Town Council Work Session:
Rewriting Our Rules – A Land Use Management Ordinance (LUMO) Update

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Date:
May 28, 2025

Overview

Topics to be discussed at the May 28, 2025, Work Session include:

1. Opportunities for fall 2025 LUMO text amendments
2. Design standards in the LUMO Rewrite
3. Natural Features Model
4. LUMO Rewrite project status update

This memo addresses the first two topics. The next item addresses the Natural Features Model. Staff will provide a project update during the Work Session.

Continuous Improvement & Fall 2025 LUMO Text Amendments

Adopting a culture of continuous improvement is an important part of ensuring that LUMO is addressing the Town's needs. Outside of major rewrites, periodic LUMO amendments can address everything from urgent concerns to more mundane technical corrections. In the long-term, staff will begin to proactively propose LUMO amendments informed by their professional judgment and stakeholder input. These amendments could be packaged as standalone ordinances or, if appropriate, omnibus proposals that address a variety of topics.

In the short-term, some Council members have expressed interest in considering amendments to the existing LUMO before the full LUMO rewrite is completed. We believe that a set of LUMO amendments could come forward for Council consideration in fall 2025.

If Council wishes to move forward, we recommend using the following factors to assess potential amendments to consider in the fall:

The amendments should:

- Relate to or build on topics that have already been discussed with Council.
- Address high-priority concerns for the Town.

The amendments should not:

- Involve extensive revisions to the existing LUMO.
- Complicate or conflict with the LUMO Rewrite project.

Staff are not recommending specific amendments at this time. Instead, the May 28 work session will be an opportunity to gauge Council's interests. Staff will use Council's feedback to determine whether it would be feasible and appropriate to propose text amendments in the fall. High-level examples of LUMO amendments that could potentially meet the criteria listed above include but are not limited to:

1. Reducing minimum lot sizes.
2. Streamlining the conditional zoning process.
3. Allowing more decisions to be made administratively.
4. Eliminating mandatory parking minimums.

Design Regulations

The new LUMO will regulate design using multiple tools. This memo highlights some of the most impactful tools that will be used and explains how they can contribute to more thoughtfully designed development.

To ensure the longevity of these standards, the proposed LUMO will rely on tools that fall squarely within the Town's zoning and land use authority. This means that the proposed LUMO will not regulate purely decorative elements of a building, like cladding materials (e.g., brick, siding, stucco, etc.), paint colors, or other ornamental features. Instead, the proposed LUMO will focus on thoughtfully regulating fundamental building elements like massing, screening, and landscaping. The result should be a set of rules that promotes high quality development without being overly proscriptive or rigid.

The design features discussed in this memo include:

- Build-to-zones
- Transitional height rules
- Stepbacks
- Datum lines
- Parking garage screening
- Street trees

Build-to-Zones

The proposed LUMO can include "build-to-zones" to create a more appealing pedestrian realm.

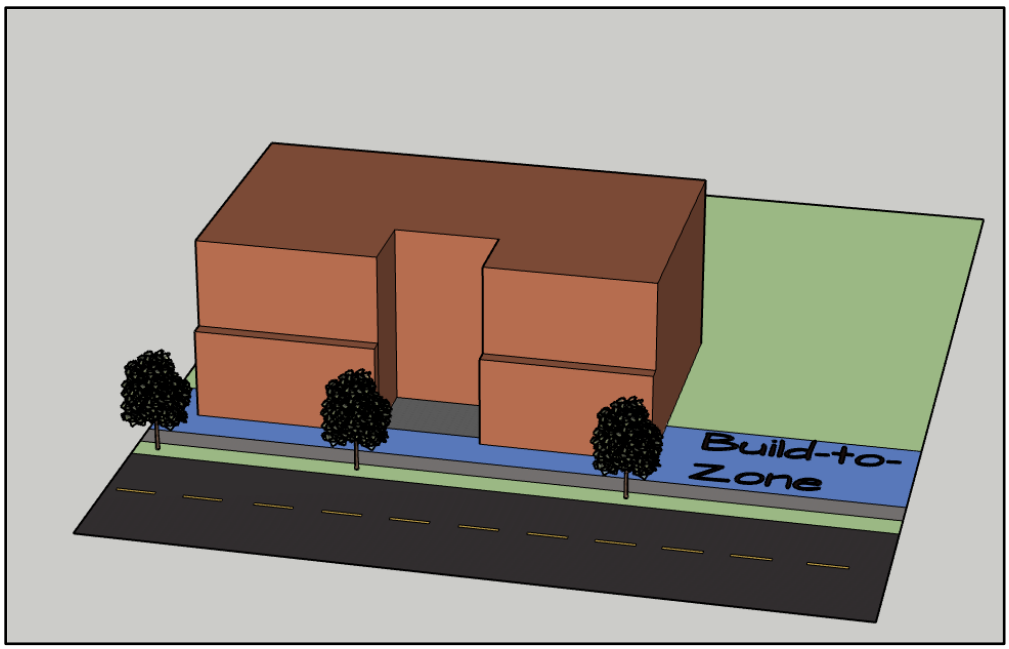
"Build-to-zones" require that a portion of a building must fall within a certain distance of the street. Oftentimes, outdoor seating areas, patios, or plazas can also satisfy the requirements of a build-to-zone.

