

2026 -- H 7374

=====
LC004432
=====

STATE OF RHODE ISLAND

IN GENERAL ASSEMBLY

JANUARY SESSION, A.D. 2026

A N A C T

RELATING TO TOWNS AND CITIES -- ZONING ORDINANCES

Introduced By: Representatives McEntee, O'Brien, Spears, and Fogarty

Date Introduced: January 28, 2026

Referred To: House Municipal Government & Housing

It is enacted by the General Assembly as follows:

1 SECTION 1. Section 45-24-31 of the General Laws in Chapter 45-24 entitled "Zoning
2 Ordinances" is hereby amended to read as follows:

3 **45-24-31. Definitions. [Effective January 1, 2026.]**

4 Where words or terms used in this chapter are defined in § 45-22.2-4 or § 45-23-32, they
5 have the meanings stated in that section. In addition, the following words have the following
6 meanings. Additional words and phrases may be used in developing local ordinances under this
7 chapter; however, the words and phrases defined in this section are controlling in all local
8 ordinances created under this chapter:

9 (1) **Abutter.** One whose property abuts, that is, adjoins at a border, boundary, or point with
10 no intervening land.

11 (2) **Accessory dwelling unit (ADU).** A residential living unit on the same lot where the
12 principal use is a legally established single-family dwelling unit or multi-family dwelling unit. An
13 ADU provides complete independent living facilities for one or more persons. It may take various
14 forms including, but not limited to: a detached unit; a unit that is part of an accessory structure,
15 such as a detached garage; or a unit that is part of an expanded or remodeled primary dwelling.

16 (3) **Accessory use.** A use of land or of a building, or portion thereof, customarily incidental
17 and subordinate to the principal use of the land or building. An accessory use may be restricted to
18 the same lot as the principal use. An accessory use shall not be permitted without the principal use
19 to which it is related.

1 (4) **Adaptive reuse.** “Adaptive reuse,” as defined in § 42-64.22-2.

2 (5) **Aggrieved party.** An aggrieved party, for purposes of this chapter, shall be:

3 (i) Any person, or persons, or entity, or entities, who or that can demonstrate that their
4 property will be injured by a decision of any officer or agency responsible for administering the
5 zoning ordinance of a city or town; or

6 (ii) Anyone requiring notice pursuant to this chapter.

7 (6) **Agricultural land.** “Agricultural land,” as defined in § 45-22.2-4.

8 (7) **Airport hazard area.** “Airport hazard area,” as defined in § 1-3-2.

9 (8) **Applicant.** An owner, or authorized agent of the owner, submitting an application or
10 appealing an action of any official, board, or agency.

11 (9) **Application.** The completed form, or forms, and all accompanying documents,
12 exhibits, and fees required of an applicant by an approving authority for development review,
13 approval, or permitting purposes.

14 (10) **Buffer.** Land that is maintained in either a natural or landscaped state, and is used to
15 screen or mitigate the impacts of development on surrounding areas, properties, or rights-of-way.

16 (11) **Building.** Any structure used or intended for supporting or sheltering any use or
17 occupancy.

18 (12) **Building envelope.** The three-dimensional space within which a structure is permitted
19 to be built on a lot and that is defined by regulations governing building setbacks, maximum height,
20 and bulk; by other regulations; or by any combination thereof.

21 (13) **Building height.** For a vacant parcel of land, building height shall be measured from
22 the average, existing-grade elevation where the foundation of the structure is proposed. For an
23 existing structure, building height shall be measured from average grade taken from the outermost
24 four (4) corners of the existing foundation. In all cases, building height shall be measured to the top
25 of the highest point of the existing or proposed roof or structure. This distance shall exclude spires,
26 chimneys, flag poles, and the like. For any property or structure located in a special flood hazard
27 area, as shown on the official FEMA Flood Insurance Rate Maps (FIRMs), or depicted on the
28 Rhode Island coastal resources management council (CRMC) suggested design elevation three foot
29 (3') sea level rise (CRMC SDE 3 SLR) map as being inundated during a one-hundred-year (100)
30 storm, the greater of the following amounts, expressed in feet, shall be excluded from the building
31 height calculation:

32 (i) The base flood elevation on the FEMA FIRM plus up to five feet (5') of any utilized or
33 proposed freeboard, less the average existing grade elevation; or

34 (ii) The suggested design elevation as depicted on the CRMC SDE 3 SLR map during a

one-hundred-year (100) storm, less the average existing grade elevation. CRMC shall reevaluate the appropriate suggested design elevation map for the exclusion every ten (10) years, or as otherwise necessary.

