



# Grand Rapids Sustainability in the Zoning Code

## Case Study

### Project Snapshot

After developing a master plan that focused on the tenets of smart growth, Grand Rapids updated its zoning ordinance in 2008 to make implementing these principles easier and the new norm for development in the city. Using the LEED-ND checklist as a starting point, the new zoning ordinance addresses sustainability by emphasizing neighborhood design and connectivity. The ordinance takes a unique approach especially in regard to parking, renewable energy, landscaping, and natural buffers.

### Timeline

Grand Rapids updated its master plan in 2002, built around an extensive community engagement piece. The City held 250 public meetings, engaging around 3,000 community members about their neighborhood assets and vision for the future. This ensured that the plan would reflect residents' concerns and desires, and that residents would support the final plan.

The City then used this community input when crafting the technical language of the zoning ordinance in 2008, marking the first comprehensive change to City zoning in four decades. The ordinance drew extensively on LEED-ND, which was being introduced nationally around the same time, and helped ingrain sustainability strategies into all aspects of development. Throughout the process, the City brought drafts of the ordinance to community leaders for feedback, which helped the ordinance pass without opposition.

### Zoning Ordinance Features

**Parking** – Minimum requirements were halved and a cap was also implemented setting the maximum number of spaces allowed as well. Developments could also reduce the number of spaces required through proximity to transit or bike facilities, or by offering explicit carpool spaces.

**Renewable Energy** – The new ordinance permits solar panels outright in all districts, whereas the old code either discouraged or prohibited entirely renewable energy. Likewise, wind development projects of a certain size can now be approved without first needing approval of the planning commission. By removing the administrative barriers in place in the old code, Grand Rapids has streamlined the process, encouraging the development of more renewable energy projects.



**Grand Rapids, MI**  
Population: 118,040  
Governance: Commission-  
Manager

### What is a Form-Based Code?

Form-based codes use an area's physical form as the organizing principle for the zoning code, rather than separating uses as in conventional Euclidean zoning. Form-based codes may include requirements about size and mass of buildings, facades, street scale, and other design considerations. These requirements may vary based on neighborhood or land use type. Form-based codes can facilitate a mix of uses, standing in contrast to the usual separation of uses.



### What is LEED-ND?

Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design for Neighborhood Development (LEED-ND) is a green neighborhood certification from the U.S. Green Building Council, Congress for New Urbanism, and Natural Resources Defense Council. The rating system recognizes developments for implementing green building and smart growth strategies, such as mixing land uses, locating close to transit, and facilitating pedestrian access.

**Landscaping** – The zoning code includes minimum green space requirements in commercial and residential districts, and allows green roofs, walls, and porous pavement to count toward the quota. The code encourages a diversity of plant species, and explicitly requires native plants and prohibits invasive species. The code also encourages on-site stormwater management, and requires payment to a regional waste water program if this requirement is not fulfilled.

**Buffer Zones** – To protect the City’s natural amenities, the ordinance requires a standard 75-foot buffer around rivers, streams, and other waterways. There are exceptions, especially if it encourages infill development as an alternative to building on an undeveloped site on the outskirts of the city.

**Relation to LEED-ND** – The zoning ordinance facilitates LEED-ND certification by requiring many of the same elements; developments meet the basic LEED-ND requirements just by following the code. While developers may choose to not pursue certification, the community benefits from developments meeting these sustainability standards.

### Advice for Communities Considering a Similar Project

- Do not underestimate the importance of the community engagement component. It should aim to involve as many residents as possible from all neighborhoods; later, identify committed individuals to serve as leaders/liason between the community and technical planners.
  - Do not assume that residents will want things a certain way or be opposed to non-traditional zoning practices. One example of this in Grand Rapids occurred when residents identified “granny flats” as a neighborhood asset. Residents viewed this as an interesting feature usually not permitted in single-family residential areas, so the language was changed to allow mixed density residential.
- Gaining support for a zoning code focused on sustainability can be difficult because it will likely be a large departure from the existing code. It is tempting to frame the issue in terms of climate change or environmental goals, but these motives can be politicized and controversial. Instead, a change to the zoning code is necessary to make communities more efficient and competitive in attracting businesses and residents. These changes represent the new standard for how business will be conducted.

### Additional Information

- The full zoning ordinance can be found on Grand Rapids website at: <http://www.grcity.us/design-and-development-services/Planning-Department/Pages/Zoning-Ordinance-Text-and-Maps.aspx>
- This “Cool Planning” guide helps to familiarize someone to LEED-ND: [http://www.oregon.gov/ENERGY/GBLWRM/docs/cool\\_planning\\_handbook.pdf?ga=t](http://www.oregon.gov/ENERGY/GBLWRM/docs/cool_planning_handbook.pdf?ga=t)
- US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) offers Community Challenge Grants and Regional Planning Grants to reduce barriers to achieving affordable, economically vital, and sustainable communities. Updating or amending zoning codes meet the criteria. View grant application online: [http://portal.hud.gov/hudportal/HUD?src=/program\\_offices/sustainable\\_housing\\_communities/Apply\\_for\\_a\\_Grant](http://portal.hud.gov/hudportal/HUD?src=/program_offices/sustainable_housing_communities/Apply_for_a_Grant)



Michigan Green Communities is a network of local government and university staff in the state of Michigan that collaborate with one another, through peer learning and information sharing, to promote innovative solutions and move sustainability initiatives forward at the local, regional, and state level.

For questions or information, visit [greenchallenge.mml.org](http://greenchallenge.mml.org) or contact Laura Matson ([lmatson@a2gov.org](mailto:lmatson@a2gov.org)).