Build-to-zones are essentially the opposite of a more commonly used design regulation: the setback. Setbacks limit how *close* a building can be from the street while build-to-zones limit how *far* a building can be from the street. Both tools play important roles, but in some contexts, it is better to prioritize the build-to-zone.

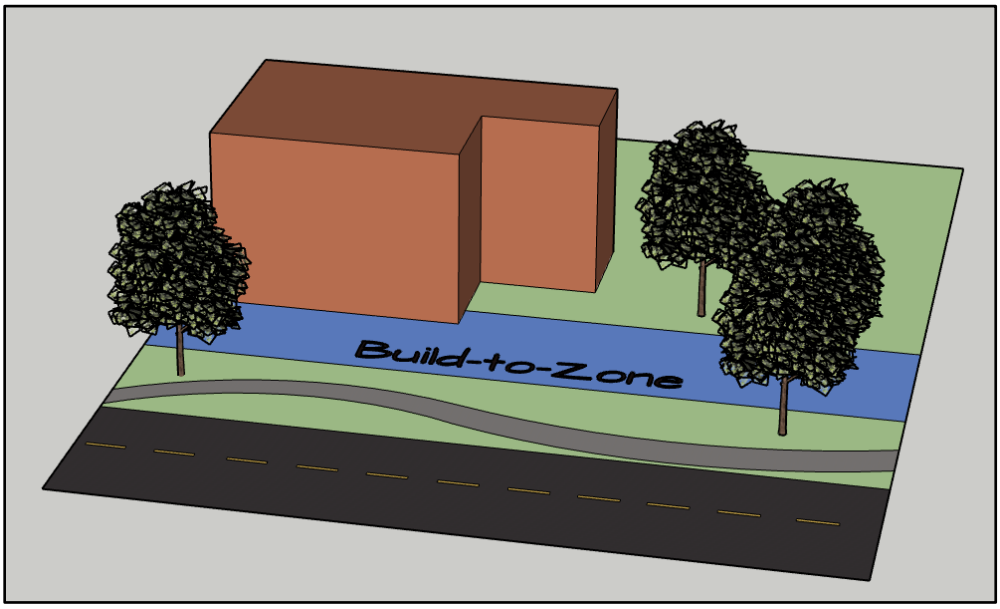
By bringing buildings and other pedestrian-oriented features closer to the street, build-to-zones naturally discourage auto-oriented features (like large parking lots between the building and street) and other non-pedestrian features (like vast lawns or stormwater ponds) from being placed near the street. The result is more human-scale development and more vibrant and walkable streetscapes.

As shown below, build-to-zones can be calibrated to create different types of pedestrian environments:

- In an urban context, build-to-zones (shown in blue) would be close to the street and require that a significant percentage of the zone is occupied by buildings or other pedestrian-oriented features.



- In a less urban context, a build-to-zone that sits farther from the street may be appropriate. These build-to-zones can also have more lenient standards for how much of the building needs to occupy the zone.



Transitional Height Requirements

The proposed LUMO can continue to use transitional height requirements to reduce the impact of tall buildings looming over adjacent residential properties.

Transitional height requirements limit how tall buildings can be when they are near low-intensity residential zoning districts. The goal of these rules is to limit sudden and

potentially jarring increases in building height when moving from one zoning district to another. As shown in Figure 2 below, transitional height rules allow building heights to gradually increase as they move farther away from residential zoning districts.

