

Proposal to Improve R4 – High Density Residential Zoning in State College Borough

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Executive Summary

State College Borough is facing increasing pressure to provide additional housing as demand continues to outpace supply. The current R4 – High-Density Residential zoning regulations limit the number of housing units that can be developed, constraining growth and affordability in the region. To address this challenge, the proposed changes to R4 zoning aim to increase density, modernize land use policies, and improve the overall efficiency and sustainability of high-density residential developments.

The proposed zoning amendments would:

- **Increase the maximum building height** from three (3) floors to five (5) floors, allowing for more residential units.
- **Remove the 40% open space requirement** while integrating modern stormwater management solutions such as green roofs and storage tanks to mitigate environmental impacts.
- **Allow accessory uses for residents and guests** to reduce reliance on personal vehicles. These include transit centers for logistics, grocery pick-up locations, and delivery hubs that support modern shopping habits.
- **Require noise mitigation measures** to minimize sound pollution and enhance residential quality of life.

Impact of Proposed Changes

A direct comparison between the current and proposed R4 zoning highlights the significant increase in housing capacity:

Zoning Regulation	Current R4	Proposed R4
Units	78	217
Residents	156	434
Building Coverage	60% of lot	100% of lot
Required Parking Spaces	117	326
Parking Floors Required	3	4

These changes would allow for more efficient land use, helping to address the growing demand for housing in Centre County while ensuring that new developments remain functional and livable.

Meeting Housing Needs in Centre County

Centre County, including the Centre Region, is experiencing a housing shortage that affects young professionals, and families. As a major economic hub anchored by Penn State University, the region needs increased housing availability to accommodate population growth, attract a skilled workforce, and support the local economy. Without zoning reforms, the shortage of available housing will continue to drive up costs, displace residents, and hinder economic development.

Summary Conclusion

The proposed changes to R4 zoning provide a strategic solution to Centre County's housing crisis. By allowing for higher-density residential developments with modern infrastructure and improved amenities, these amendments will enable State College Borough to grow sustainably while maintaining a high quality of life for its residents. The proposal aligns with best practices in urban planning and ensures that State College remains a thriving, accessible, and forward-thinking community.

Need for R4 – High Density Zoning in State College Borough

The Need for More Housing in Centre County

Centre County, including the Centre Region, is experiencing a pressing need for additional housing to accommodate a growing population and workforce. As the home of Penn State University and a hub for businesses, healthcare, and other essential services, the region attracts a diverse population of students, professionals, and families. However, the current supply of housing, particularly affordable and workforce housing, is falling short of demand. This mismatch creates significant challenges for the local economy, residents, and future development.

Increasing Housing is in the Financial Interest of State College Borough

Every year the price of things go up, impacting State College Borough directly. With a positive federal funds interest rate, costs will rise. Municipalities have three options to address price increases; increase taxes, reduce services, increase tax paying residents. If tax paying residents do not increase then residents are either paying more for the same services and/or getting worse services. It is in State College Borough's financial interest and the financial interest of residents of the borough to attract new tax paying residents.

Consequences of the Lack of Workforce Housing

The shortage of workforce housing—defined as housing for individuals and families who work in Centre Region but cannot afford market-rate rents or home prices—has far-reaching consequences. Workers in key industries, including education, healthcare, retail, and public service, often struggle to find affordable, conveniently located housing. This issue forces many employees to commute long distances from surrounding areas, increasing traffic congestion, commute time, and transportation costs.

Additionally, the lack of accessible housing reduces the region's ability to attract and retain skilled workers, creating labor shortages that impact businesses, schools, and local services. Employers in Centre County report difficulties in hiring due to potential employees being deterred by the high cost of living. The continued housing shortfall risks further exacerbating these economic and social challenges.

Affordability Challenges in the Centre Region

The Centre Region is becoming increasingly unaffordable for residents. According to recent data, the cost of both rental housing and homeownership has risen significantly, driven by limited housing

supply and high demand. Many households are cost-burdened, meaning they spend more than 30% of their income on housing. This affordability crisis disproportionately affects low- to moderate-income households, including essential workers who support the region's economy and quality of life.

