



SINGLE-FAMILY INFILL DEVELOPMENT

MUNICIPAL RESOURCE

Encouraging
Infill Housing

November 2022

Image Source: County Planning

SINGLE-FAMILY INFILL OVERVIEW

Residential infill development is new construction of housing on vacant lots within established neighborhoods, often where homes have been demolished. Infill projects—especially single-family infill—are common in the First Suburbs, as they are typically built-out with only smaller, scattered vacant lots available. Infill construction is important to First Suburbs as it can bring new investments that can help rebuild neighborhoods and restore population loss.

INFILL OPPORTUNITY IN THE FIRST SUBURBS

With the assistance of the Cuyahoga Land Bank, First Suburbs have created opportunities for new infill housing by proactively addressing blight through demolitions. From 2010 to 2020, 2,149 homes have been demolished; however, construction has been slow, with only 874 homes having been built between 2009 and 2020. Demand for housing in the First Suburbs has been growing, as families and individuals are seeking smaller homes in walkable neighborhoods. The First Suburbs have an opportunity to fulfill this demand, with approximately 5,320 vacant lots where single-family homes could potentially be built.

IMPORTANT CONSIDERATIONS FOR MUNICIPALITIES

Infill development comes with several challenges that can be discouraging and can leave these vacant lots unbuilt. Local governments can actively promote and facilitate infill to overcome those challenges and encourage construction of desired housing by updating their regulations and policies, educating and involving their communities, and assisting developers and builders.

This guide provides a brief overview of different ways municipalities can better facilitate infill and underscores their important role in encouraging infill development.



A Potential Infill Lot in a First Suburb
Source: County Planning, Garfield Heights, Ohio

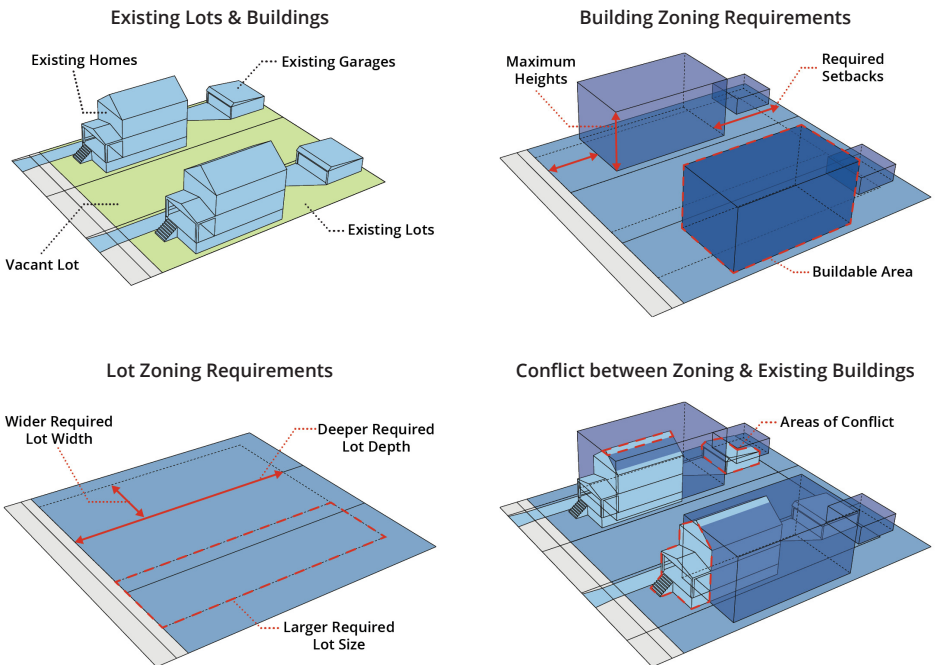
INFILL HOUSING AND ZONING

Many lots were platted before zoning codes were established, therefore many current lots and homes are often at odds with zoning requirements. For example, among existing single-family lots in the First Suburbs, 48% do not meet minimum lot width requirements, 41% do not meet minimum lot size requirements, and 30% do not meet minimum front setbacks requirements.

As demonstrated by the graphic below, outdated zoning codes can result in a mismatch between what is legally allowed to be built and what can be physically built. When zoning codes require larger lots, wider frontages, larger buildings, and deeper setbacks than what is feasible on current lots, development professionals must apply for variances or build housing that is out of character with the surrounding neighborhood. This can result in higher project costs or abandonment of infill projects altogether.

Over half of the surveyed development professionals in Cuyahoga County noted that an easy-to-use zoning document was the most important factor when pursuing single-family infill housing development. Over a third of those development professionals said they were dissuaded from developing infill in a First Suburb community due to its zoning code.