(14) **Cluster.** A site-planning technique that concentrates buildings in specific areas on the site to allow the remaining land to be used for recreation, common open space, and/or preservation of environmentally, historically, culturally, or other sensitive features and/or structures. The techniques used to concentrate buildings shall be specified in the ordinance and may include, but are not limited to, reduction in lot areas, setback requirements, and/or bulk requirements, with the resultant open land being devoted by deed restrictions for one or more uses. Under cluster development, there is no increase in the number of lots that would be permitted under conventional development except where ordinance provisions include incentive bonuses for certain types or conditions of development.

(15) **Co-living housing.** A specific residential development with units which provide living and sleeping space which are independently rented and lockable for the exclusive use of an occupant, but require the occupant to share sanitary and/or food preparation facilities with the other units in the occupancy. This section shall not be read to allow the conversion of existing dwelling units into co-living housing unless authorized by a local zoning ordinance.

(16) **Common ownership.** Either:

(i) Ownership by one or more individuals or entities in any form of ownership of two (2) or more contiguous lots; or

(ii) Ownership by any association (ownership may also include a municipality) of one or more lots under specific development techniques.

(17) **Community residence.** A home or residential facility where children and/or adults reside in a family setting and may or may not receive supervised care. This does not include halfway houses or substance-use-disorder-treatment facilities. This does include, but is not limited to, the following:

(i) Whenever six (6) or fewer children or adults with intellectual and/or developmental disability reside in any type of residence in the community, as licensed by the state pursuant to chapter 24 of title 40.1. All requirements pertaining to local zoning are waived for these community residences;

(ii) A group home providing care or supervision, or both, to not more than eight (8) persons with disabilities, and licensed by the state pursuant to chapter 24 of title 40.1;

(iii) A residence for children providing care or supervision, or both, to not more than eight (8) children, including those of the caregiver, and licensed by the state pursuant to chapter 72.1 of

1 title 42;

2 (iv) A community transitional residence providing care or assistance, or both, to no more

3 than six (6) unrelated persons or no more than three (3) families, not to exceed a total of eight (8)

4 persons, requiring temporary financial assistance, and/or to persons who are victims of crimes,

5 abuse, or neglect, and who are expected to reside in that residence not less than sixty (60) days nor

6 more than two (2) years. Residents will have access to, and use of, all common areas, including

7 eating areas and living rooms, and will receive appropriate social services for the purpose of

8 fostering independence, self-sufficiency, and eventual transition to a permanent living situation.

9 (18) **Comprehensive plan.** The comprehensive plan adopted and approved pursuant to

10 chapter 22.2 of this title and to which any zoning adopted pursuant to this chapter shall be in

11 compliance.

12 (19) **Day care — Daycare center.** Any other daycare center that is not a family daycare

13 home.

14 (20) **Day care — Family daycare home.** Any home, other than the individual's home, in

15 which day care in lieu of parental care or supervision is offered at the same time to six (6) or less

16 individuals who are not relatives of the caregiver, but may not contain more than a total of eight

17 (8) individuals receiving day care.

18 (21) **Density, residential.** The number of dwelling units per unit of land.

19 (22) **Development.** The construction, reconstruction, conversion, structural alteration,

20 relocation, or enlargement of any structure; any mining, excavation, landfill, or land disturbance;

21 or any change in use, or alteration or extension of the use, of land.

22 (23) **Development plan review.** See §§ 45-23-32 and 45-23-50.

23 (24) **District.** See "zoning use district."

24 (25) **Drainage system.** A system for the removal of water from land by drains, grading, or

25 other appropriate means. These techniques may include runoff controls to minimize erosion and

26 sedimentation during and after construction or development; the means for preserving surface and

27 groundwaters; and the prevention and/or alleviation of flooding.

28 (26) **Dwelling unit.** A structure, or portion of a structure, providing complete, independent

29 living facilities for one or more persons, including permanent provisions for living, sleeping, eating,

30 cooking, and sanitation, and containing a separate means of ingress and egress.

