



MEMORANDUM

To: Zoning Board of Appeals
Re: Proposed Changes for Section 8.2 of the Zoning Regulations: Non-Conforming Lots in the R-1 Zone
Date: May 4, 2023

The Planning and Zoning Commission is currently contemplating a change in the language related to undersized non-conforming lots within the R-1 Zone to deal with minimum setback requirements. The Commission is seeking your input before moving forward on the proposal. Some background:

The R-1 Zone (Lakeside and Village Residential) was created in 1990, when it replaced the RA-1 Zone (Single Family and Conversions) and RA-2 Zone (Lake Residence). The current zone paints with a broad brush, and includes residential properties surrounding Lake Pocotopaug, the Village Center, to the west of the Village along Barton Hill and to the east roughly between Summit Street and Watrous Street. The R-1 area and dimensional requirements are in the table below.

	With Sewer	Without Sewer
Minimum Lot Area (square feet)	20,000	60,000
Minimum Lot Width (feet)	125	150
Minimum Lot Depth (feet)	125	200
Minimum Lot Frontage (feet)	100	100
Maximum Lot Coverage (percent)	20%	10%
Minimum Front Setback (feet)	25	50
Minimum Side Setback (feet)	15	25
Minimum Rear Setback (feet)	25	50
Maximum Building Height (feet)	30	30

The zone encompasses much of the older housing stock in Town, and incorporates many neighborhoods which were created long before the modern zoning regulations were adopted in 1958. The vast majority of the lots in neighborhoods which surround Lake Pocotopaug are far smaller in lot size than the minimum size required in the zoning regulation and are legally non-conforming. As such they can be developed and redeveloped in a manner consistent with the zoning regulations in accordance with Section 8.2.

A breakdown of the non-conforming conditions is below, but in short, 65% of the zone consists of non-conforming lots with regard to lot size alone. Taking into account other bulk requirements such as lot width, depth, and frontage, the number of non-conforming lots increases. A map of the zone showing these non-conforming parcels is attached to this memo as Exhibit A.

R-1 Zone Statistics

6,236 Parcels in Town

1,434 Parcels in R-1 Zone (23%)

965 Non-Conforming Lot Size (65%)
 26 Lots conform to Lot Size, but not to frontage requirement.

Following the completion of the centralized sewer system in the 1980's, the vast majority of what were once seasonal cottages began to be converted to year round homes. Many properties were redeveloped with additions and reconstructions. The existing condition of so many undersized lots has led to a large number of variance requests over the years. In an effort to appease landowners and allow conversions and reconstructions, the Zoning Board of Appeals has been put in a position to approve variances where often, a hardship, as defined by CT General Statutes section 8-6, may be difficult to prove.

For reference, a hardship must be present to issue a variance. Per Connecticut State Statute, the Board of Appeals may issue a variance *"...solely with respect to a parcel of land where, owing to conditions especially affecting such parcel but not affecting generally the district in which it is situated, a literal enforcement of such bylaws, ordinances or regulations would result in exceptional difficulty or unusual hardship so that substantial justice will be done and the public safety and welfare secured..."* Simply stating a lot is undersized, where an entire neighborhood is made up of undersized lots, is not enough to prove a hardship and case law suggests that doing so will lose in a court appeal.

Considering that well over half of the parcels in the zone are undersized, the reality is that we have a zoning problem. The regulation cannot force properties to merge once they have been developed, and cannot force homeowners to purchase more than one lot to create conforming conditions. Below is a summary of 5.5 years of variance applications received by the Zoning Board of Appeals.

ZBA Statistics - July 1 2016 – December 31, 2022

87 Variance Applications

75 Approved

8 Denied

4 Withdrawn

44 Applications in R-1 Zone (52% of total)

39 for Setback Variances (88% of those in the R-1 Zone)

33 Approved

6 Denied (2 due to neighbor opposition, 4 due to lack of hardship finding)

Forty-five percent (39 out of 87) of all variance applications over a 5.5 year period involved requests for setback variances in the R-1 Zone which only encompasses 23% of the total number of lots in Town. This indicates that the current zoning requirements for the zone do not align with the reality of the lot configurations within the zone. As evidenced by the map, the majority of the non-conforming lots surround Lake Pocotopaug. In searching the variance requests, it is evident that the majority of the setback variance requests occur in the historic lake neighborhoods, which are mostly made up of small, non-conforming lots.

Staff considered several options for resolving this issue to lessen the burden on the Zoning Board of Appeals, and reduce the number of variances being requested. Those options included:

1. Reduce bulk and setback requirements for R-1 Zone – The thinking was that for a large part of the zone, the setbacks are simply too large for the lot size, and the minimum lot size. This was ultimately ruled out because the R-1 zone does have significant areas that do meet the requirements and are not subject to as many variances.
2. Create a new zone surrounding the lake and encompassing most of the small lots – This was not preferred simply due to the complexity of the process. There are too many questions to try to answer, where do you draw the zone lines, how do you make that determination, and are there unfair disadvantages to any particular neighborhoods.
3. Address setback concerns in Section 8.2 – Non-Conforming Lots of Record, similar to the way maximum house size is impacted by lot size in the R-1 Zone. – This approach seems to be the most straightforward. There are no impacts to lots that meet the zoning requirement, and the other requirements remain intact, such as maximum coverage, allowed uses, etc.

The proposal included with this memo is an attempt to create a setback regulation which acknowledges the large number of undersized and narrow lots within the zone, while keeping minimum setbacks consistent with the Building Code and allowing houses of a minimum of 25 feet in width to be constructed. Rather than a strict broad brush setback requirement, the proposal scales the minimum setback down relative to the size of the lot, and includes an aggregate minimum so as to avoid clustering of structures. I have included a diagram with this Memo as Exhibit B in order to demonstrate minimum and aggregate setbacks. It is important to note that no other underlying requirements change. For example, the lot coverage would remain at 20% and could only be varied by the ZBA.