VISUALIZING INFILL HOUSING & ZONING CONFLICTS



COMMUNITY BENEFITS OF INFILL

Expansion of residential infill development is an important element in neighborhood reinvestment, allowing communities to address housing demands while maintaining neighborhood character and affordability. Benefits of residential infill development to communities include:



ENHANCING THE HOUSING STOCK

There is an opportunity to develop new housing that accommodates smaller households or intergenerational families, and incorporates marketable elements such as modern floor plans, accessible features, and a variety of price points.



IMPROVING PROPERTY VALUES

Residential infill development attracts investment, thereby marginally increasing adjacent property values, which is important for neighborhoods that have experienced prolonged disinvestment.



LOWERING COST OF PUBLIC SERVICES

Through residential infill development, vacant lots become occupied, further contributing to the tax base and spreading the cost of public services. The additional tax money helps support and maintain transit, sidewalks, utilities, schools, and public safety.



STRENGTHENING NEIGHBORHOODS

Residential infill development eliminates vacant lots and adds new homes to existing neighborhoods—meaning more residents to maintain properties and more appealing and safer streets in vibrant and resilient neighborhoods.


CHALLENGES TO INFILL IN FIRST SUBURBS

Relative to greenfield development, infill development can have various regulatory, physical, and financial challenges. However, municipalities often assume an important role in reducing these challenges. Surveyed development professionals in Cuyahoga County identified the following top challenges of developing single-family infill housing in the First Suburbs:



REVIEW & APPROVAL PROCESS

It often includes several submission requirements, multiple steps of approval, complex regulations, design standards, and variances which can result in a lengthy process. Municipalities can improve regulations and provide incentives to facilitate a better infill process.




ECONOMY OF SCALE

Infill lots often have to be developed one at a time and the scattered nature and size of these lots can make it difficult for a developer to justify financially. Municipalities can assist by streamlining this process and assembling parcels to overcome this challenge.



PERCEPTION OF SAFETY

A lasting perception of safety issues in certain communities can affect infill's marketability. Additional improvements to neighborhoods and an emphasis on their amenities and assets can lessen this perception. Involving CDCs and community groups can be helpful.



NEIGHBORHOOD OPPOSITION

Many community members may be apprehensive about changes to their neighborhood, have a general mistrust of new development, or associate an influx of new residents with an increase in traffic, pollution, or noise. Meaningful engagement is important to ensure buy-in.

BEST PRACTICES

Below are best practices for municipalities to encourage and develop desired infill housing.

1. Clearly outline infill needs and goals

Communicating infill needs and goals through a comprehensive or neighborhood plan, an RFP, or general marketing material can help attract interested developer. Having clear goals provides direction and flexibility. This creates a collaborative environment and allows a developer to tailor their development to the communities' needs or find the necessary partnerships to make it happen.

2. Provide up-to-date market data and promote assets

Sharing market data can help showcase the demand and/or potential for infill, thus lowering the perceived risk and enticing builders. It can be effective to provide data targeted to specific streets or neighborhoods where infill should be prioritized. Highlighting the surrounding assets and amenities can also make infill more attractive and enhance its marketability.

3. Provide site-specific information

Providing site-specific information—such as availability and quality of utilities and infrastructure and description of physical limitations—allows builders to more accurately estimate cost, plan effectively, and avoid delays.

4. Lower the cost of infill development

Infill development has significant upfront costs that can be a large barrier especially for smaller builders. Cities should look at what tools—financial or process-oriented—they have at their disposal to help reduce costs.

5. Update zoning code

It is important to have an effective zoning code that aligns with development goals, is realistic to what can be built, and is easy-to-use. Updating your code may require small in-text modifications or may necessitate a complete restructuring, depending on the specific issues that need to be addressed.

6. Improve the regulatory review process

Regulatory review processes entail multiple steps of review that involve different boards and entities which can lead to a lengthy and complicated process that can drive up the cost of development. An effective review process ensures a level of predictability, transparency, coordination, and efficiency that minimizes unnecessary delays and resolves issues early in

the process. To ensure a timely review process and increase confidence in the process, time limits of when applications must be reviewed by or automatically accepted could be placed. It can also be helpful to offer preliminary meetings with developers and builders to provide more information upfront and demystify the process.

7. Provide clear and easy-to-use design guidelines

Design guidelines can help builders understand what external elements are prioritized in a community and can help staff or design review board members achieve consensus. Effective design guidelines attain a balance between ensuring certainty and allowing creative flexibility. That can look different across communities as design guidelines should be developed within the local context and be tailored to a community's specific goals, needs, and capabilities.

