

Northfield Land Development Code

Article 2: Zoning Districts and Use Regulations

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Executive Summary

- The zoning plan doesn't leave much room for multi-family buildings or infill development;
- It does a good job of regulating businesses but allowing renewable energy uses;
- It doesn't protect the floodplain as much as I'd like,

I. General Zoning System

Sec. 2.1-2.2: Establishes the zoning districts, whose purposes include "to encourage sustainable development practices."

This [link](#) will take you to an interactive zoning map.

The **basic scheme** includes:

- **Residential** (low to high density and "general neighborhood" districts, along with a mobile home district);
- **Business** (downtown, highway and industrial districts);
- There are also **special districts**: agricultural, public benefit (parks, cemeteries, etc), college development and public institutional (schools, hospital).

These are all mutually exclusive.

Overlay districts are imposed *on top* of the base districts, and include:

- **Flood Plain**: the flood insurance study dated April 2, 2003, for the City of Northfield, prepared by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)
- **Wild & Scenic River**: established by the Department of Natural Resources (DNR).
- **Historic**: The downtown historic district has been certified by the state.

These are subject to special, more restrictive building standards.

Two **floating districts** can also be laid on top of certain base districts. These don't seem to be in use(?):

- **Neighborhood Center:** “The purpose of the NC-F district is to promote and enhance the vitality of existing neighborhoods by providing for the opportunity to develop nonresidential or mixed-uses in existing neighborhoods where the principal building is designed to be consistent with the size, scale, and massing of the surrounding residential uses. Additionally, the uses should be of an intensity that will create minimal traffic and noise impacts on the surrounding neighborhood.”
- **Economic Development:** “[A]reas of the city appropriate for employment with an urban campus type character with a focus on sustainable, high quality development that is designed in a way to preserve the city's natural resources while simultaneously promoting economic development. This district will provide opportunities for corporate administrative offices, research and development firms, and other uses that may be identified through a master planning process, to locate within the city. Land uses within the district shall be designed to minimize impact on any residential uses or environmental resources by appropriate buffering and overall subdivision design. High standards of appearance and design will be required and maintained with restrictions on outdoor storage and activities with undesirable characteristics.”

The rest of the chapter describes what is and is not allowed in each district.

II. Policies of Note

Residential District Takeaway: Despite some language suggesting otherwise, the general scheme does not promote multi-family developments or infill development.

- **Residential 1:** this is the neighborhood around downtown. To preserve its character, *buildings are limited to single, two-family or three family homes.*
- Most of the rest of the residential areas are “**Neighborhood General 1.**” The code seems ambivalent about them:
 - “The N1 district is characterized by primarily single family homes, or attached housing, on parcels that are generally larger than those found in the R1, and that are located on streets more curvilinear and less connected than traditional urban development patterns. The essential, existing character of the N1 district should be reinforced with any infill or redevelopment of properties. When feasible, infill or redevelopment in the N1 district should also create a more pedestrian-friendly, walkable development pattern with a mixture of housing types.”
- **Neighborhood General 2** refers to areas to be developed into residential areas in the future. These future developments are *required* to have some multi-family buildings. (The largest developments must be 25% multi-family units). [Sec 2.3.6(D)]
- **Mobile home park:** Interestingly, manufactured homes “may be located in other residential zoning districts as long as a manufactured home adheres to all other zoning and state building code requirements applicable to other residential uses.”

In sum, there aren't many places in the city where apartments can be built. The Neighborhood Central Floating District is meant to allow some compatible non-residential uses in residential neighborhoods, but I can't see any areas actually designated NC-FD.

Business District Takeaway: These districts are pretty well-regulated, and there are specific standards for solar, wind, and other pro-environment uses. However, the Cannon River is not as well-protected as I would like.

- The **downtown district** is subject to all sorts of standards. The **historic district** is subject to very restrictive design standards, which might affect the adoption of energy efficiency measures. However, the Historic Preservation Committee is aware of the issue and I didn't see any big issues with their guidelines. Most energy efficiency measures I could think of would be OK.
- The **commercial highway** district has fewer restrictions, although the plan does claim that we want "attractive" buildings and to "provide safe and attractive routes to businesses for pedestrians and bicyclists from neighboring sites and the rest of the city." You can judge for yourself how well we've achieved that goal.
- The **industrial district** includes a lot of land along the Cannon River, but "the portion of the district that abuts the Cannon River shall be developed in a manner that enhances, restores, augments and maintains the ecology and beauty of this natural corridor." Interestingly, mining & aggregate processing is allowed in the Industrial district, but it's subject to lots of standards. [2.9.14]
- **Neighborhood-serving commercial businesses** are subject to more restrictive outdoor lighting requirements than other businesses: Lights must be fully shielded. [2.9.16(c)].
- There are also lots of restrictions on **telecommunications towers** [2.9.19; 2.10.4 (J)].

Overall, I was pretty happy with the regulations on business districts. But why do we allow industrial uses anywhere near the Cannon?

Other zones: Just a couple of points:

- **Agricultural districts** need not be actually used for agriculture; they can be kept as green space. Solar farms and solar gardens are allowed in Agricultural districts. There are pretty detailed standards for them [2.9.5].
- The **flood district** is subject to special restrictions (Art. 4) and its boundaries can't be changed without FEMA approval. However, there is actually quite a lot of development in the flood zone.
- **Wild and scenic river** zones are basically protected as green space. These zones include Spring Creek, Heath Creek and Sibley Marsh.

I'd like to take a close look at the restrictions on development in the Flood Zone, which are in Article 4 of this chapter.

And don't forget "accessory uses" [2,10]:

- Several zoning categories allow wind energy and solar energy systems as accessory uses [2.10.4 (H), (L)]

- Chicken-keeping is also allowed [2.10.4(C)]

Finally: Remember that builders can often get variances, and existing nonconforming uses are often grandfathered in.