31 (27) **Extractive industry.** The extraction of minerals, including: solids, such as coal and

32 ores; liquids, such as crude petroleum; and gases, such as natural gases. The term also includes

33 quarrying; well operation; milling, such as crushing, screening, washing, and flotation; and other

34 preparation customarily done at the extraction site or as a part of the extractive activity.

1 (28) **Family member.** A person, or persons, related by blood, marriage, or other legal
2 means, including, but not limited to, a child, parent, spouse, mother-in-law, father-in-law,
3 grandparents, grandchildren, domestic partner, sibling, care recipient, or member of the household.

4 (29) **Floating zone.** An unmapped zoning district adopted within the ordinance that is
5 established on the zoning map is effective only when an application for development, meeting the
6 zone requirements, is approved and the approved plan is recorded.

7 (30) **Floodplains, or Flood hazard area.** As defined in § 45-22.2-4.

8 (31) **Freeboard.** A factor of safety expressed in feet above the base flood elevation of a
9 flood hazard area for purposes of floodplain management. Freeboard compensates for the many
10 unknown factors that could contribute to flood heights, such as wave action, bridge openings, and
11 the hydrological effect of urbanization of the watershed.

12 (32) **Groundwater.** “Groundwater” and associated terms, as defined in § 46-13.1-3.

13 (33) **Halfway house.** A residential facility for adults or children who have been
14 institutionalized for criminal conduct and who require a group setting to facilitate the transition to
15 a functional member of society.

16 (34) **Hardship.** See § 45-24-41.

17 (35) **Historic district or historic site.** As defined in § 45-22.2-4.

18 (36) **Home occupation.** Any activity customarily carried out for gain by a resident,
19 conducted as an accessory use in the resident’s dwelling unit. For the purposes of this chapter,
20 home occupation does not include remote work activities as defined in § 45-24-37.

21 (37) **Household.** One or more persons living together in a single-dwelling unit, with
22 common access to, and common use of, all living and eating areas and all areas and facilities for
23 the preparation and storage of food within the dwelling unit. The term “household unit” is
24 synonymous with the term “dwelling unit” for determining the number of units allowed within any
25 structure on any lot in a zoning district. An individual household shall consist of any one of the
26 following:

27 (i) A family, which may also include servants and employees living with the family; or

28 (ii) A person or group of unrelated persons living together. ~~The~~ A municipality may set a
29 maximum number ~~may be set~~ by local ordinance, but such ordinance shall allow at least one person
30 per bedroom for dwelling units containing up to five (5) bedrooms. For dwelling units that exceed
31 five (5) bedrooms, a municipality shall allow at least five (5) unrelated persons per dwelling unit.
32 ~~but this maximum shall not be less than one person per bedroom and shall not exceed five (5)~~
33 ~~unrelated persons per dwelling.~~ The maximum number shall not apply to NARR-certified recovery
34 residences.

1 (38) **Incentive zoning.** The process whereby the local authority may grant additional
2 development capacity in exchange for the developer’s provision of a public benefit or amenity as
3 specified in local ordinances.

4 (39) **Infrastructure.** Facilities and services needed to sustain residential, commercial,
5 industrial, institutional, and other activities.

6 (40) **Land development project.** As defined in § 45-23-32.

7 (41) **Lot.** Either:

8 (i) The basic development unit for determination of lot area, depth, and other dimensional
9 regulations; or

10 (ii) A parcel of land whose boundaries have been established by some legal instrument,
11 such as a recorded deed or recorded map, and that is recognized as a separate legal entity for
12 purposes of transfer of title.

13 (42) **Lot area.** The total area within the boundaries of a lot, excluding any street right-of-
14 way, usually reported in acres or square feet.

15 (43) **Lot area, minimum.** The smallest land area established by the local zoning ordinance
16 upon which a use, building, or structure may be located in a particular zoning district.

17 (44) **Lot building coverage.** That portion of the lot that is, or may be, covered by buildings
18 and accessory buildings.

19 (45) **Lot depth.** The distance measured from the front lot line to the rear lot line. For lots
20 where the front and rear lot lines are not parallel, the lot depth is an average of the depth.

