

Thurston County Stormwater Solutions

LID Fact Sheet: Building Setbacks & Heights

Issue

Zoning regulations typically include guidelines — setbacks, height limits, and minimum lot widths — which limit the location and size of structures on a parcel. These standards, which were generally put in place for either safety reasons or aesthetic considerations, create impervious surfaces that contribute stormwater runoff and water pollution.

For example, front yard setbacks — which dictate how far houses must be from the street — can extend driveway lengths and increase impervious coverage of the lot. Side yard setbacks and wide frontages can increase total road length, and reduce flexibility on where buildings are placed in a site design. Building height limits can require larger building footprints for the same capacity.

Why are changes needed?

The Thurston County Code requires that commercial and residential structures over 120 square feet in floor area meet minimum yard setback requirements. Such setbacks are generally in line with rural standards in other Washington jurisdictions but could be reduced to enable more flexibility in where buildings can be placed to allow better stormwater infiltration on site.

Most zones within Thurston County have a building height limit of 35 feet. Exceptions are commercial districts, which have a 40-foot limit, and Light Industrial, which has a 65-foot limit. Certain structures (e.g., barns, silos, chimneys) are excluded from height limits. The 35-foot limit generally allows for a 2-3-story building. This is similar to height standards in other jurisdictions.

Why aren't changes proposed for building heights?

County staff considered raising height limits, particularly for Commercial or Industrial zones; however, greater height limits may not be in keeping with rural character and may not substantially change building footprints, since developers are able to meet demand for space with current height limits.

In addition, staff consulted with area fire chiefs, who raised fire safety concerns; fire trucks used in the county carry ladders that can reach 24-28 ft., which facilitate a rescue from a second-story or (depending on grade) third-story window. The only units with ladder lengths beyond these standards are the two aerial ladders operated by the Lacey and Olympia fire departments. These units have 105-foot aerial devices for taller building access; however, they are not typically used to respond to emergencies outside of the urban core areas. Currently, buildings that exceed 35 feet (such as those in the Light Industrial zone) must have an approved sprinkler system. Any additions to height limits in the rural areas would need to include mandated fire escape accommodations and roof access.

How and where would building setbacks change?

The table below shows proposed changes to setbacks for building types:

Building Type	Arterial, State Highway and RR ROW	Collector, Local and Private Roads	Side Yard	Rear Yard
a. Commercial, industrial and other nonresidential	35 20' from right-of-way easement or property line; 10' from right-of-way of a flanking street	25 10' from right-of-way easement or property line; 10' from right-of-way of a flanking street	10 6'	10 6'
b. Residential exceeding two units per structure	30 25'; 10' from right-of-way of a flanking street	20'; 10' from right-of-way of a flanking street	10 6'	10 6'
c. Single-family and two-family structures	30 25'; 10' from right-of-way of a flanking street	20'; 10' from right-of-way of a flanking street	6'	10 6'

The revised setbacks would affect the following zoning areas: RR 1/5 (Rural Residential – one unit per five acres); RRR 1/5 (Rural Residential/Resource – one unit per five acres); R 1/20 (Rural – one unit per 20 acres); R 1/10 (Rural – one unit per 10 acres); RL 1/2 (Residential LAMIRD¹ – one unit per two acres); RL 1/1 (Residential LAMIRD – one unit per acre); RL 2/1 (Residential LAMIRD – two units per acre); R 3-6/1 (Residential – 3-6 units per acre); R 4-16 (Residential – 4-16 units per acre); MGSA (McAllister Geologically Sensitive Area); PI (Planned Industrial Park); LI (Light Industrial); RRI (Rural Resource Industrial); NC (Neighborhood Convenience Commercial); RCC (Rural Commercial Center).

Are there zoning areas where setbacks would not change?

Yes. Existing larger setbacks would be maintained in areas designated Long-Term Agriculture, Nisqually Agricultural District, Long-Term Forestry, and Agritourism Overlay, as well as amid areas zoned AC (Arterial Commercial) and HC (Highway Commercial).

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¹ In Washington, the Growth Management Act permits Limited Areas of More Intensive Rural Development (LAMIRD) — unincorporated rural areas with more housing, service and job choices.