

Neighborhood Conservation Overlays



Frequently Asked Questions

What is a neighborhood conservation overlay district?

A Neighborhood Conservation Overlay (NCO) district is a zoning layer placed on top of the base zoning district that serves to protect unique features of a residential neighborhood. The zoning overlay is tailor-made to each neighborhood and reflects the special qualities of that place. The development standards protect elements visible from the public right-of-way and may vary from setbacks and building massing to distinct architectural features to special natural or environmental characteristics. An NCO also serves to facilitate compatible development or redevelopment.



What changes will happen when a neighborhood becomes a conservation district?

The purpose of an NCO is to maintain the existing setting and features of a neighborhood that give it its special character. A property owner will not have to change or alter the property due to the designation. If the owner wants to make changes that are addressed in the neighborhood design guidelines, plans will be reviewed by city staff to ensure that any alterations are compatible with the existing neighborhood guidelines.



Who will decide how the guidelines will affect my property?

Residents within the overlay district determine what is included in the guidelines. The neighborhood creates its own design guidelines and conservation plan with the help of City staff. The City serves to help property owners comply with the neighborhood's goals.

How will an NCO district help a neighborhood?

One of the goals of an NCO district is to stabilize and enhance neighborhood character by providing a clear plan and set of design guidelines that accurately reflect the neighborhood as a cohesive unit. By establishing a higher standard of development, NCOs typically stabilize property values and encourage quality new development and reinvestment in the area. Increased neighborhood pride, resident involvement, and a greater sense of community often result from this recognition as a unique and special place.



How are neighborhood boundaries defined?

Boundaries should reflect a cohesive built environment that represents common characteristics and the setting of the neighborhood. Boundaries can be as small as one block face and may be altered in the same manner that they are created. There may be multiple NCOs within a traditionally defined neighborhood boundary.

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How do I know if my neighborhood is eligible?

A potential NCO must contain at least one block face and at least 75% of the land area must have been developed at least 25 years prior to the application.

How are the guidelines and plan written?

Districts will be studied by neighborhood residents with the assistance of City staff. The neighborhood residents and staff will assess the special characteristics of the neighborhood in order to create a plan that accurately reflects the goals and characteristics of the district.

Can a neighborhood be both a Conservation District and an Historic District?

No. Conservation Overlay Districts and Historic Districts serve different purposes. If a neighborhood is unsure of which direction to take, City staff will be happy to review the neighborhood and make suggestions.

Will being an NCO make me change the appearance of my property or rehabilitate it right now?

No. Property owners are not required to alter their properties upon designation. If, however, an owner wishes to alter property after designation, the owner would be required to follow any applicable NCO guidelines.

What sorts of things can the guidelines regulate?

Items such as, but not limited to: building height, massing, and orientation, principal elevation features, building materials, roofline and pitch, dimensional requirements, setbacks, lot size, lot coverage, parking and loading requirements, garage entrance location, driveways, landscaping, fences and walls, lighting, signage, general site planning for both primary and accessory structures.

What sorts of things can not be regulated by the guidelines?

Interior alterations, routine maintenance or repair of any structure or site feature, demolition of any structure, exterior paint colors and types of land uses permitted by the underlying zoning district.

Is there a design committee review or public hearing for alterations or for new construction?

No. All review is done by staff and the general public is not involved in the review process.

How long will review take and will there be a fee?

There is no additional fee for NCO plan review and design assistance to the normal fees associated with building permits. Major alterations and new construction follow the same timeline as any project requiring a building permit.

Can an NCO be used to exclude certain types of housing?

No. An NCO is used to maintain the character, setting and identity of a neighborhood and to promote quality, respectful investment. If a parcel is currently zoned for multi-family, an NCO will not change that current land use.

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Will an NCO downzone my property or change its land use?

No, the existing base zoning will remain unchanged. Any vacant parcels will also maintain the range of uses permitted by the underlying zoning. The NCO may affect the dimensional standards (lot area, setbacks, building height, etc.), but not the use or density of the base zoning.

Will different land uses have different guidelines?

Sometimes commercial and multi-family areas have different characteristics and settings from their single-family neighbors even when they are located within the same neighborhood. In order to conserve these special characteristics, neighborhoods may have different guidelines in order to protect the special qualities of each area.

How do you start an NCO in your neighborhood?

Typically a neighborhood files an application with the Planning Department and an assessment is made as to its eligibility. If the neighborhood is found eligible using criteria outlined in the Development Ordinance, a public meeting is scheduled by the Planning Department to provide pertinent information for residents and stakeholders. Following the public meeting, if the residents are still interested in pursuing an NCO district, the residents, with the assistance of City staff will draft a Neighborhood Conservation Plan. The plan is reviewed by the neighborhood and is presented at public hearings by the Planning Board, Zoning Commission and City Council. Once the Neighborhood Conservation Plan is approved, the Guidelines will be used to review proposed developments within the district.

