Glossary of common planning and zoning terms

**Accessory Structure** A structure detached from a principal building on the same lot and customarily incidental and subordinate to the principal building or use.

**Abut** To physically touch or border upon, or to share a common property line.

**Accessory Use** A use of land or of a building or portion thereof customarily incidental and subordinate to the principal use of the land or building, and located on the same lot with such principal use.

**Adverse Possession** The right of an occupant to acquire title to a property after having continuously and openly used and maintained a property over a statutory period of time without a protest from the owner of record.

**Airport Zoning** A particular set of controls designed to reduce the safety and noise hazards associated with aircraft flying within the airport control zone. Primarily the controls restrict the height of buildings and trees near the landing corridors and the location of residences, schools, hospitals, and other such uses needing protection from potential aircraft hazards. Chapter 329, *Code of Iowa*.

**Amenity** A natural or human-made feature that enhances or makes a particular property more attractive or satisfying.

**Amortization** A method of eliminating nonconforming uses by requiring the termination of the nonconforming use after a specified period of time.

**Anchor Tenant** The major store or stores within a shopping center.

**Base Flood Elevation** The highest elevation, expressed in feet above sea level, of the level of flood waters occurring in the regulatory base flood.

**Base Map** A map having sufficient points of reference, such as state, county, or municipal boundary lines; streets; easements; and other selected physical features to allow the plotting of other data.

**Basin** An area drained by the main stream and tributaries of a large river.

**Berm** A mound of earth, or the act of pushing earth into a mound.

**Buffer Strip** Land area used to visibly separate one use from another or to shield or block noise, lights, or other nuisances.

**Buildable Area** The area of a lot remaining after the minimum yard and open space requirements of the zoning ordinance have been met.

**Building Accessory** A subordinate structure on the same lot as the principal or main building or use occupied or devoted to a use incidental to the principal use.

**Building Coverage** The horizontal area measured within the outside of the exterior walls of the ground floor of all principal and accessory buildings on a lot.

**Bulk Regulations** Standards that control the height, density, intensity, and location of structures.

**Capital Improvement Program (CIP)** A community's present and near-future financial plan which matches future capital improvement costs such as sewers, hospitals, and roads to anticipated revenues. The planning and zoning commission should be given authority to develop and review the CIP proposal, thereby linking planning to the annual budgetary process. CIPs are usually prepared for five or six years and updated annually.

**Central Business District (CBD)** The major shopping area within a city usually containing, in addition to retail uses, governmental offices;
service uses; professional, cultural, recreational, and entertainment establishments and uses; residences, hotels and motels; appropriate industrial activities; and transportation facilities.

**Certificate of Occupancy (CO)** A document issued by the proper authority allowing the occupancy or use of a building and certifying that the structure or use has been constructed or will be used in compliance with all the applicable municipal codes and ordinances.

**City Planning** The decision-making process in which goals and objectives are established, existing resources and conditions analyzed, strategies developed, and controls enacted to achieve the goals and objectives as they relate to cities and communities.

**Cluster** A development design technique that concentrates buildings in specific areas on the site to allow the remaining land to be used for recreation, common open space, and preservation of environmentally sensitive features.

**Cluster Subdivision** A form of development for single-family residential subdivisions that permits a reduction in lot area and bulk requirements, provided there is no increase in the number of lots permitted under a conventional subdivision and the resultant land area is devoted to open space.

**Conditional Use** A use permitted in a particular zoning district only upon showing that such use in a specified location will comply with all the conditions and standards for the location or operation of such use as specified in a zoning ordinance and authorized by the planning board.

**Congregate Housing** A dwelling providing shelter and services for the elderly that may include meals, housekeeping, and personal care assistance.

**Cost-Benefit Analysis** An analytic method whereby the actual and hidden costs of a proposed project are measured against the benefits to be received from the project.

