

Community Advocate Handbook

Your guide to building stronger neighborhoods



Know your rights. Know your neighbors.
Make your voice heard.



Table of Contents

Welcome	pg 2
How Housing Decisions actually get made	pg 2
Housing vocabulary	pgs 3 - 4
A rezoning start to finish	pg 4
Rezoning codes	pgs 5 - 6
What to look out for	pg 7
Applying this to your own neighborhood	pg 7
A few rules that make advocacy work	pg 8
How to get involved	pg 8
Email templates	pgs 9 - 10
Phone and voicemail scripts	pg 11
Who to contact	pg 11
Current Officeholders and contacts	pg 12 -13
Other key contacts	pg 13

Welcome

Housing decisions that shape your neighborhood, your rent, and your ability to buy a home are made in public meetings that most people never attend, using vocabulary most people never learned. This guide fixes that. It explains what the words mean, how the decisions work, what to watch for in your own neighborhood, and exactly how to make your voice count. You do not need to be an expert. You need about twenty minutes and this guide.

How Housing Decisions Actually Get Made

Three layers of government touch housing in Wake County, and each one controls different things.

Your city or town council makes the decisions with the most direct impact on your neighborhood: what can be built where (zoning), whether a property gets rezoned, how the comprehensive plan is amended, and how local housing dollars are spent. In Raleigh that is the Mayor and City Council; every municipality in Wake County (Cary, Knightdale, Wake Forest, Garner, Morrisville, Zebulon, and the rest) has its own equivalent.

Wake County government runs affordable housing programs, manages county housing funds, and controls land use in unincorporated areas outside town limits.

The North Carolina General Assembly sets the rules the local governments must play by. State law (Chapter 160D of the General Statutes) defines what cities can and cannot do with zoning. Some tools used in other states, like rent control or mandatory inclusionary zoning, are not permitted under North Carolina law, which is why local debates focus on the tools that are.

A useful shorthand: the state writes the rulebook, the county funds programs, and your council decides what gets built on the ground.

Housing Vocabulary

Zoning: The rules that say what can be built on each piece of land: homes, shops, offices, apartments, and how big. Every parcel in Raleigh has a zoning designation right now, including yours.

Rezoning (map amendment): Changing a property's zoning to allow something different, usually more homes or a mix of uses. This is the single most common housing decision your council makes, and it always includes a public process you can participate in.

Text change: Changing the zoning rulebook itself rather than one property's designation. Text changes are quieter than rezonings but often matter more, because they apply everywhere at once. Raleigh's rulebook is called the Unified Development Ordinance, or UDO.

2030 Comprehensive Plan: Raleigh's long-range guide for how the city should grow. It does not rezone anything by itself, but council decisions are supposed to be consistent with it, which makes it the reference document in nearly every rezoning debate. Other Wake County towns have their own comprehensive or land use plans.

Future Land Use Map: The map inside the comprehensive plan showing what kind of development the city envisions for each area over time. When a rezoning matches the map, approval is likelier; when it does not, the map itself may be amended. Checking this map for your street tells you what the city already expects your area to become.

Area study or area plan: A deep-dive plan for one part of the city, written with the community, that then gets adopted into the comprehensive plan. The Dix Edge Area Study south of downtown is a current example: it amended the 2030 plan for those neighborhoods specifically.

Density: How many homes fit on a given amount of land. A subdivision of large-lot houses is low density; a downtown apartment building is high density. Density is not a synonym for tall; a street of townhomes is denser than a street of single houses at the same height.

Missing middle housing: The home types between a detached house and a big apartment building: duplexes, triplexes, quadplexes, townhomes, cottage courts, and small apartment buildings. Most were legal across American cities a century ago, were zoned out for decades, and are now being re-legalized in many places, including through recent Raleigh reforms.

ADU (accessory dwelling unit): A small second home on the same lot as a main house: a backyard cottage, garage apartment, or basement unit. ADUs let homeowners add housing, income, or a place for family without changing the look of a street.

Mixed-use: Buildings or districts that combine homes with shops, restaurants, or offices, so daily needs are reachable on foot. North Hills is Raleigh's best-known example.

Transit-oriented development: Concentrating homes and jobs near major transit, like Raleigh's New Bern Avenue bus rapid transit (BRT) line, so more people can live with lower transportation costs.

Upzoning and downzoning: Upzoning allows more homes on a property than before; downzoning allows fewer. Both change what your neighborhood can become and what your land is worth.

Zoning conditions: Promises a property owner attaches to a rezoning request, like height limits, buffers, or road improvements. Conditions are enforceable, which is why neighborhood meetings often focus on negotiating them.

Overlay district: An extra layer of rules on top of the base zoning, often to protect historic character or manage a special area.