The lack of affordable options places additional pressure on surrounding communities, leading to sprawl and further straining regional infrastructure. Without proactive measures to increase the availability of high-density, affordable housing, Centre County risks deepening the divide between housing supply and demand, making it increasingly difficult for residents and workers to thrive.

About the Proposed R4 Zoning

The proposed changes to the R4 – High-Density Residential zoning in State College aim to modernize land use regulations to better accommodate evolving housing needs, sustainable development practices, and changing urban mobility trends. The amendments seek to increase housing availability, support environmentally responsible infrastructure, and enhance the livability of high-density residential areas.

Key Changes in the R4 Zoning Proposal:

1. Increased Building Height and Density:

- The maximum allowable height would be increased from three stories (35 feet) to five stories (55 feet).
- This change enables a more efficient use of limited urban land, supporting greater housing supply while maintaining appropriate architectural and urban design standards.

2. Modification of Open Space Requirements:

- The current requirement that 40% of the property remain as open space would be removed. Or provide language confirming that the 40% open space can be met through using green roofs (which might already be allowed). This would allow more of the property to be used for housing.
- Currently green roofs are mentioned in the open space section and is an incentive for increasing the maximum number of floors.
- State College Borough already has comprehensive codes for addressing stormwater. Requiring additional open space is not necessary. This allows for a more flexible site design while integrating modern stormwater management technologies such as storage tanks and green roofs to mitigate potential environmental impacts.
- This allows for more land in the R4 zone to be used for housing, the purpose of the zone.

3. Accessory Uses to Support Residential Needs Without Personal Vehicles:

- Having more amenities on site or nearby reduces the needs of residents to travel and to need a personal vehicle. Allowing for accessory uses for these amenities could reduce the need of residents for parking spaces. The Borough could incentives properties to have these amenities by reducing the parking spaces requirement.
- The revised zoning would allow specific accessory uses that serve only property residents and their guests, reducing reliance on personal vehicles and promoting more efficient urban logistics. These uses include:
 - **Transit Centers:** Facilitating the movement of people and goods to the property. Including allowing drone delivery as an acceptable use.
 - **Grocery Pick-Up and Delivery Hubs:** Supporting modern shopping behaviors by centralizing deliveries and reducing individual vehicle trips.
 - **Other Residential Support Facilities:** Enhancing convenience while reducing congestion and emissions. These could include: co-working space, maker space, lounges, event space, wellness clinic, cafes, shops, gyms, spas, pool halls, and video game arcades. These amenities would be for residents and their guests, not for the general public and not to compete with other commercial uses in the Borough.

4. Required Noise Reduction Measures:

- Developments would be required to incorporate soundproofing measures to mitigate noise pollution and enhance residential quality of life.
- Sound proofing of the building would improve the lives of residents in the building and neighboring properties.

By implementing these updates to R4 zoning, State College can accommodate growing demand for housing while ensuring that development remains sustainable, efficient, and well-integrated with modern urban infrastructure.

Comparing the Current R4 to the Proposed R4 Zoning

A calculator on rent prices and zoning regulations is available on elliottkillian.com.

This calculator can be used to consider a possible R4 zoning changes in State College Borough.

Comparison

- **Under Current R4**
 - **Units:** 78
 - **People:** 156
 - **Building Coverage:** 60% of lot
 - **Parking Spaces:** 117 required
 - **Parking Floors Required:** 3
- **Under Proposed R4**
 - **Units:** 217
 - **People:** 434
 - **Building Coverage:** 100% of lot
 - **Parking Spaces:** 326 required
 - **Parking Floors Required:** 4

Benefits of the Proposed R4 Zoning

The proposed amendments to the R4 – High-Density Residential zoning in State College Borough offer significant benefits for residents, property owners, and the broader community. By increasing housing density, incorporating modern stormwater management practices, reducing reliance on personal vehicles, and improving noise mitigation measures, these changes aim to create a more sustainable, efficient, and livable urban environment.

1. Increased Housing Availability and Affordability

- Raising the maximum building height from three (3) to five (5) stories allows for more residential units per property, increasing overall housing supply.
- Higher density development can help alleviate housing shortages and stabilize rental prices by expanding the availability of units in a desirable location.

- Greater housing supply supports economic growth and attracts a diverse population, including students, young professionals, and families.