**Critical Area** An area with one or more of the following characteristics: (1) slopes in excess of 20 percent; (2) flood plain; (3) soils classified as having a high water table; (4) soils classified as highly erodible, subject to erosion, or highly acidic; (5) land incapable of meeting percolation requirements; (6) land formerly used for landfill operations or hazardous industrial use; (7) fault area; (8) stream corridors; (9) estuaries; (10) mature stands of native vegetation; (11) aquifer recharge and discharge areas.

**Current Planning Capacity** A measure of the ability of a region to accommodate the growth and development within the limits defined by existing infrastructure and natural resource capabilities.

**Dedication** Required under some subdivision regulations to transfer part of the developer's private land for public use. As a condition for the approval of a development by a planning and zoning commission, the developer is typically required to build streets and utility lines to specifications and then to “dedicate” them, including the land, to the public. Many subdivision regulations now have been extended to include land dedication for open space, schools, and other community facilities. The dedication may be a transfer of ownership or a transfer of a portion of the development rights through an “easement.” The purpose is an attempt to assess developers for some of the costs incurred by the community because of a new development.

**Deed Restriction (Covenant)** A private legal restriction on the use of land, attached in the deed to the property. A deed restriction is most commonly used in the establishment of a subdivision to restrict the use of all individual lots in the development to a certain type of use, e.g., single-family dwellings. Usually the community has no control over deed restrictions.

**Density** The number of families, individuals, dwelling units, or housing structures per unit of land.

**Developer** The legal or beneficial owner or owners of a lot or of any land included in a proposed development including the holder of an option or contract to purchase, or other persons having enforceable proprietary interests in such land.

**Development** The division of a parcel of land into two or more parcels; the construction, reconstruction, conversion, structural alteration, relocation, or enlargement of any structure; any mining, excavation, landfill, or land disturbance; and any use or extension of the use of land.

**Development Regulation** Zoning, subdivision, site plan, official map, flood plain regulation, or other governmental regulation of the use and development of land.

**Easement** A grant of one or more of the property rights by the property owner to and/or for the
use by the public, a corporation, or another person or entity.

**Easement Affirmative** An easement that gives the holder a right to make some limited use of land owned by another.

**Easement Appurtenant** An easement that runs with the land.

**Easement Negative** An easement that precludes the owner of the land from doing that which the owner would be entitled to do if the easement did not exist.

**Egress** An exit.

**Elevation** (1) A vertical distance above or below a fixed reference level; (2) A flat scale drawing of the front, rear, or side of a building.

**Eminent Domain** The authority of a government to take, or to authorize the taking of, private property for public use.

**Enabling Act** The legislative act authorizing a governmental agency to do something that previously could not be done.

**Extraterritorial Land Controls (Zoning and Subdivision Regulations)** Authority granted to certain cities to exercise zoning and subdivision powers for two miles outside their boundaries. It is intended to protect the use of land on the edge of communities from being encroached on by incompatible activities that might degrade adjoining property or cause a nuisance. These powers and specific requirements are found in Sections 409.14 and 414.23 of the *Iowa Code*.

**Facade** The exterior wall of a building exposed to public view or that wall viewed by persons not within the building.

**Fair Market Value** The price of a building or land that would be agreed upon voluntarily in fair negotiations between a knowledgeable owner willing, but not forced, to sell, and a knowledgeable buyer willing, but not forced, to buy.

**Feasibility** Study An analysis of a specific project or program to determine if it can be successfully carried out.

**Fence** An artificially constructed barrier of any material or combination of materials erected to enclose or screen areas of land.

**Final Subdivision Plat (or Map)** A map that has gone through the planning and zoning preliminary review process, been approved, and eventually filed in the county recorder's office. It usually shows surveyed lot lines, street right-of-way, easements, monuments, distances, angles, and bearings pertaining to the exact dimensions of all parcels, street lines, and other physical features.

**Floating Zone** An unmapped zoning district where all the zone requirements are contained in the ordinance and the zone is fixed on the map only when an application for development meeting the zone requirements is approved.

**Flood Insurance Rate Map** The official map on which the Federal Insurance Administration has delineated both the areas of special flood hazards and the risk premium zones applicable to the community.