AMI (area median income): The benchmark for the word affordable. If the Raleigh area median income for a family is used as the yardstick, housing programs describe eligibility as percentages of it: 30 percent AMI, 60 percent AMI, 80 percent AMI. When someone says affordable housing, always ask: affordable at what percent of AMI? The answer changes who can actually live there.

Subsidized affordable housing: Homes with rents or prices held below market by public funding or programs, reserved for households under an AMI threshold.

Naturally occurring affordable housing: Older, modest homes that are affordable simply because of age and size, with no subsidy attached. These are the most common affordable homes in Wake County and the easiest to lose, because nothing protects their price.

Displacement: When rising costs push longtime residents out of their neighborhood. The policy debate is rarely growth versus no growth; it is how to add homes while protecting the people already here. Raleigh's Dix Edge study, for example, concluded that adding new supply relieves displacement pressure by giving higher earners somewhere to go besides bidding up older homes.

Gentrification: Neighborhood change driven by wealthier arrivals and rising prices. It overlaps with displacement but is not identical; the questions to ask are who benefits, who is at risk, and what protections are in place.

Public hearing: The legally required meeting where residents may speak before council votes on a rezoning or plan change. Your comments become part of the official record.

A Rezoning, Start To Finish

1. A property owner **files a rezoning application** with the city
2. The applicant **holds a required neighborhood meeting** with nearby residents (your first and best input point)
3. City planning **staff analyze the request** against the comprehensive plan and write a report
4. The Planning Commission holds a **public meeting and votes** on a recommendation
5. City Council holds the **formal public hearing** (your last input point) and votes
6. If approved, **the new zoning takes effect**, subject to any conditions attached

The whole process typically **takes months**, which means a **sign in a yard is the beginning** of your window, not the end of it.

Raleigh Zoning Codes in Plain Language

Raleigh's Unified Development Ordinance (UDO) sorts land into residential, mixed-use, and special districts. The key to reading a residential code: the number after the R is the maximum homes allowed per acre, so a higher number means more housing on the same land.

Residential Codes

Zoning Code	Meaning
R-1	Lowest density; large-lot single-family homes, about 1 per acre
R-2	Single-family homes on smaller lots, about 2 per acre
R-4	Standard single-family neighborhoods, up to 4 per acre; duplexes allowed by-right here and up
R-6	Higher density; duplexes and townhouses, up to 6 per acre
R-10	Densest residential; townhomes and small multi-unit buildings, up to 10 per acre

In R-1 and R-2 only single-family homes are allowed as the main structure, but accessory dwelling units (ADUs) are now permitted by-right across residential zones under state law (NC HB 488). That is the ADU point from earlier in this guide, made concrete.

Mixed-use districts (the letter signals the flavor; each carries a height number, so NX-3 means Neighborhood Mixed Use up to three stories)

Mixed-Use Codes

Code	Plain meaning
RX-	Residential Mixed Use: many housing types above 10 units per acre, with limited ground-floor commercial
NX-	Neighborhood Mixed Use: small corner stores and coffee shops within residential areas
OX-	Office Mixed Use: offices that can also include retail and homes
OP-	Office Park: office and employment uses, campus style
CX-	Commercial Mixed Use: larger commercial like shopping centers, with a residential component
DX-	Downtown Mixed Use: the tallest and densest, for the downtown core
IX-	Industrial Mixed Use: light industrial combined with some commercial

Codes that modify the base zoning

- **-CU (Conditional Use):** the base district's rules plus specific conditions the owner agreed to, such as height caps or buffers. This is the "-CU" you will see on many rezoning cases.
- **Overlay districts:** extra rules layered on top of the base zoning, such as a Historic Overlay to protect historic character or Conservation Management to protect natural resources.

How to look up any property: use the "Find My Zoning" tool at raleighnc.gov/planning, or search your address on iMAPS (maps.wake.gov). For an official answer, request a Zoning Verification Letter from the Planning Department.

What To Look Out For

The rezoning sign. A posted sign on a property near you is the official notice that a rezoning has been filed. Take a photo of the case number; searching it on raleighnc.gov brings up the full application, staff analysis, and hearing schedule.

The neighborhood meeting notice. Raleigh requires rezoning applicants to hold a meeting with nearby residents early in the process. If you receive a letter, go. This is the stage where zoning conditions get negotiated and your input has the most leverage, long before the council vote.

Planning Commission agendas. The Planning Commission reviews rezonings and makes recommendations to council. Its agendas, published on raleighnc.gov, are the early warning system for what is coming to your area.

Text changes and plan amendments. These do not come with a sign in a yard, which is exactly why they deserve attention. Watch the council and Planning Commission agendas for UDO text changes and comprehensive plan amendments; a single text change can affect every street in the city.

The word affordable without a number. Whenever a project or policy is described as affordable, look for the AMI percentage and the number of units. If those two numbers are missing, the word is marketing, not policy.