8. Educate and involve stakeholders and residents

Community education and involvement is critical when outlining infill needs, updating zoning codes, or developing design guidelines. It is important for municipalities to meaningfully and consistently engage and involve residents in its decision making processes to ensure new developments are accepted and benefit community members. Municipalities can facilitate community engagement themselves or assist development professionals by providing engagement resources or connecting them to local organizations or Community Development Corporations (CDCs) that can assist.



Single-Family Infill Home
Image Source: County Planning, Cleveland, Ohio

ZONING CODE IMPROVEMENT OPTIONS

There are several ways municipalities can update their zoning codes to reduce barriers to infill development and produce the desired housing. Three typical approaches include:

1. Making Changes to a Base Zoning District

A base zoning district determines the types of uses permitted and the minimum dimensional requirements of lots and buildings within a certain area. Changes can include: adding in-text exemptions and reductions for lots platted before the zoning code was instated; altering lot requirements to better reflect existing lot and building characteristics; making infill a distinct permitted use with separate requirements; or adding performance standards and flexibility for infill.

Benefit: It does not require the creation of a new zoning boundary or mapping changes

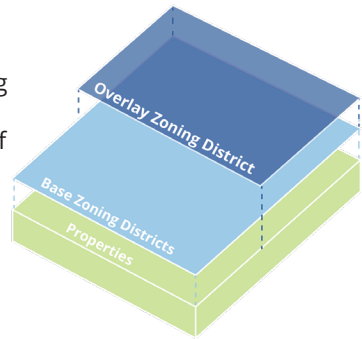
Considerations: It may not be enough to adequately address infill or it can make regulations more complicated or uncoordinated, if significant changes are required.

2. Creating an Overlay Zoning District

An overlay zoning district is applied over one or more previously established zoning districts, developing different standards for properties in the overlay. In the case of residential infill, an overlay could provide flexibility and streamline processes to remove barriers to infill development.

Benefit: It can be tailored specifically to address the needs or concerns of infill redevelopment without changing the base district or rewriting entire zoning categories.

Consideration: It can make the process more complex or confusing with multiple layers of regulations.



3. Creating a Floating Zoning District

A floating zoning district is an unmapped overlay zoning district. It is not effective or established on the zoning map until a property owner submits a development plan that meets the specified conditions and gets approval.

Benefit: It can be helpful when trying to achieve specific goals but where the direction of development and growth is uncertain.

Consideration: There can be a loss of predictability and accessibility of the zoning map.

OVERVIEW OF DESIGN GUIDELINES

PURPOSE

Design guidelines allow communities to influence the look and feel of their neighborhood by providing a set of parameters that inform the exterior materials, design, and layout of new or renovated buildings. Communities employ design guidelines for various reasons:

- To give clear design direction to development professionals
- To serve as a guide for staff and review boards to ensure consistency
- To enhance the overall quality of new development
- To preserve the existing character of neighborhoods with a specific style
- To improve the appearance of areas experiencing incompatible design
- To encourage the inclusion of elements that provide environmental, social, or health-related benefits

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

Design guidelines can be a helpful tool, however they need to be crafted thoughtfully and administered properly to be effective. Below are some key considerations for developing and administering design guidelines:

- **Context:** To be applicable and feasible, they should take into account the current built environment, coordinate with existing regulations, align with established community objectives, and be attuned with market demand.
- **Capacity & Expertise:** Having enough staff and the sufficient expertise are critical to successful implementation. Design guidelines also need to be easily and consistently interpreted by those enforcing them.
- **Flexibility:** It is important to distinguish which criteria are essential and necessitate rigid specifications, and which are more aspirational. They also need to be clear, precise, and understandable in order to be legally defensible.
- **Time & Cost Implications:** It is important for design guidelines to not unnecessarily extend the review process, as time and cost are two critical barriers for development professionals. Additionally, requiring expensive design elements can ultimately affect the affordability of homes.

Figure 1: Neighborhood Identity Illustration

The repeated use of a specific architectural element, such as horizontal wood siding or stone, can create a thematic component that helps to identify a neighborhood.



Illustration from the City of Berea's Single-Family Residential Site Design Standards

INFILL INCENTIVE OPTIONS

Below is an overview of different types of incentives municipalities can offer to outweigh challenges and make infill an attractive development opportunity. The diagram shows that most incentives apply early on in the development process, thus demonstrating a municipality's key initial role in facilitating infill.