**Flood of Record** A flood that has occurred for which there are accurate local records available.

**Flood, Regulatory Base** Flood having a 1 percent chance of being equaled or exceeded in any given year (a 100 year flood).

**Flood Plain** The channel and the relatively flat area adjoining the channel of a natural stream or river that has been or may be covered by floodwater.

**Floodway** The channel of a natural stream or river and portions of the flood plain adjoining the channel that are reasonably required to carry and discharge the floodwater or flood flow of any natural stream or river.

**Floor Area Ratio (FAR)** A standard used to control the amount of floor area that can be built on a given lot. For example, a FAR of 3.0 on a 10,000 square foot lot would allow a building whose total floor area is 30,000 square feet. This permits a three-story building with 10,000 square feet on each floor or a six-story building with 5,000 square feet on any combination of stories and floor area that do not exceed 30,000 square feet.

**Green Area** Land shown on a development plan, master plan, or official map for preservation, recreation, landscaping, or park.

**Green Belt** An open area that may be cultivated or maintained in a natural state surrounding development or used as a buffer between land uses or to mark the edge of an urban or developed area.

**Historic Area** A district or zone designated by a local authority, state, or federal government...
within which the buildings, structures, appurtenances, and places are of basic and vital importance because of their association with history, or because of their unique architectural style and scale, including color, proportion, form, and architectural detail, or because of their being a part of or related to a square, park, or area, the design or general arrangement of which should be preserved and or developed according to a fixed plan based on cultural, historical, or architectural motifs or purposes.

**Historic Building** Any building or structure that is historically or architecturally significant.

**Home Occupation** Any activity carried out for gain by a resident conducted as an accessory use in the resident’s dwelling unit.

**Housing Assistance Plan (HAP)** A plan that surveys the condition and needs of the housing stock and assesses the housing needs of lower income, disabled, and elderly persons residing (or expected to reside) in the community. It specifies a realistic annual goal for the number of units or persons to be assisted, including a mix of new, existing, and rehabilitated units, and the size and type of projects and assistance. HAPs are required for application for federal community development block grants under the Housing and Community Development Act of 1974.

**Impact Zoning** The technique of protecting the community's fiscal capacity and natural environment from being negatively impacted by a proposed development. The process (still being tested in a few cities) involves a detailed analysis of existing conditions of the area to be developed and estimates what impacts the development will have on community facilities and environment. The goal is for the developer to show that the proposed development will not cost the community more than it will produce in taxes and incomes.

**Improved Lot** A lot containing an improvement.

**Improvement** Any humanly-made, immovable item that becomes part of, placed upon, or is affixed to, real estate.

**Inclusionary Zoning** Regulations that increase housing choice by providing the opportunity to construct more affordable, diverse, and economical housing to meet the needs of low- and moderate income families.

**Industrial Park** A large tract of land that has been planned, developed, and operated as an integrated facility for a number of individual industrial uses, with special attention to circulation, parking, utility needs, aesthetics, and compatibility.

**Infrastructure** Facilities and services needed to sustain industry, residential, and commercial activities.

**Ingress** Access or entry.

**Interim Zoning** This is a stopgap technique used to temporarily freeze or severely restrict development in an area until a permanent classification for the land can be decided upon (also referred to as a moratorium). It permits the planning and zoning commission and governing body to develop a comprehensive plan and management tools free from heavy development pressures. Courts in other states have widely accepted the reasonableness of interim controls, as long as reasonable progress is being made toward permanent controls. Because Iowa courts have not looked too favorably on interim zoning, some cities have used the “restricted residence district” provision (Sec. 414.24, Code of Iowa) as an interim control while developing the full scale zoning ordinance.

**Inverse Condemnation** The taking of private property as a result of governmental activity without any formal exercise of eminent domain.

**Just Compensation** Payment made to a private property owner by an agency with power of eminent domain when the private property is taken for public use.

**Kiosk** A free-standing structure upon which temporary information and/or posters, notices, and announcements are posted.

**Land Surveyor** One who is licensed by the state as a land surveyor and is qualified to make accurate field measurements and mark, describe, and define land boundaries.

