

HOUSING SUPPLY SOLUTIONS FOR CITY LEADERS
LAND USE AND REGULATIONS

Unified Development Ordinances

The acute housing supply shortage of almost 4 million units in the United States demands urgent action. Barriers to increasing housing supply exist across multiple sectors, including finance, construction, land use and regulations, infrastructure and workforce. In this series of fact sheets, NLC offers context, solutions and case studies for city leaders seeking to address these barriers and create more housing more efficiently and at lower costs. This Housing Supply Accelerator Fact Sheet series explores solutions in three critical areas: construction and development; land use and regulations; and finance.

Key Takeaways

- ◆ Unified Development Ordinances streamline land use regulations by consolidating zoning, subdivision rules and other development standards into a single, user-friendly document.
- ◆ These ordinances create a more predictable, transparent and efficient development process for all involved.
- ◆ Unified Development Ordinances help align a city's land use with its comprehensive plan, supporting goals for housing, economic development, transportation and sustainability.

Background

Land use regulations can make or break a city's efforts to increase housing supply, often determining what housing types can be built, where and how. For many communities, addressing local housing shortages will require not just reviewing building codes and permitting processes but also revisiting zoning ordinances to increase the permissibility of diverse housing types.

[A Unified Development Ordinance \(UDO\)](#) is a policy tool that combines traditional zoning and subdivision regulations with other regulations, such as design guidelines, sign regulations, floodplain and stormwater management, into a single document. The purpose of a UDO is to streamline the development process by removing inconsistencies, eliminating outdated policies, and simplifying permitting and approval procedures.

UDOs [grew in popularity in the 1980s](#), influenced by Michael B. Brough's publication, "A Unified Model Ordinance." Since then, cities across the country have increasingly adopted UDOs to align development regulations with evolving community goals. A UDO allows cities to simplify the permitting process, remove regulatory contradictions, and provides greater clarity for developers, residents and city staff.

Understanding it combines multiple regulations, a UDO also ensures that development policies support broader goals such as sustainability, transportation access and economic development. This can be especially valuable for cities experiencing [rapid growth](#) or those undergoing zoning reform to support housing production.

The Benefits for Cities and Their Residents

Coordination and Predictability.

UDOs help cities modernize and manage their regulatory environment in a more coordinated and predictable way. By combining multiple regulations, such as zoning, subdivision, environmental standards and design guidelines into a single document, a UDO streamlines the development process.

Clarity for Developers.

A UDO offers developers greater certainty about what can be built and how long it will take to get approvals; this, in turn, helps projects move forward more quickly and with lower costs. The consolidation of rules and regulations reduces confusion, eliminates conflicting provisions and clarifies the permitting process from start to finish.

Efficiency for Local Governments.

For local governments, UDOs reduce administrative burdens by replacing [duplicative, contradictory, and siloed codes](#) with a single, user-friendly framework. Reviewing a project as one unified package improves coordination among departments, leading to more effective outcomes that reflect the city's vision. The UDO outlines all necessary steps for development, helping staff, developers and residents engage more confidently.



Transparency and Public Trust.

For the community, a UDO enhances transparency and builds public trust. By combining land use and design review processes, UDOs allow for a more holistic, [site-specific evaluation of proposed developments](#). This helps neighbors and stakeholders better understand what a project will look like, rather than making assumptions based on zoning categories alone.

Support for Diverse Housing Types.

Finally, UDOs can play a vital role in advancing housing supply strategies. They support infill development, enable neighborhood-scale housing* types, and reduce barriers to mixed-use and walkable neighborhoods. UDOs can also expand housing choices by allowing a broader range of dwelling types such as Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs), while preserving the character of existing neighborhoods. By thinking about housing in conjunction with walkability, multimodal access, and sustainability goals, cities can use UDOs as a tool to shape more livable communities.

Did You Know?

