

Staff Report

ZONING ORDINANCE UPDATE DISCUSSION

April 15, 2025

BACKGROUND:

At the May 14, 2024 City Council meeting, the Council decided to pursue a comprehensive update of the City's Zoning Ordinance and related development standards. Zoning is the fine grain tool that translates vision and policy into practical implementation standards that apply to all types of properties across the city.

Council initiated the update process in order to efficiently address a wide range of issues related to implementation of Plan 2040, Complete Streets design policies, and individual zoning issues for customers, including developers and citizens.

City Council initially raised the idea of rewriting the Zoning Ordinance due to the large number of text amendments approved each year and list of priorities related to the adoption of Plan 2040 in 2022. The City has made dozens of text amendments over the past 10 years to modify or update the Zoning Ordinance to address specific issues. Staff provided some initial background on permitting and text amendments on [November 14, 2023](#), when staff catalogued 69 text amendments from 2015-2023.

Some changes were substantial, such as the rewrite of landscaping standards in 2017, creation of the 20% alternative design alternative flexibility, and rewrite of the Conservation Subdivision in 2024. Others were narrower in scope such as such as Downtown nonconforming lot standards and industrial flag lot widths. Most of the text amendments are the result of referrals by Council in response to development interests, homeowners, and the code enforcement processes. About 40% were staff-initiated changes to address various Council directives, clean up issues, and state law changes. Overall, the November summary supported the need to take a more comprehensive look at the Zoning Ordinance that was last updated in whole in 2000.

As part of the Planning Division FY 2025-26 budget, City Council set aside \$100,000 for consulting assistance for drafting an ordinance. The \$100,000 would not fund a complete rewrite process with a consultant. Staff has recently seen budgets for comparable efforts to Ames in excess of \$250,000, with the greatest variability of cost based on public engagement efforts. **While staff can facilitate the public engagement for the rewrite and develop the desired standards, the consulting budget is intended to augment staff resources as needed.** An example could be for expertise regarding a specific design issue or legal issue. Final formatting and graphics may also require consulting assistance from experts that prepare codes.

OPTIONS:

WORKSHOP TOPICS:

At the Council workshop, staff will: 1) review previously discussed topics/standards that will be addressed with an update, 2) gain an understanding of Council's desired public outreach components, 3) identify any specific issues to be addressed that are not yet identified, and 4) receive initial direction on the type of ordinance/end product that would be the result of the update. **Once the workshop is concluded, staff will then prepare a formal scope of work and timeline for the project and return to Council at future meeting for its approval.**

A. Topics/Standards:

Typically at the outset of a Zoning Ordinance update process, an assessment of what works and what is missing within an existing code as the initial step of the process. A comparison is done of current code and recently adopted City Plans and may also have a review of recently completed projects to gauge the effectiveness of the standards. In many ways this has occurred at a high level through recent changes to the ordinance and the discussion of Plan 2040 implementation.

The following is summary of known issues identified on [May 14, 2024](#) that at a minimum would be addressed with an update.

1. Complete Streets Standards/Subdivision Code Updates (Including Walk Bike Roll Plan)
2. Create a New Corridor Zoning District for Lincoln Way
3. General rewrite of commercial zoning districts and standards, including gateway overlays
4. General cleanup of standards and simplify tables for uses and development standards
5. Updates to general standards of development, such as lighting, landscaping, parking as needed
6. Update of Zoning for Floating Suburban (FS) areas related to housing density and building types
7. Incorporate general infill design standards
8. Other green building or sustainable development requirements
9. Park land dedication ordinance requirements
10. Sign Code update and coordination with zoning

Staff believes the above list is still pertinent today and should be addressed in any update of the Zoning Ordinance.

Additionally, Staff believes that based upon our experience in the development review process (DRC) and the previous research for the 20% flexibility ordinance during 2024 that there will be, at a

minimum, interest in updating the following existing standards:

- simplifying and potentially reducing landscaping requirements,
- continued evaluation and lowering of minimum parking requirements,
- reviewing the procedural process for shared sites and improvements,
- updating of Campustown Service Center (CSC) design standards,
- adding Downtown Service Center (DSC) zoning design standards, and
- industrial storage area allowances and improvement requirements.

It should be emphasized that the focus of the Zoning Ordinance update, as articulated above, is related to commercial development requirements and targeted areas for zoning change related to Plan 2040 initiatives. Staff believes that large scale changes to the existing single-family residential zoning districts of City will not be needed. This is in part due to recent changes by Council to allow for ADUs, two-family units, updates of nonconforming standards for accessory buildings, front yard parking/driveways, and small infill options with PUDs and townhomes.

At the workshop on April 15th, staff will be seeking feedback from the Council regarding significant issues that should be identified up front that have not been discussed or if the scope is too broad and should be reduced. Understanding the breadth of the update will help define a timeline and steps for the project. Issues will arise during the process, but having a solid defined starting point will assist in efficiently completing the update.

B. Outreach:

Outreach options can be driven by interests in general public involvement or weighted towards a targeted group of individuals focused on specific issues or the overall process. Outreach can be used to identify initial public interests for an update, i.e. issues to address, and it can be used to refine proposed changes as they are developed.

The 2000 ordinance rewrite included extensive public outreach efforts and involvement of stakeholder groups to craft the ordinance as a complete rewrite of zoning districts regarding uses and standards. Input at the outset of the 2000 process defined some of the overall objectives of the 2000 update and then the draft was refined through additional efforts while evaluating multiple draft ordinances.