**Land Use** A description of how land is occupied or utilized.

**Land Use Plan** A plan showing how the existing and proposed location, extent, and intensity of development of land to be used in the future for varying types of residential, commercial, industrial, agricultural, recreational, educational, and other public and private purposes or combination of purposes.

**Large Lot Zoning** Low density residential development that requires a large parcel of land (usually more than one acre) for each dwelling.
**Leapfrog Development**  The development of land well beyond the existing limits of urban development by jumping over land (usually more expensive) located adjacent to existing development. This bypassing of the next-in-line land may cause serious problems for both the new residents and the public. Most public services are not available to sprawl development and may cost much more to provide.

**Mall**  (1) A shaded walk or public promenade; (2) A shopping center where stores front on both sides of a pedestrian way that may be enclosed or open.

**Map, Contour**  A map that displays land elevations in graphic form.

**Master Plan**  A comprehensive long-range plan intended to guide the growth and development of a community or region and one that includes analysis, recommendations, and proposals for the community's population, economy, housing, transportation, community facilities, and land use.

**Metes and Bounds**  A system of describing and identifying a tract of land by distances (metes) and direction (bounds) from an identifiable point of reference such as the monument of a quarter section of land.

**Mini-Mall**  A shopping center of between 80,000 and 150,000 square feet on a site of 8 to 15 acres where tenants are located on both sides of a covered walkway with direct pedestrian access to all establishments from the walkway.

**Mini-Warehouse**  A structure containing separate storage spaces of varying sizes leased or rented on an individual basis.

**Mixed Use Development**  The development of a tract of land or building or structure with two or more different uses such as, but not limited to, residential, office, manufacturing, retail, public, or entertainment, in a compact urban form.

**Neighborhood**  An area of a community with characteristics that distinguish it from other community areas and which may include distinct ethnic or economic characteristics, schools, or social clubs, or boundaries defined by physical barriers such as major highways and railroads or natural features such as rivers.

**Nonconforming Lot**  A lot, the area, dimensions, or location of which was lawful prior to the adoption, revision, or amendment of the zoning ordinance, but which fails by reason of such adoption, revision, or amendment to conform to the present requirements of the zoning district.

**Nonconforming Sign**  Any sign lawfully existing on the effective date of an ordinance, or an amendment thereto, that renders such sign nonconforming because it does not conform to all the standards and regulations of the adopted or amended ordinance.

**Nonconforming Structure or Building**  A structure or building, the size, dimensions, or location of which was lawful prior to the adoption, revision, or amendment to a zoning ordinance, but which fails by reason of such adoption, revision, or amendment, to conform to the present requirements of the zoning district.

**Nuisance**  An interference with the enjoyment and use of property.

**Official Map**  A legally adopted map that conclusively shows the location and width of proposed streets, public facilities and public areas, and drainage rights-of-way.

**Open Space**  Any parcel or area of land or water essentially unimproved and set aside, dedicated, designated, or reserved for public or private use or enjoyment, or for the use and enjoyment of owners and occupants of land adjoining or neighboring such open space.

**Performance Guarantee**  Any security that may be accepted by a municipality as a guarantee that improvements required as part of an application for development are satisfactorily completed.

**Performance Standards**  A set of criteria or limits relating to nuisance elements that a particular use or process may not exceed.

**Permitted Use**  Any use allowed in a zoning district and subject to the restrictions applicable to that zoning district.

**Planned Commercial Development**  An area of a minimum contiguous size, as specified by ordinance, to be planned, developed, operated, and maintained as a single entity containing one or more structures to accommodate commercial or office uses, or both, and appurtenant common areas and other uses incidental to the predominant uses.

**Planned Development**  An area of a minimum contiguous size, as specified by ordinance, developed according to plan as a single entity and containing one or more structures with appurtenant common areas.
Planned Unit Development (PUD)  An area of a minimum contiguous size, as specified by ordinance, to be planned and developed as a single entity containing one or more residential clusters or planned unit residential developments and one or more public, quasi-public, commercial, or industrial areas in such ranges of ratios of nonresidential uses to residential uses as shall be specified.