UDO are powerful tools for turning a city's long-term vision into reality. Because they are typically grounded in a community's comprehensive plan or related strategic documents, they ensure that land use, housing, transportation, environmental protection, and economic development policies are not only aspirational but also actionable. UDOs can help cities grow more intentionally, encouraging sustainable development patterns, protecting natural resources, and aligning land use decisions with long-term goals.

Many cities have adopted UDOs to [implement their comprehensive plans](#). In Charlotte, North Carolina, for example, the city's UDO was crafted to implement the Charlotte Future 2040 Comprehensive Plan and is used to promote mixed-use development, expand housing choices, and guide equitable growth. The UDO consolidates eight separate development ordinances into one streamlined document, making it easier for staff, developers and residents to navigate.

Many cities across the country are also using UDOs to bring clarity to complex regulations and ensure that development practices reflect community values and long-term visions.

* Neighborhood-scale housing refers to housing types that are appropriately sized and designed to fit within the scale and character of existing single-family residential neighborhoods. This term is often used interchangeably with *missing middle housing* and includes building types such as accessory dwelling units (ADUs), duplexes, triplexes, fourplexes, cottage courts and small-lot homes.



Case Studies

Overland Park, Kansas (Population: 197,238)

In 2024, the City of Overland Park adopted a new Comprehensive Plan, [FrameworkOP](#). The plan is a policy guide outlining the city's intention for future growth, including housing, mobility and environmental priorities. A key implementation step is an update of the [City's Unified Development Ordinance \(UDO\)](#), which contains regulations related to development within the city. The Overland Park City Council unanimously voted to approve an agreement with White and Smith LLC to consult on an update of the UDO with the aim of aligning development regulations with Framework OP. The city has allocated nearly \$560,000 for this project, which is expected to take two years to complete.

In addition to the specific regulations for each of the city's zoning districts, the UDO contains development standards for parking, landscaping, signage and subdivisions. One of the goals of the update is to revise development regulations to support a wider variety of mixed-used spaces and to remove regulatory barriers that may impede the development of diverse housing options. In 2025, to help facilitate a more diverse housing stock, the city will be making a catalog of free, small-scale one- and two-family home plans (Portfolio Homes) available for use by Overland Park residents on any legal lot.

McAllen, Texas (Population: 142,210)

In 2024, McAllen's City Commission unanimously voted to create a [Unified Development Code \(UDC\)](#). The UDC will combine all of McAllen's development ordinances — including subdivision regulations, zoning, landscaping and signage — into a single document. This document will help streamline development processes and promote sustainable growth by granting staff greater discretion in managing development projects, expediting approvals and reducing reliance on variances.

Through six town hall meetings, the UDC was developed with extensive community input and feedback to ensure that the document is in alignment with the needs and aspirations of McAllen residents. The new code promises residents more modernized, predictable and efficient development processes. Key components of the UDC include: streamlined zoning classifications; mixed-use zones; reduced parking requirements; enhanced bicycle infrastructure; and support for diverse housing options. The city commission views this initiative as a vital step forward for the city's vision of a more resilient, innovative and pedestrian-friendly city.

Next Steps for Your City

A UDO can be a powerful tool for cities seeking to streamline their land use regulations, reduce development inefficiencies, and better support housing supply. Consider the following steps your city can take to adopt a UDO and assure a more transparent, efficient and predictable development process.

1. Evaluate current regulatory processes.

Identify redundancies, areas of inefficiency and bottlenecks in the current permitting process by mapping out the existing workflow.

2. Align with community goals.

Hold workshops and meetings with developers, builders and community members to gather feedback on current processes and requirements and explore solutions.

3. Engage with consultants or technical experts.

Develop clear and concise guidelines for different project types to mitigate any errors and ambiguity in the permitting process.

4. Solicit community feedback.

Set measurable goals for permit processing times and track progress to identify areas that still need improvement.guidelines.

By following these steps, cities can use UDOs to update their land use regulations and advance long-term housing and development goals.