Election season. Council members decide all of the above, and municipal elections are decided by shockingly few votes. Knowing where candidates stand on housing is the highest-leverage twenty minutes of research a resident can do.

Applying This To Your Own Neighborhood

Find your zoning in five minutes. Raleigh residents: search iMAPS (Wake County's free property map website, maps.raleighnc.gov or maps.wake.gov) for your address, and the parcel report shows your zoning designation. Every Wake County town's zoning is viewable through iMAPS or the town's own map portal.

Check the Future Land Use Map for your street. On raleighnc.gov, search for the 2030 Comprehensive Plan and open the Future Land Use Map. What the city envisions for your area may surprise you, in either direction, and knowing it before a rezoning sign appears puts you ahead of the process.

Learn whether your area has an area study. If your neighborhood falls inside an adopted area plan (like Dix Edge), the recommendations in it are the script for what happens next. Search the plan name plus raleighnc.gov.

Know your representatives. Raleigh elects a mayor, two at-large council members, and five district members; find your district and their contact information at raleighnc.gov under City Council. County residents can find their commissioner district at wake.gov. State legislators for your address are at ncleg.gov under Find Your Legislators.



A Few Rules That Make Advocacy Work

Be brief. Officials and their staff read hundreds of messages; three clear sentences beat three paragraphs.

Be local and specific. "I live on Oakwood Avenue" outweighs a form letter every time. Say where you live and how the issue touches your life.

Be respectful, even in disagreement. The goal is to be the resident they remember for the right reasons.

Always include the case number when there is one. It routes your comment to the right file and the right vote.

Follow up. A thank-you after a good vote builds the relationship that makes your next message land.

You do not need permission or expertise. You need your address, two minutes, and your own honest experience.

How To Get Involved

Start by signing up. Subscribe to your city's development and council agenda notifications (raleighnc.gov offers email subscriptions, and Raleigh's public engagement portal at publicinput.com hosts active studies). Fifteen minutes of setup means the process comes to you from then on.

Speak at a public hearing. Anyone can. Sign up through the city clerk's process listed on the agenda, keep remarks to the allotted time (usually two to three minutes), speak from your own experience, and reference the case number. A resident's specific story routinely outweighs a professional's polished slideshow.

Write before the vote. A short, respectful email to council referencing the case number, stating where you live and what you support or oppose and why, takes ten minutes and enters the record. Ten emails from actual neighbors move votes.

Go to the neighborhood meeting. For rezonings near you, this early meeting is where conditions are negotiated. Ask about traffic, buffers, affordability commitments, and construction timelines. Get answers in writing where possible.

Apply for a board or commission. Raleigh and every Wake County town appoint residents to planning commissions, boards of adjustment, and housing-related advisory boards. These seats shape recommendations before council ever votes, and they regularly go unfilled or uncontested. Applications are on your city or town website.

Attend an area study. When the city launches a study for your part of town, the residents who show up write the plan. The ones who do not live with it.

Vote in municipal elections. Council races in Wake County have been decided by margins smaller than a church congregation. If you do only one thing on this list, do this one.

Share your story. Personal stories are what change minds in hearing rooms and headlines. If housing costs have shaped your life, your commute, or your family's plans, Raleigh Rising wants to help you tell it: raleighrising.org.



Copy-and-Use Email Templates

Template 1: Support a rezoning or housing project

New Message



To

Subject **Please support [case number or project name]**

Dear [Council Member / Commissioner name],

My name is [your name] and I live in [neighborhood or street]. I am writing to ask you to support [case number or project name].

Our community needs more housing options, and this project would [add homes near transit / bring missing middle housing to our area / create homes people can actually afford]. As someone who [rents here / is trying to buy / has watched neighbors priced out], this matters to me personally.

Thank you for representing us. I hope I can count on your support.

[Your name]

[Your address]

Template 2: Raise concerns while staying constructive

New Message



To

Subject **Comments on [case number or project name]**

Dear [Council Member / Commissioner name],

My name is [your name] and I live in [neighborhood or street]. I want to share my thoughts on [case number].

I support more housing in our area, and I would like to see this project include [specific request: sidewalks, a traffic study, tree buffers, a share of affordable units, a commitment on building height]. With those additions, I believe it would be a good fit for our neighborhood.

Thank you for considering resident input.

[Your name]

[Your address]



Template 3: Ask your representative where they stand

New Message

To

Subject **Your position on housing affordability**

Dear [name],

My name is [your name] and I live in [neighborhood]. Housing affordability is the issue I care most about this election.

Could you share your position on allowing more housing types, like duplexes, townhomes, and accessory dwelling units, in our community? I want to support leaders who are serious about keeping [Raleigh / our town] affordable for working families.

Thank you, and I look forward to hearing from you.