Plat  (1) A map representing a tract of land, showing the boundaries and location of individual properties and streets; (2) a map of a subdivision or site plan.

Plat, Final  The final map of all or a portion of a subdivision or site plan that is presented to the proper review authority for final approval.

Plat, Preliminary  A preliminary map indicating the proposed layout of the subdivision or site plan which is submitted to the proper review authority for consideration and preliminary approval.

Plat, Sketch  A rough sketch map of a proposed subdivision or site plan of sufficient accuracy to be used for the purpose of discussion and classification.

Plot  (1) A single unit parcel of land; (2) a parcel of land that can be identified and referenced to a recorded plat or map.

Police Power  The right of government to regulate personal conduct and the use of land in order to protect that public health, safety, and welfare. The use of police power by a unit of government must follow “due process” and be “reasonable,” but the government does not have to pay compensation for related losses. In this last respect, it differs from the government’s use of the power of eminent domain (where just compensation is mandatory).

Public Development Proposal  A master plan, capital improvement program, or other proposal for land development, and any amendment thereto, adopted by the appropriate public body.

Reasonable Use Doctrine  A common law principal that no one has the right to use his or her property in a way that deprives others of the lawful enjoyment of their property.

Restricted Residence Districts  A provision of the zoning enabling legislation that permits cities to adopt a simplified version of zoning whereby the residential and nonresidential areas are separated into two districts within the city (sec. 414.24, Code of Iowa). The city council may regulate all development within the residential district, yet not be required to appoint a zoning commission or board of adjustment. One drawback is that the nonresidential district may not be regulated in any manner.

Restrictive Covenant  A restriction on the use of land usually set forth in the deed.

Reversion Clause  A requirement that may accompany a “special exception” permit approval or a “rezoning” that returns the property to its prior zoning classification if a specified action, such as beginning construction, does not begin in a specified time period, say, six months. This is one way to protect a community from using permits or rezoning for speculative purposes.

Rezone  To change the zoning classification of particular lots or parcels of land.

Right-of-Way  (1) A strip of land acquired by reservation, dedication, forced dedication, prescription, or condemnation and intended to be occupied or occupied by a road, crosswalk, railroad, electric transmission lines, oil or gas pipeline, water line, sanitary storm sewer, and other similar uses; (2) generally, the right of one to pass over the property of another.

Run With The Land  A covenant or restriction to the use of land contained in a deed and binding on the present and all future owners of the property.

Setback  The distance between the street right-of-way line and the front line of a building or any projection thereof, excluding uncovered steps.

Shopping Center  A group of commercial establishments planned, constructed, and managed as a total entity with customer and employee parking provided on-site, provision for goods delivery separated from customer access, aesthetic considerations, and protection from the elements.

Sign  Any object, device, display, or structure, or part thereof, situated outdoors or indoors, used to advertise, identify, display, direct, or attract attention to an object, person, institution, organization, business, product, service, event, or location by any means, including words, letters, figures, design, symbols, fixtures, colors, illumination, or projected images.

Sign, Animated or Moving  Any sign or part of a sign that changes physical position by any movement or rotation or that gives the visual impression of such movement or rotation.
Sign Area  The entire face of a sign including the advertising surface and any framing, trim, or molding, but not including the supporting structure.

Sign, Billboard  A sign that directs attention to a business, commodity, service, or entertainment conducted, sold, or offered at a location other than the premises on which the sign is located.

Sign, Home Occupation  A sign containing only the name and occupation of a permitted home occupation.

Sign, Identification  A sign giving the nature, logo, trademark, or other identifying symbol; address; or any combination of the name, symbol, and address of a building, business, development, or establishment on the premises where it is located.

Sign, Illuminated  A sign lighted by or exposed to artificial lighting either by lights on or in the sign or directed toward the sign.

Sign Pole  A sign that is mounted on a free standing pole or other support so that the bottom edge of the sign face is six feet or more above grade.

