



Zoning Ordinance Assessment Overview

March 18, 2026

What Zoning Does

Zoning regulations determine:

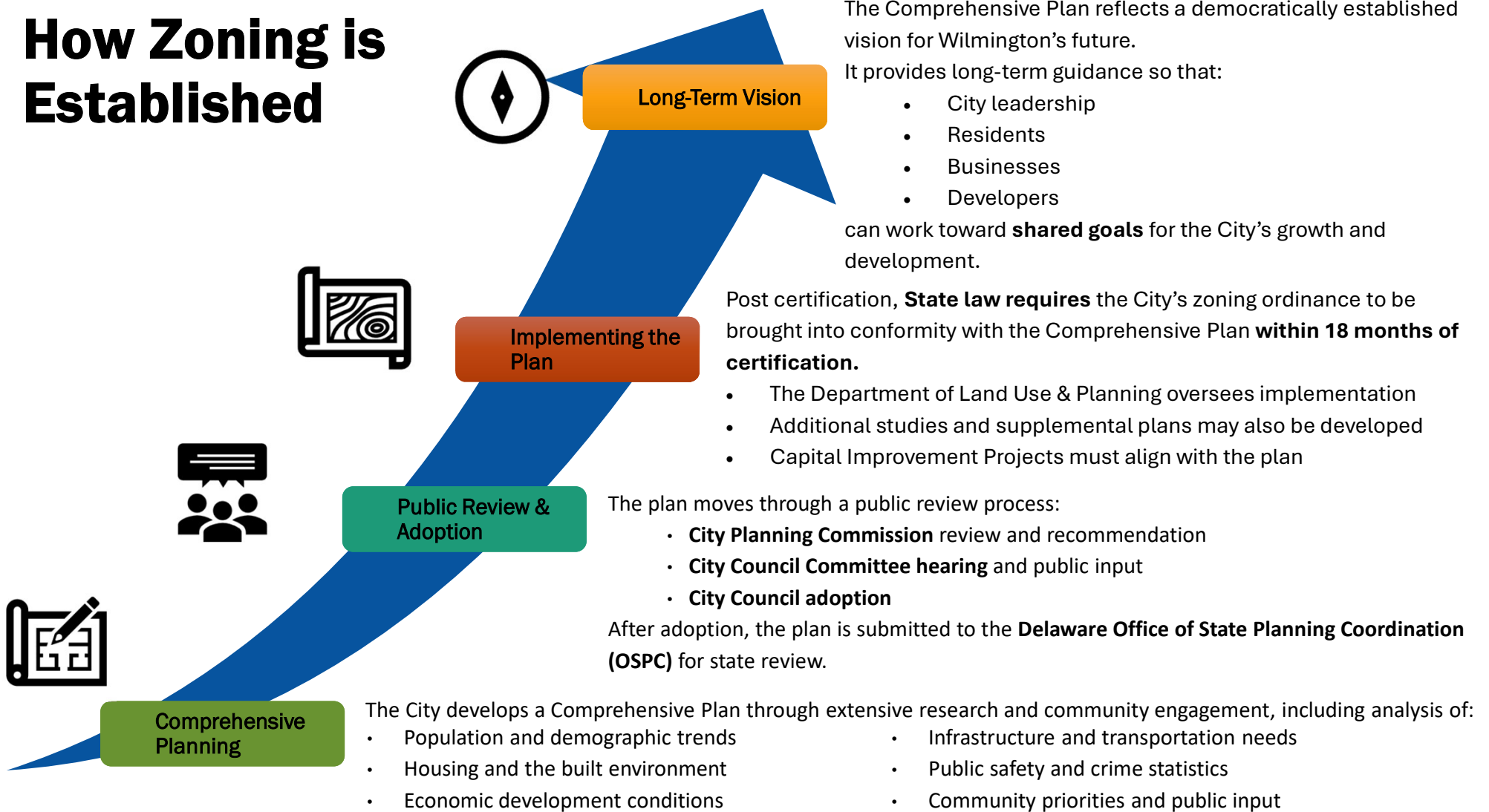
- What types of **housing** and **businesses** are allowed
- Building **height** and **density**
- **Parking** requirements
- How neighborhoods **grow** and **change**

Why It Matters

Zoning directly affects:

- Housing availability
- Neighborhood character
- Business development
- Infrastructure and public investment