[Your name]
[Your address]

Template 4: Thank a leader who voted well

New Message

To

Subject **Thank you for your vote on [case number]**

Dear [name],

Thank you for voting to support [project or policy]. Decisions like this help keep our community open to families like mine. I noticed, I appreciate it, and I will remember it.

[Your name]
[Your neighborhood]

Phone and Voicemail Scripts

Calls take two minutes and staff do count them. If you reach voicemail, the same words work.

Script 1: Support or oppose a specific case

"Hi, my name is [name] and I am a resident of [neighborhood]. I am calling to ask [Council Member name] to [support / vote yes on] case [number], the housing project on [street or area]. Our community needs more housing options, and I hope [he / she / they] will support it. Thank you."

Script 2: General housing message

"Hi, my name is [name] and I live in [neighborhood]. I am calling because housing affordability is my top concern. I want [Council Member name] to support more housing choices, like townhomes, duplexes, and accessory dwelling units, so families can afford to live here. Thank you for passing along my message."

If they ask a question you cannot answer: it is completely fine to say "I am just a resident sharing how I feel, I do not have those details." You are never expected to be the expert. Your experience is the point.

Who to Contact

City of Raleigh Planning and Development: raleighnc.gov, search Planning and Development. Staff can explain any case, map, or process, and answering resident questions is part of their job. For questions about a specific rezoning, the case's assigned planner is listed on the case page.

Raleigh City Council: Contact information for the mayor and all council members is on raleighnc.gov under City Council. Emails sent before a public hearing become part of the record; reference the case number.

Your town's planning department: Every Wake County municipality has one, reachable through the town website. They are the equivalent starting point outside Raleigh.

Wake County Housing Authority: wake.gov, search Housing, for county affordable housing programs, assistance, and the county's housing plan.

Wake County Board of Commissioners: wake.gov under Board of Commissioners for county-level housing funding decisions.

Your state legislators: ncleg.gov, Find Your Legislators. State law shapes what local governments can do; when housing bills move in the General Assembly, your representative and senator need to hear from residents, not just lobbyists.

Raleigh Rising: raleighrising.org. Share your housing story, sign up for updates, and find upcoming community events, including our fall town hall series.



Who Represents You: Current Officeholders and Contacts

Verified July 2026. Officeholders and, especially, election-year candidate fields change, so confirm at raleighnc.gov/city-council and wake.gov before a deadline.

Raleigh City Council (general line 919-996-3050; group email citycouncilmembers@raleighnc.gov; Municipal Building, 222 W. Hargett St., 2nd Floor, Raleigh, NC 27601)

Seat	Officeholder	Contact
Mayor	Janet Cowell	janet.cowell@raleighnc.gov
At-Large	Stormie D. Forte	stormie.forte@raleighnc.gov
At-Large	Jonathan Lambert-Melton	jonathan.lambert-melton@raleighnc.gov
District A	Mitchell Silver	mitchell.silver@raleighnc.gov
District B	Megan Patton	megan.patton@raleighnc.gov
District C	Corey Branch	corey.branch@raleighnc.gov
District D	Jane Harrison (Mayor Pro Tem)	jane.harrison@raleighnc.gov
District E	Christina Jones	christina.jones@raleighnc.gov

Wake County Board of Commissioners (main line 919-856-6180; P.O. Box 550, Raleigh, NC 27602). Commissioners are elected countywide, so any of them represents you. Reach the full board through the "Contact the Commissioners" form at wake.gov; submissions go to all seven plus the Clerk.

District	Commissioner	Contact
1	Don Mial (Chair)	don.mial@wake.gov
2	Safiyah Jackson (Vice Chair)	safiyah.jackson@wake.gov
3	Cheryl Stallings	cheryl.stallings@wake.gov
4	Susan Evans	susan.evans@wake.gov
5	Tara Waters	tara.waters@wake.gov
6	Shinica Thomas	shinica.thomas@wake.gov
7	Vickie Adamson	vickie.adamson@wake.gov

Other key contacts

- City of Raleigh Planning and Development (zoning questions, case planners): raleighnc.gov/planning
- Speak at a Raleigh City Council public hearing: raleighnc.gov/petition-address-city-council
- Wake County Housing (affordable housing programs): wake.gov, search Housing; 919-856-6180
- Find your NC state legislators: ncleg.gov, Find Your Legislators
- Outside Raleigh: every Wake County town (Cary, Apex, Morrisville, Wake Forest, Garner, Holly Springs, Fuquay-Varina, Knightdale, Wendell, Zebulon, Rolesville) has its own council and planning department, reachable through the town website



Raleigh Rising

More Homes. More Choices.

Raleigh Rising is a consumer education campaign of the Raleigh Regional Association of REALTORS®, supported by the National Association of REALTORS® Consumer Advocacy Outreach program. Learn more at raleighrising.org.