, Boxborough, Carlisle, Concord, Hudson, Lexington, Lincoln, Littleton, Maynard, and Stow.

with their neighbors than a more isolated suburban lifestyle. Thus many communities are turning to “mixed use,” which generally refers to a deliberate mix of housing, civic uses, and commercial uses, including retail, restaurants, and offices.

Mixing uses, however, works best when it grows out of a thoughtful plan that emphasizes the connectivity and links among the uses. Results may be haphazard when communities simply enable multiple uses without providing guidance about the mix of uses and how they are spatially related. If your town is considering mixed use, it is most likely to succeed if the impetus grows out of a large-scale community planning effort and is recommended in a local Master Plan, Comprehensive Plan, Community Development Plan, or other studies. Effective plans are typically adopted by the community after a lengthy and considered public process, with input from local officials, planners, developers, property and business owners, and other interested citizens. Thus there is generally some official community expression of a will to move forward with mixed use as one of a number of strategies to manage future development in a way that furthers a variety of local goals.

What are the Benefits of Mixed Use Development?

Different communities choose mixed use for different reasons. Some see it as an excellent way to incorporate a mix of housing types on a small scale while enhancing traditional town character. Others see it primarily as a vehicle for revitalizing struggling areas and spurring economic development. Still others use it to create or enhance village centers. Suburban communities in metro Boston have identified many benefits of mixed use development. Citizens find that mixed use:



- Spurs revitalization
- Encourages high quality design by providing both greater flexibility and more control
- Preserves and enhances traditional village centers
- Promotes a village-style mix of retail, restaurants, offices, civic uses, and multi-family housing
- Provides more housing opportunities and choices
- May increase affordable housing opportunities
- Enhances an area’s unique identity and development potential (e.g., village centers, locations near bike paths, or “gateway” areas that announce a community’s strengths)
- Promotes pedestrian & bicycle travel
- Reduces auto dependency, roadway congestion, and air pollution by co-locating multiple destinations
- Promotes a sense of community
- Promotes a sense of place
- Encourages economic investment

- Promotes efficient use of land and infrastructure
- Guides development toward established areas, protecting outlying rural areas and environmentally sensitive resources
- Enhances vitality
- Embodies “Smart Growth”
- Increases revenues
- Improves a municipality’s Commonwealth Capital score

Although mixed use is especially applicable near public transportation, it has advantages for other areas as well. Such benefits include the preservation of undeveloped or environmentally sensitive land elsewhere in the community, opportunities for more or different housing, bicycle and pedestrian-friendly destinations, and an enhanced sense of place or sense of community.



Each community will design its bylaw differently, depending on its particular priorities and on the specific opportunities of different locales. The incentives, controls, and tone will be carefully selected to achieve these local goals. If the community wants to encourage mixed use and be happy with the result, it needs to balance a number of potentially competing factors. On the one hand,

the bylaw should be structured to be attractive to developers and to avoid onerous requirements. On the other hand, it should ensure that new mixed use development is compatible with and enhances community character. Similarly, the community will want to be flexible enough to encourage innovative design but definitive enough to provide clear and predictable guidance.

The delicate balance and strong local control are achieved through the language of the bylaw, optional design guidelines, and the special permit process itself. **It is important to remember that through the special permit process, the municipality typically retains control and can turn down any development not to its liking.**

The remainder of this guide presents visual examples of mixed use “successes” and opportunities. A Technical Appendix, outlining some things to consider in reviewing mixed use proposals in your community, is available under separate cover.

Mixed Use in Practice



New Mixed Use in Canton

The five communities we worked closely with are Bedford, Millis, Southborough, Stoughton, and Stow, all suburban and some quite small. We also reviewed the experiences of other communities, most notably Canton, where a mixed use bylaw passed and a new development, with housing, retail, and offices, was built near the Canton Center Rail station.

Specific areas in each town were chosen for a variety of reasons. Some, like Depot Park in Bedford, already had some improvements but also had ripe revitalization potential.



Bedford's Depot Park Improvements



Bedford Opportunities

Others, like the Lower Village area in Stow, are places where housing and a mix of uses would create more of a village atmosphere and improve the “gateway” potential of this main route into town.

In most cases, the vision is to create a vibrant and attractive village-style area with a lively mix of housing, retail, restaurants, offices, and other compatible uses.



Stow Lower Village



←← Vision for the Village Center at the former South Weymouth Naval Air Station