

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.