21 (46) **Lot frontage.** That portion of a lot abutting a street. A zoning ordinance shall specify
22 how noncontiguous frontage will be considered with regard to minimum frontage requirements.

23 (47) **Lot line.** A line of record, bounding a lot, that divides one lot from another lot or from
24 a public or private street or any other public or private space and shall include:

25 (i) Front: the lot line separating a lot from a street right-of-way. A zoning ordinance shall
26 specify the method to be used to determine the front lot line on lots fronting on more than one
27 street, for example, corner and through lots;

28 (ii) Rear: the lot line opposite and most distant from the front lot line, or in the case of
29 triangular or otherwise irregularly shaped lots, an assumed line at least ten feet (10') in length
30 entirely within the lot, parallel to and at a maximum distance from, the front lot line; and

31 (iii) Side: any lot line other than a front or rear lot line. On a corner lot, a side lot line may
32 be a street lot line, depending on requirements of the local zoning ordinance.

33 (48) **Lot size, minimum.** Shall have the same meaning as “minimum lot area” defined
34 herein.

1 (49) **Lot, through.** A lot that fronts upon two (2) parallel streets, or that fronts upon two
2 (2) streets that do not intersect at the boundaries of the lot.

3 (50) **Lot width.** The horizontal distance between the side lines of a lot measured at right
4 angles to its depth along a straight line parallel to the front lot line at the minimum front setback
5 line.

6 (51) **Manufactured home.** As used in this section, a manufactured home shall have the
7 same definition as in 42 U.S.C. § 5402, meaning a structure, transportable in one or more sections,
8 which, in the traveling mode, is eight (8) body feet or more in width or forty (40) body feet or more
9 in length, or, when erected on site, is three hundred twenty (320) or more square feet, and which is
10 built on a permanent chassis and designed to be used as a dwelling with a permanent foundation
11 connected to the required utilities, and includes the plumbing, heating, air-conditioning, and
12 electrical systems contained therein; except that such term shall include any structure that meets all
13 the requirements of this definition except the size requirements and with respect to which the
14 manufacturer voluntarily files a certification required by the United States Secretary of Housing
15 and Urban Development and complies with the standards established under chapter 70 of Title 42
16 of the United States Code; and except that such term shall not include any self-propelled
17 recreational vehicle.

18 (52) **Mere inconvenience.** See § 45-24-41.

19 (53) **Mixed use.** A mixture of land uses within a single development, building, or tract.

20 (54) **Modification.** Permission granted and administered by the zoning enforcement officer
21 of the city or town, and pursuant to the provisions of this chapter to grant dimensional relief from
22 the zoning ordinance to a limited degree as determined by the zoning ordinance of the city or town,
23 but not to exceed twenty-five percent (25%) of each of the applicable dimensional requirements,
24 except as set forth in § 45-24-46(c).

25 (55) **Nonconformance.** A building, structure, or parcel of land, or use thereof, lawfully
26 existing at the time of the adoption or amendment of a zoning ordinance and not in conformity with
27 the provisions of that ordinance or amendment. Nonconformance is of only two (2) types:

28 (i) Nonconforming by use: a lawfully established use of land, building, or structure that is
29 not a permitted use in that zoning district. A building or structure containing more dwelling units
30 than are permitted by the use regulations of a zoning ordinance is nonconformity by use; or

31 (ii) Nonconforming by dimension: a building, structure, or parcel of land not in compliance
32 with the dimensional regulations of the zoning ordinance. Dimensional regulations include all
33 regulations of the zoning ordinance, other than those pertaining to the permitted uses. A building
34 or structure containing more dwelling units than are permitted by the use regulations of a zoning

ordinance is nonconforming by use; a building or structure containing a permitted number of dwelling units by the use regulations of the zoning ordinance, but not meeting the lot area per dwelling unit regulations, is nonconforming by dimension.

(56) **Overlay district.** A district established in a zoning ordinance that is superimposed on one or more districts or parts of districts. The standards and requirements associated with an overlay district may be more or less restrictive than those in the underlying districts consistent with other applicable state and federal laws.

(57) **Performance standards.** A set of criteria or limits relating to elements that a particular use or process must either meet or may not exceed.

(58) **Permitted use.** A use by right that is specifically authorized in a particular zoning district.