Sign, Political  A temporary sign announcing or supporting political candidates or issues in connection with any national, state, or local election.

Sign, Projecting  A sign that is wholly or partly dependent upon a building for support and that projects more than 12 inches from such building.

Site Plan  A plan (to scale) showing uses and structures proposed for a parcel of land as required by the regulations involved. Its purpose is to show how the intended use relates to the major landscape features, the sun and weather, and the surrounding area.

Slope  The degree of deviation of a surface from the horizontal, usually expressed in percent or degrees.

Special District  A district created by act, petition, or vote of the residents for a specific purpose with the power to levy taxes.

Special Use Permit  A permit issued by the proper governmental authority that must be acquired before a special exception use can be constructed.

Spot Zoning  Rezoning of a lot or parcel of land to benefit an owner for a use incompatible with surrounding uses and not for the purpose or effect of furthering the comprehensive zoning plan.

Street  Any vehicular way that (1) is an existing state, county, or municipal roadway; or (2) is shown upon a plat approved pursuant to law; or (3) is approved by other official action; or (4) is shown on a plat duly filed and recorded in the office of the county recording officer prior to the appointment of a planning board and the grant to such board of the power to review plats; and includes the land between the street lines, whether improved or unimproved.

Street, Collector  A street that collects traffic from local streets and connects with minor and/or major arterials.

Street, Local  A street designed to provide vehicular access to abutting property and to discourage through traffic.

Street, Major Arterial  A street with access control, channelized intersections, and restricted parking that collects and distributes traffic to and from minor arterials.

Street, Minor Arterial  A street with signals at important intersections and stop signs on the side streets that collects and distributes traffic to and from collector streets.

Street, Service  A street running parallel to a freeway or expressway and serving abutting properties.

Strip Development  Commercial or retail development, usually one-store deep, that fronts on a major street.

Taking  To take, expropriate, acquire, or seize property without compensation.

Temporary Structure  A structure without any foundation or footings that is removed when the designated time period, activity, or use for which the temporary structure was erected has ceased.

Temporary Use  A use established for a fixed period of time with the intent to discontinue such use upon the expiration of the time period.

Topography  The configuration of a surface area showing relative elevations.

Urban Fringe  Land at the edge of an urban area usually made up of mixed agricultural and urban land uses. This is probably the most critical area within an urban area and requires adequate controls wisely administered by a coordinated effort of city and county officials.
Vacancy Rate  The number of uninhabited dwelling units that are available and suitable for occupancy expressed as a ratio to the total number of housing units.

Variance  Permission to depart from the literal requirements of a zoning ordinance.

Vest Pocket Park  A small land area, usually in a built-up neighborhood, developed for active or passive recreation.

Yard  An open space that lies between the principal or accessory building or buildings and the nearest lot line. Such yard is unoccupied and unobstructed from the ground upward except as may be specifically provided in the zoning ordinance.

Yard, Required  The open space between a lot line and the buildable area within which no structure shall be located except as provided in the zoning ordinance.

Zero Lot Line  The location of a building on a lot in such a manner that one or more of the building’s sides rest directly on a lot line.

Zone  A specifically delineated area or district in a municipality within which regulations and requirements uniformly govern the use, placement, spacing, and size of land and buildings.

Zoning  The dividing of a municipality into districts and the establishment of regulations governing the use, placement, spacing, and size of land and buildings.

Zoning Envelope  The three-dimensional space within which a structure is permitted to be built on a lot, defined by maximum height regulations, yard setbacks, and sky exposure plane regulations.

Zoning Map  The map or maps that are a part of the zoning ordinance and delineate the boundaries of zone districts.

Zoning Officer  The administrative officer designated to administer the zoning ordinance and issue zoning permits.

Zoning Permit  A document signed by the zoning officer, as required in the zoning ordinance, as a condition precedent to the commencement of a use or the erection, construction, reconstruction, restoration, alteration, conversion, or installation of a structure or building that acknowledges that such use, structure, or building complies with the provisions of the municipal zoning or authorized variance therefrom.