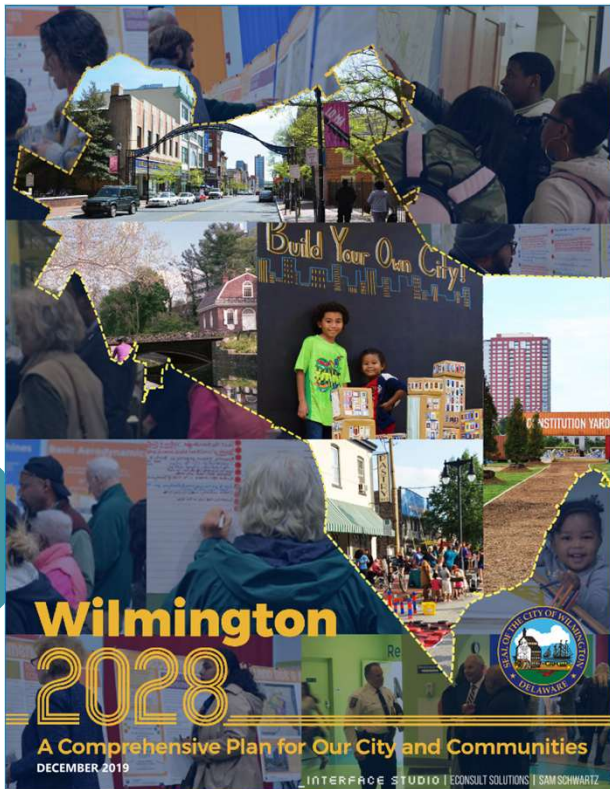
How Zoning is Established



Wilmington 2028

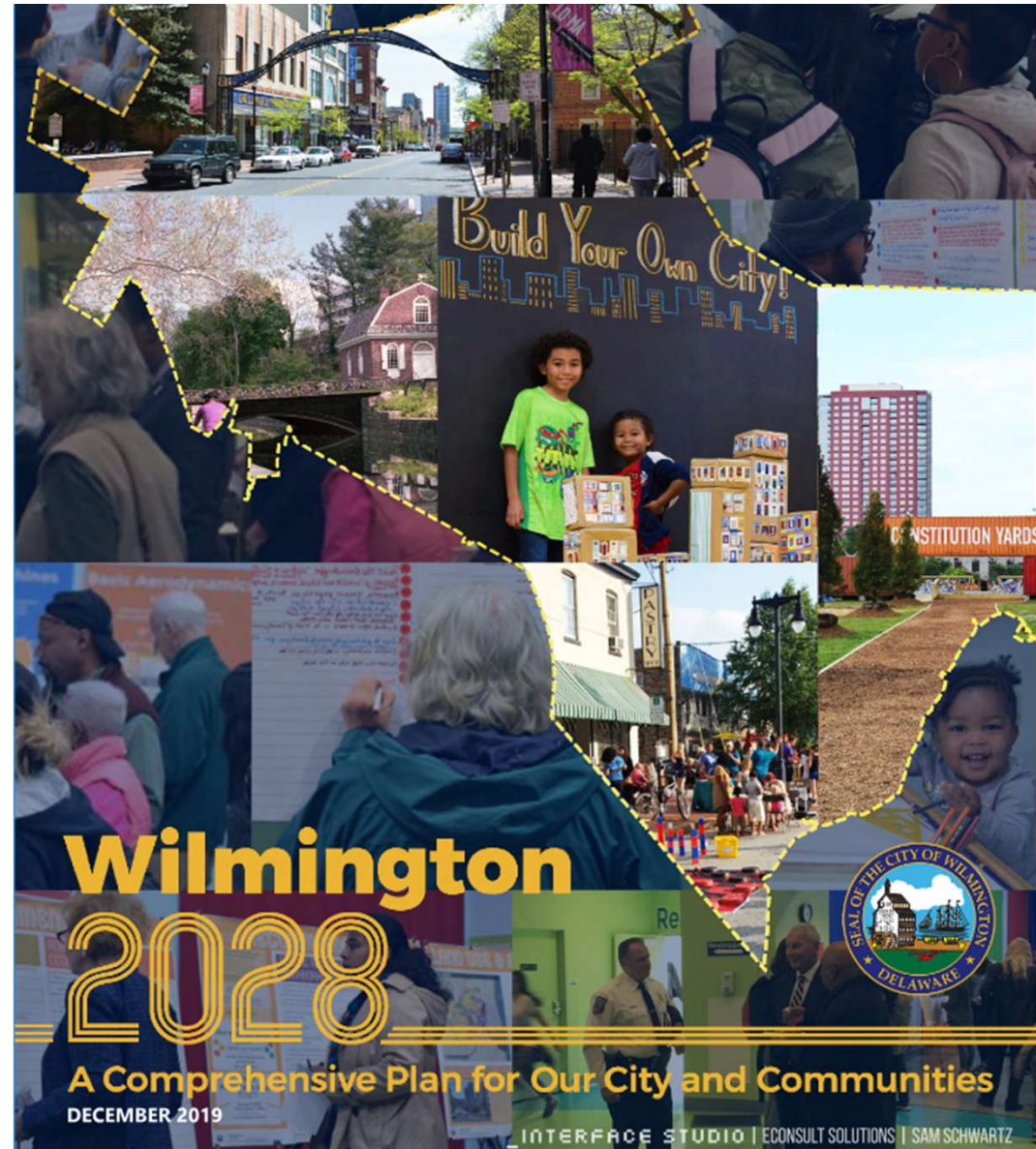
Vision

Wilmington is a **great small city** that offers a high quality of life. It combines the attractions of cosmopolitan city life with a tight-knit and welcoming community. It is a **city of opportunity** for everyone. It has a robust economy, plenty to do with a vibrant cultural community and abundant recreational options, and support for homegrown creativity and innovation that create local jobs and enrich lives. It is a **diverse and family-friendly city** where people look out for one another, and are proud to live and work in the community. It is a **safe, healthy and attractive city** of beautiful parks and historic neighborhoods that are walkable and bikeable, where residents have easy access to community amenities. It is a **resilient and sustainable city** that embraces green design to protect the well-being of its people and businesses. And most of all, it is a **city of connected neighborhoods and communities** where people, organizations, the City and the State are working together toward a shared future.