2. Efficient Land Use and Sustainable Development

- Removing the requirement that 40% of a property be designated as open space allows for more flexible site planning while ensuring sustainable stormwater management.
- Modern stormwater technologies such as storage tanks, green roofs, and permeable surfaces mitigate runoff issues without requiring excessive land allocation for traditional open space.
- Smart land-use policies encourage urban infill development, reducing urban sprawl and preserving surrounding green spaces outside the borough.

3. Reduced Dependence on Personal Vehicles

- Allowing accessory uses that serve only property residents and their guests, such as transit centers, grocery pick-up locations, secure e-bikes chargers, and logistics hubs, reduces the need for car ownership.
- By integrating facilities for last-mile delivery and public transit coordination, the revised zoning encourages walking, biking, and the use of shared mobility options.
- Fewer vehicle trips within high-density residential areas lead to decreased traffic congestion, reduced parking demand, and improved air quality.

4. Improved Infrastructure and Convenience for Residents

- Accessory-use facilities tailored to residents' needs improve overall convenience, making daily tasks such as grocery shopping and package retrieval more efficient.
- Encouraging mixed-use elements within residential properties enhances livability and modernizes urban development patterns to align with current lifestyle trends.
- Streamlining logistics within residential developments can help mitigate strain on municipal infrastructure and reduce delivery-related congestion in surrounding neighborhoods.

5. Supports Borough's Long-Term Planning Goals

- The proposed changes align with urban planning best practices that prioritize density, sustainability, and efficient transportation.
- Increased residential capacity supports the local economy by attracting and retaining a diverse workforce.
- Thoughtful zoning modifications ensure that State College remains adaptable to future growth while maintaining a high standard of living for its residents.

By modernizing R4 zoning regulations, the borough can support a growing population, promote sustainable development, and improve the overall functionality of high-density residential areas. These updates will help State College remain a forward-thinking, resilient, and vibrant community.

Questions for State College Borough to Consider

Below are the things that State College Borough Council and Planning Commission could consider in ways to improve the R4 zone.

- Should the maximum height for R4 change from 35 feet (3 floors) to 55 feet (5 floors)?
- Should there be a requirement or incentive to have a mix of housing types (1, 2, and 3 bedroom units)?
- Should the open space requirement be changed?
 - If so, should it be removed?
 - If so, should green roofs be able to completely fulfill the open space requirement?
- Should State College Borough incentive public transportation in R4 by providing reduced parking requirement?
 - If so, what should the incentives be?
 - If so, should ride share pickup hubs be incentivised?
- Should there be accessory uses in R4 to provide residents with amenities?
 - If so what should they be?
 - If so should State College Borough incentives them to reduce the need of residents to have personal vehicles by reducing parking spaces requirements?
- Should State College Borough intensive or require soundproofing materials and noise pollution mitigation in R4?
- Should some or all of R3 be upzoned to R4?

Conclusion

The proposed changes to the R4 – High-Density Residential zoning in State College Borough present a forward-thinking solution to the region’s pressing housing needs. By increasing the allowable building height, removing restrictive open space requirements while integrating modern stormwater management technologies, and allowing accessory uses to reduce reliance on personal vehicles, this proposal will help create a more efficient, sustainable, and livable urban environment.

With a growing population driven by Penn State University, expanding businesses, and a thriving healthcare sector, State College Borough requires a zoning framework that supports higher-density housing without compromising quality of life. The proposed R4 zoning updates would significantly increase the number of housing units available, accommodating over twice the number of residents compared to the current regulations. This change would help alleviate housing shortages, stabilize rental prices, and attract a diverse workforce essential for the region’s continued economic vitality.

Furthermore, the inclusion of noise mitigation requirements and improved logistics infrastructure for transit and deliveries ensures that the proposed higher-density developments remain functional and comfortable for residents. By modernizing zoning regulations, State College can align itself with best practices in urban planning, making the borough a more adaptable and resilient community in the face of ongoing population growth and housing demand.

Updating R4 zoning is a critical step toward ensuring that State College remains an accessible, vibrant, and sustainable place to live. These changes will not only provide immediate relief to housing shortages but will also set the stage for long-term economic and community development. The Borough Council has an opportunity to shape the future of State College by supporting a zoning framework that balances growth with sustainability, efficiency, and quality of life.