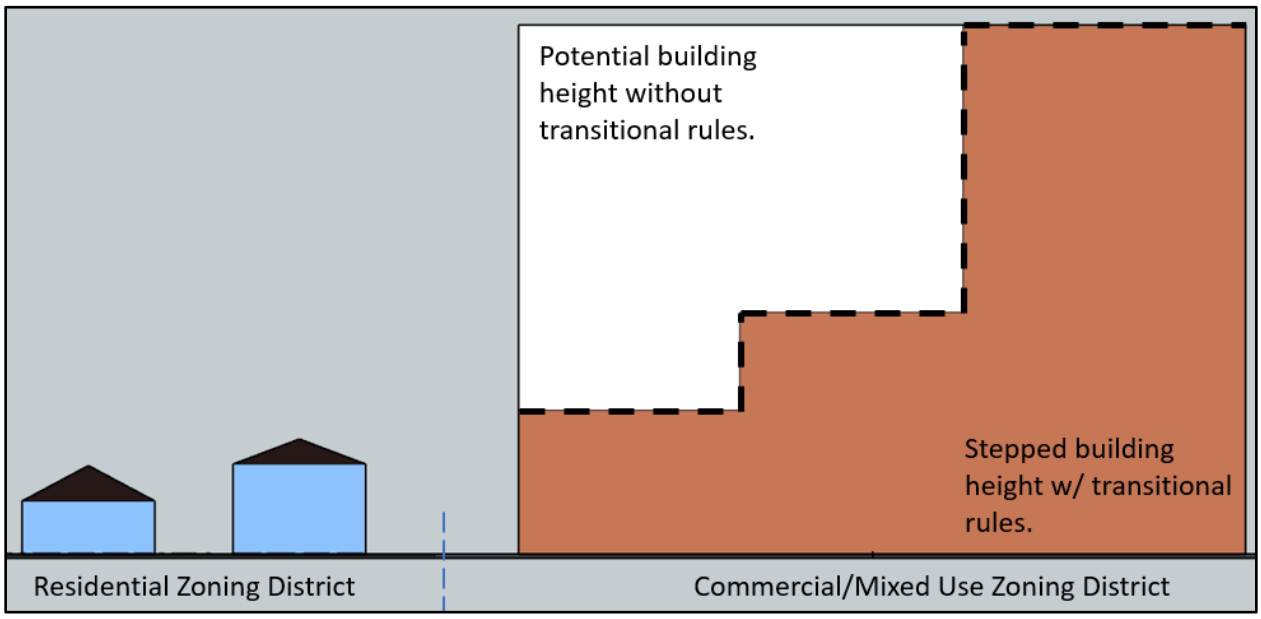


Figure 2: Transitional Height Requirements

Stepbacks

The proposed LUMO can require "stepbacks" to promote context sensitive buildings that reinforce the pedestrian experience.

A "stepback" is a design feature in which the upper floors of a building are set back from the lower floors, creating a tiered or stepped appearance.

The appropriate height at which a building's façade should step back is based on its context. In downtown Chapel Hill, for example, many existing buildings are between one to three stories tall. For a new taller building to fit into this context, the building should include a stepback somewhere between its second and fourth story. As shown in Figure 3, the building at 140 West Franklin St. uses a significant stepback above its 4th story. The result of the stepback is to minimize the visual impact of the upper floors and emphasize the lower, more human-scaled portion of the building.

Because step backs reduce the buildable floor area on a site, they should be used strategically. For example, a step back smaller than the one used at 140 West Franklin St. could achieve similar design goals without sacrificing as much buildable floor area.

As shown in Figure 4, the Graduate Hotel located at 311 West Franklin St. uses smaller step backs to successfully emphasize its lower levels and relate to the shorter buildings across the street.

Figure 3: 140 West Franklin Street

Figure 4: 311 West Franklin Street

Datum Lines

The proposed LUMO can encourage datum lines to promote cohesion between buildings and reinforce a sense of human-scale design.

A datum line is a strong horizontal line in a building or row of buildings. As shown in Figure 5, a datum line can be established using a wide range of architectural details including awnings, windowsills, belt courses, and changes in window patterns or cladding materials.

Some of the features that contribute to datum lines can be regulated through LUMO. For example, minimum requirements for how much of a building's ground floor should be transparent, regulations regarding the size and location of signs, and step backs can all create datum lines.

Figure 5: Datum line on East Franklin Street

Parking Garages

The proposed LUMO can require parking garages to use screening, landscaping, and other architectural details to promote their compatibility with other development.

Noise, traffic, and light pollution are common concerns associated with parking garages. These concerns can be mitigated, in part, through appropriate landscaping and screening that block the lights and sounds of vehicles and control the glare of lighting that's often needed to create a safe environment within a garage.

The garages at Carolina Square and UNC Health Eastowne, shown in Figures 6 and 7 below, successfully use a variety of screening and landscaping elements to limit their visual impact.

Figure 6: Parking garage at Carolina Square

Figure 7: Parking garage at UNC Health Eastowne

Street Trees

The proposed LUMO can require street trees in appropriate locations along major roads.

Reimagining landscape buffers to complement the adjoining land uses will be an important part of helping the Town create safer, healthier, and more pleasant pedestrian experiences. In contrast to large, wide, visually dense landscaped buffers that oftentimes separate pedestrians from buildings, well-placed street trees can complement buildings, separate pedestrians from vehicular traffic, and provide increasingly important shade and cooling effects.

Figure 7: A landscaped buffer that detracts from the pedestrian experience

Figure 8: Street trees located between the street and sidewalk create an inviting environment for pedestrians