

Northfield Zoning Regulations: Executive Summary

January 5, 2024

This document provides an executive summary of the Town of Northfield Zoning Bylaws update. Included is an overview of the purpose of the updates, a summary of the update process, and information about some of the key changes.

Based on Title 24 VSA Chapter 117, municipal zoning regulations describe the allowed types and densities of development within designated zoning districts. The current Bylaws for the Regulation of Land Use was originally adopted in 1973 and has undergone several amendments since adoption, with the most recent version having been approved in December 2017.

Revision Process

The update process was initiated and led by the Planning Commission in coordination with the Town's Zoning Administrator. Through the generous support of a Municipal Planning Grant administered by the Vermont Department of Housing and Community Development, the Town hired a consultant to assist with the revisions. JuliBeth Hinds of Birchline Planning was retained and began work with the Planning Commission in 2022.

Monthly Planning Commission meetings were held with the revisions being a recurrent agenda item from April 2022 through December 2023. During this timeframe, the Commission researched best practices and zoning updates from comparable communities. On November 10, the Planning Commission voted to approve draft revisions to the Zoning Regulations. The draft Zoning Regulations were made available to the public, including the Central Vermont Regional Planning Commission as well as the Planning Commissions of abutting municipalities. A Public Hearing was warned and held on December 6, 2023. The Commission considered the public comments as well as additional feedback provided by other means (i.e. emails) and voted unanimously to forward the proposed revisions to the Select Board on December 13, 2023.

Key Changes and Improvements

The focus of the revisions was to reorganize the document for clarity and usability for the community, Development Review Board, and Town staff; align the document with the Northfield Town Plan; and ensure compliance with State law. Some of the key changes and improvements to the proposed revisions are listed below.

- ☐ Reorganization for clarity and readability. This included:
 - Addition of a table of contents, several tables for easy review of requirements, and various maps

- Removal of redundant language
 - Clarification on inconsistent or vague language
 - Formatting and organization of the document
 - Elaboration of the definition sections
 - Consistent nomenclature changes (e.g. “Regulations” instead of “bylaws” and/or “land use”)
- Removed section covering Planning Commission and Development Review Board Operating Procedures and recommend that the Select Board adopt standalone ordinances covering the organization and operation of these bodies.
 - Cleaned up outdated or statutorily noncompliant language.
 - Recognition of the Village Center district in Northfield Falls, including in the Zoning Map.
 - Developed site plan review standards and granted the Zoning Administrator the ability to administratively approve minor site plan adjustments (must report such reviews at subsequent DRB meeting).
 - Require Certificate of Occupancy upon completion of most permitted structures.
 - Reduce the minimum lot size in the Low-Density Residential district to 2 acres (from 5 acres).
 - Reduce the minimum road frontage on a new dwelling lot from 200 feet to 100 feet (also in the Low-Density Residential district).
 - Exemptions from permitting will include fences less than 7 feet in height.
 - Defer updating the Floodplain regulations until the Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) completes work remapping the central Vermont watershed. The PC anticipates amending these proposed Zoning Regulation by adopting a Floodplain model regulation some time in 2024.

The Zoning Regulations should be consistent and workable for Northfield stakeholders and the draft is a modernized document that lays the groundwork for future amendments that support the goals articulated in the Town Plan. Additionally, the Planning Commission is undergoing conversations with the Northfield Conservation Commission for strengthening protection of the Town Forest. The Planning Commission looks forward to Select Board feedback and subsequent approval of the amendments.