Option 1-General Public Involvement Strategy:

Utilizing general public outreach strategies (public workshops/focus groups) to building awareness and involvement in the process would likely be most valuable in response to proposed changes with drafts of new standards. At this point it does not appear we need significant input on the initial type of issues to address for the update because of the initial list of topics described in the previous section.

With this option, staff suggests an initial kick off of the process focused on online input and registering for future topical involvement. This approach would not include in person focus groups and public meetings because of the already identified core list of topics. The online input would be provided to

Council and help inform drafting of new language.

As staff develops proposed language it would then be available for public review and suggestions before finalizing language as a draft ordinance. This approach can be augmented with additional public participation as needed if issues arise that area unanticipated and there is a strong desire for more discussion about some specific issues.

Throughout the update process the City would want to keep messaging that the process is underway and at what steps public involvement is expected.

Due to the details and specificity of a Zoning Ordinance, compared to Plan 2040 policies and goals, staff believes most of the work will be done administratively with an eye on technical issues to minimize frequent Council meeting updates.

Option 2- Advisory Committee Strategy:

Alternatively, the City Council may find it beneficial to select members of the public as an advisory committee to help work through concepts to get to a public draft. The committee would work within the scope approved by Council and not set the priorities themselves. This option would utilize an application process with the intent to identify community members representing a variety of areas of the City (commercial, industrial, and residential stakeholders). Council would select the members of this committee and staff would provide updates to the committee as drafts are developed for comments and input.

Council could utilize the Planning and Zoning Commission in this role as an alternative to a new committee. The Commission has some familiarity with zoning and development issues and represents a cross section of the community. Staff would consider committee feedback for the drafting of final language and presentation to Council.

An advisory committee would likely be formed during the initial outreach step and have a life of 12-18 months with potentially 10-15 meetings during the drafting of the update. Because of the detailed nature of a Zoning Ordinance, having a consistent group involved in the drafting could be beneficial for continuity throughout the process and building knowledge of the issues and details. **Council would be involved with updates at select points in the process but would not regularly address the details as they are developed.**

Final Steps

With either option for public outreach, staff would utilize the City website to provide a means for the public to track progress on the update and to stay informed of new information. Regardless of the primary means of creating the initial draft, the final step of adoption would include making draft documents available for public comment and having a public presentation(s). Staff would provide this information and comments to Council to obtain direction regarding the final ordinance before public hearings for approval.

C. Format/Style:

Currently the City's ordinances are very traditional with individual topic chapters that need to be cross referenced for a full understanding of regulations, this includes Flood Plain, Stormwater, Subdivision, Missing Infrastructure, and Zoning. Staff would generally categorize format options as traditional, unified development code, or a form base code.

Option 1- Traditional/Reorganized:

At the outset of the update, staff believes reorganization of the development related chapters would be beneficial by separating zoning uses from development regulations. Iowa Code has specific parameters around zoning defined activities and uses, while development and building related standards have a different set of requirements regarding process that could allow for project review to be more tailored to unique or individual conditions of a project.

Staff believes this approach could make it easier to understand the overall requirements and provide some flexibility to how standards are defined and administered. However, chapters would not necessarily be integrated as one defined code.

Option 2- Unified Development Code:

Staff believes a Unified Development Code approach which brings the site development and subdivision standards together in one place to simplify communication of standards and ensure integration of development expectations.

The downside of a Unified Development Code could be too much content, repetition, and detail that could result in the opposite outcome of making something too unwieldy to understand for small and average projects.

Option 3-Form Based Code:

A third alternative of format is newer style called a Form Based Code that is heavy on design details "the form" of the built environment and less concerned about traditional zoning use controls. This is a graphics laden approach with specific dimensional details that result in a specific look and type of development that is intended to be contextual to its surroundings as defined by the zoning standards. It is a time intensive process to create and administer, but has generally very predictable outcomes because of the degree of specifications in the code.

Staff does not believe that this approach is warranted for Ames. Although some areas of the City will include additional design standards and details compared to other areas, the overall community has not had a tradition or experience with this type of regulatory process. Implementation would likely take too much investment in staff and customers resources compared to its potential benefit.

To help Council have a feel for modern zoning ordinances that includes graphics and utilize web resources to disseminate information, we have provided some links to codes that are in staff's view consistent with a hybrid traditional approach or unified development code approach. City's either post pdfs of Zoning Ordinance documents or rely on a code publishing service to host the ordinances. The city currently relies on individual pdfs and does not utilize a code publishing service.

South Bend, IN

Columbia, MO-Chapter 29

Boise, ID

Cedar Rapids, IA

Johnston, IA

Rochester, MN

With either Option 1 or 2 related to Format/Style, staff believes the work can primarily be accomplished by staff with the assistance of a consultant as needed. If Council keeps the broad scope identified by staff, the Unified Development Code (Option 2) would seem to be a good choice. If Council desires a narrow scope of work on fewer development issues, then Option 1 would work best for consistency with the existing structure of the Municipal Code.

Should Form Based Code (Option 3) be preferred, staff recommends preparing a RFP and hiring a consultant at the beginning of the process because staff does not have the knowledge to prepare this type of code.

STAFF COMMENTS:

The staff is seeking direction from the City Council regarding Topic/Standards, Public Outreach, and Format/Style for updating the Zoning Ordinance. The overall timeline for the project is likely 18 + months. Staff will prepare a formal timeline and scope of work for Council's approval after receiving feedback at the workshop.

ATTACHMENT(S):