Financial Incentives seek to remove financial pressure and allow infill projects to “pencil out” and compete with greenfield sites. They include:



Buyer Attraction incentives which expand the pool of qualified buyers and give developers the assurance that their newly built infill homes will be purchased.



Cost Reduction incentives which remove financial barriers for builders. They can come in many different forms, such as fee waivers, low or no interest loans, or tax rebates.

Process Incentives seek to improve the development process. They include:



Site Identification & Assemblage incentives which involve identifying and promoting specific areas to focus infill development.

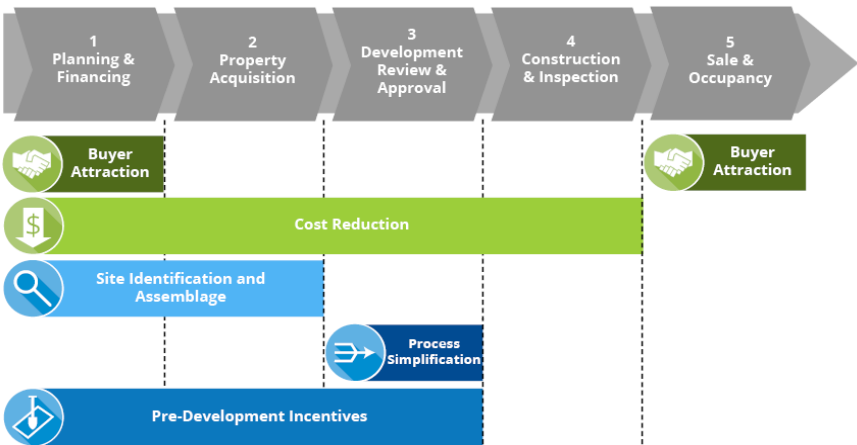


Development Process Simplification incentives which involve streamlining the review and approval process for infill projects that meet criteria defined by the municipality.



Pre-Development incentives that are actions which can be taken to prepare vacant lots for development before a specific builder is identified.

TYPICAL DEVELOPMENT PROCESS & RELEVANT INCENTIVES



ROLES IN RESIDENTIAL INFILL

Residential infill development is successful when there is cooperation among various stakeholders. Below are key stakeholders and their roles.

Local Municipality

Municipalities review plans, issue permits, and conduct inspections of new developments. They are responsible for fostering desired development that aligns with the community's overall needs and goals by establishing and enforcing the rules and regulations that guide the development process. They can assume a key role in incentivizing and promoting infill development.

Community Members

Community members have valuable firsthand experience and knowledge on the day-to-day needs and concerns of their communities, and they are often interested in building or purchasing an infill home.

Development Professionals

Development professionals are responsible for presenting development plans that are financially sound and adhere to regulations; providing supporting data and studies to reduce unintended consequences; engaging the community early in the development process to ensure buy-in; and constructing responsibly.

Other Governmental Agencies and Non-Profits

The Cuyahoga Land Bank can be instrumental as they acquire properties and develop them themselves or sell them to homeowners and small developers. They can also provide technical assistance and additional resources during the development process.

County Planning can assist municipalities in updating their zoning codes and can engage stakeholders to establish development goals and a plan for the future.



Single-Family Infill Home built by The Cuyahoga Land Bank
Image Source: Cuyahoga Land Bank, South Euclid, Ohio

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

This resource is made possible by the Northeast Ohio First Suburbs Consortium in partnership with the Cuyahoga Land Bank and First Federal Lakewood and is facilitated by the Cuyahoga County Planning Commission.

Northeast Ohio First Suburb Consortium

www.firstsuburbs.org/

The first government-led advocacy organization in the country working to revitalize mature developed communities, and raise public and political awareness of the problems and inequities associated with urban sprawl and urban disinvestment

Cuyahoga Land Bank

www.cuyahogalandbank.org/

A non-profit government-purposed entity tasked with acquiring blighted properties and returning them to productive use to increase property values, support community goals and improve the quality of life for Cuyahoga County residents

Cuyahoga County Planning Commission

www.countyplanning.us/

An independent governmental agency that informs and provides services in support of the short and long term comprehensive planning, quality of life, environment, and economic development of Cuyahoga County and its cities, villages and townships

Single-Family Zoning Analysis

www.countyplanning.us/singlefamily

The Single-Family Zoning Analysis aims to identify issues within zoning and outline best practices for making constructing desired infill housing more practicable

Contact your local municipality for the most up-to-date and complete information about residential infill development in your community.



County Planning



First Federal
Lakewood