(59) **Planned development.** A “land development project,” as defined in subsection (39), and developed according to plan as a single entity and containing one or more structures or uses with appurtenant common areas.

(60) **Plant agriculture.** The growing of plants for food or fiber, to sell or consume.

(61) **Preapplication conference.** A review meeting of a proposed development held between applicants and reviewing agencies as permitted by law and municipal ordinance, before formal submission of an application for a permit or for development approval.

(62) **Setback line or lines.** A line, or lines, parallel to a lot line at the minimum distance of the required setback for the zoning district in which the lot is located that establishes the area within which the principal structure must be erected or placed.

(63) **Site plan.** The development plan for one or more lots on which is shown the existing and/or the proposed conditions of the lot.

(64) **Slope of land.** The grade, pitch, rise, or incline of the topographic landform or surface of the ground.

(65) **Special use.** A regulated use that is permitted pursuant to the special-use permit issued by the authorized governmental entity, pursuant to § 45-24-42. Formerly referred to as a special exception.

(66) **Structure.** A combination of materials to form a construction for use, occupancy, or ornamentation, whether installed on, above, or below the surface of land or water.

(67) **Substandard lot of record.** Any lot lawfully existing at the time of adoption or amendment of a zoning ordinance and not in conformance with the dimensional or area provisions of that ordinance.

(68) **Use.** The purpose or activity for which land or buildings are designed, arranged, or

1 intended, or for which land or buildings are occupied or maintained.

2 (69) **Variance.** Permission to depart from the literal requirements of a zoning ordinance.
3 An authorization for the construction or maintenance of a building or structure, or for the
4 establishment or maintenance of a use of land, that is prohibited by a zoning ordinance. There are
5 only two (2) categories of variance, a use variance or a dimensional variance.

6 (i) Use variance. Permission to depart from the use requirements of a zoning ordinance
7 where the applicant for the requested variance has shown by evidence upon the record that the
8 subject land or structure cannot yield any beneficial use if it is to conform to the provisions of the
9 zoning ordinance.

10 (ii) Dimensional variance. Permission to depart from the dimensional requirements of a
11 zoning ordinance under the applicable standards set forth in § 45-24-41.

12 (70) **Waters.** As defined in § 46-12-1(23).

13 (71) **Wetland, coastal.** As defined in § 45-22.2-4.

14 (72) **Wetland, freshwater.** As defined in § 2-1-20.

15 (73) **Zoning certificate.** A document signed by the zoning enforcement officer, as required
16 in the zoning ordinance, that acknowledges that a use, structure, building, or lot either complies
17 with, or is legally nonconforming to, the provisions of the municipal zoning ordinance or is an
18 authorized variance or modification therefrom.

19 (74) **Zoning map.** The map, or maps, that are a part of the zoning ordinance and that
20 delineate the boundaries of all mapped zoning districts within the physical boundary of the city or
21 town.

22 (75) **Zoning ordinance.** An ordinance enacted by the legislative body of the city or town
23 pursuant to this chapter and in the manner providing for the adoption of ordinances in the city or
24 town's legislative or home rule charter, if any, that establish regulations and standards relating to
25 the nature and extent of uses of land and structures; that is consistent with the comprehensive plan
26 of the city or town as defined in chapter 22.2 of this title; that includes a zoning map; and that
27 complies with the provisions of this chapter.

28 (76) **Zoning use district.** The basic unit in zoning, either mapped or unmapped, to which
29 a uniform set of regulations applies, or a uniform set of regulations for a specified use. Zoning use
30 districts include, but are not limited to: agricultural, commercial, industrial, institutional, open
31 space, and residential. Each district may include sub-districts. Districts may be combined.

32 SECTION 2. This act shall take effect upon passage.

=====
LC004432
=====

EXPLANATION
BY THE LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL
OF
A N A C T
RELATING TO TOWNS AND CITIES -- ZONING ORDINANCES

1 This act would amend the definition of a "household" in the "zoning ordinances" chapter
2 to clarify that the maximum number of unrelated persons living together may be set by local
3 ordinance; however, the maximum shall not be less than one person per bedroom, but may be
4 limited to one person per bedroom up to a five (5) bedroom unit. Units with more than five (5)
5 bedrooms may be limited to five (5) unrelated persons per unit.

6 This act would take effect upon passage.

=====
LC004432
=====