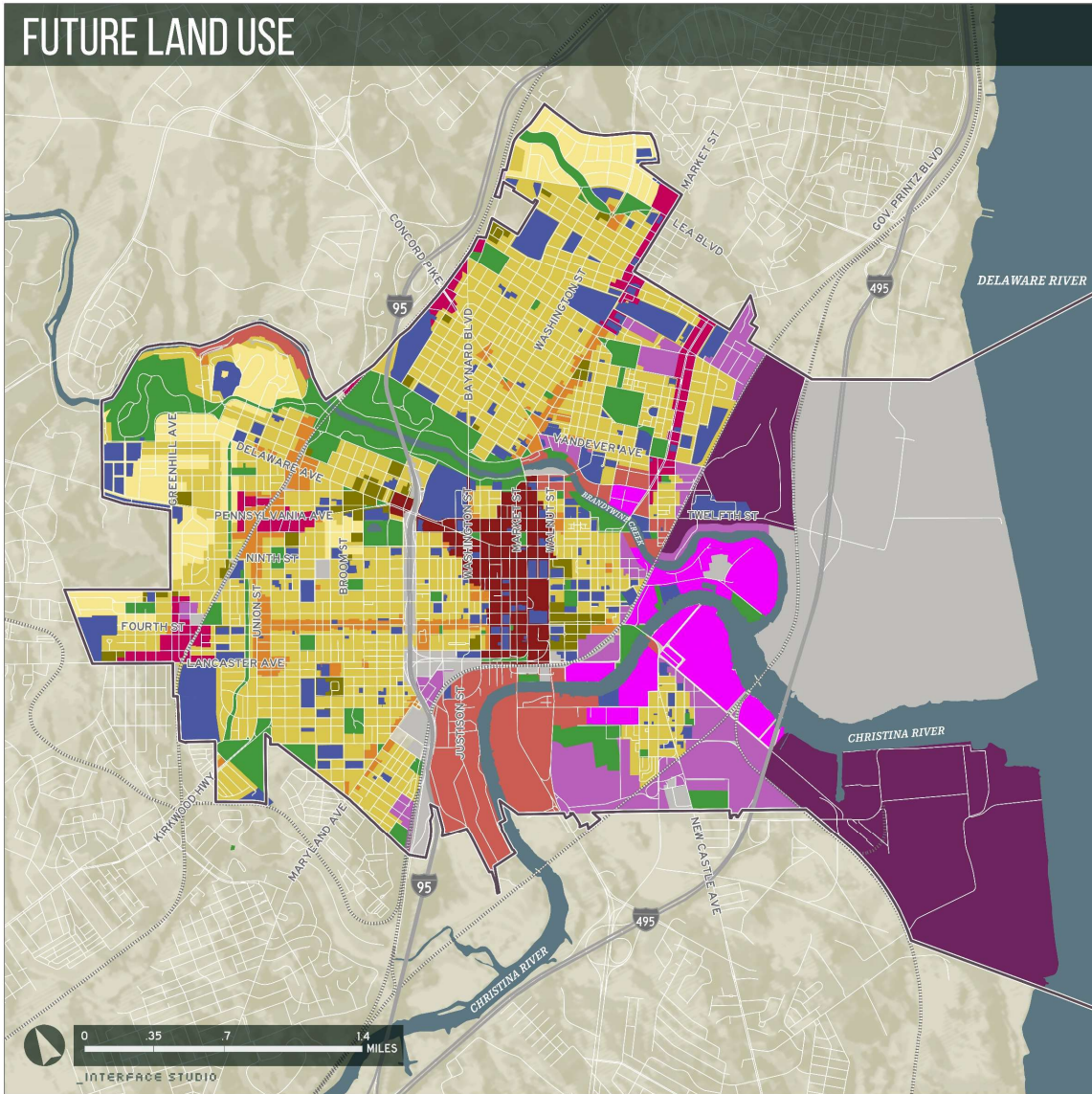


Guiding Principles

- **Safety:** a safe environment for everyone in all neighborhoods
- **Equity:** opportunity for everyone and all neighborhoods
- **Health:** people and neighborhoods have what they need to be healthy
- **Sustainability:** economic and environmental systems that are mutually supportive
- **Resilience:** ability to bounce back from economic and environmental changes



FUTURE LAND USE



Wilmington 2028 Future Land Use Map

- Parks & Open Space
- Institutions
- Manufacturing
- Mixed Commercial/
Light Manufacturing
- Regional Commercial
- Downtown Mixed Use
- Waterfront Mixed Use
- Waterfront Mixed
Commercial / Light
Manufacturing
- Neighborhood Mixed Use
- High Density Residential
- Medium Density Residential
- Low Density Residential
- Infrastructure
- City border

City of Wilmington Zoning Ordinance Assessment

October 2025

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UNIVERSITY OF DELAWARE
BIDEN SCHOOL OF PUBLIC
POLICY & ADMINISTRATION

Purpose of the Assessment

- To modernize Wilmington's Zoning Ordinance (Chapter 48) to align with current housing, economic development, and climate resilience goals
- Ensure the City's regulations are equitable, predictable, and supportive of growth.

The modernization effort corrects outdated language, standards, and processes that do not align with today's development patterns or Wilmington's 2028 Comprehensive Plan.

Wilmington's Zoning Ordinance

Chapter 48



Wilmington's current zoning code, written decades ago (1962), reflects outdated assumptions about how people live, work, and invest today.

The current zoning code has been amended many times over decades.

- Regulations are spread across multiple sections
- Some provisions are outdated or inconsistent
- Staff and applicants must navigate complex processes

This creates:

- Uncertainty for residents and developers
- Heavy reliance on variances and special approvals
- Administrative inefficiencies

Major Findings

The assessment identified several overarching themes:

Key Findings

- Fragmented ordinance structure
- Outdated terminology and land use categories
- Complex approval processes
- Heavy reliance on variances
- Barriers to housing production

These issues slow development and create confusion for residents and applicants.

What's Working

Strengths identified by the assessment

Strong Policy Foundation

- The City has a recently adopted **Comprehensive Plan (2019)** that provides clear planning goals.

Established Review Bodies

- The **City Planning Commission** and **Board of Adjustment** provide structured oversight and public review.

Existing Zoning Framework

- **Wilmington's** ordinance already includes a range of zoning districts that support **mixed-use** development and urban form.

What's the Problem



- **Lack of Integration:** Current zoning does not fully align with the 2028 Comprehensive Plan or with infrastructure, floodplain, and housing policies.
- **Fragmented Structure:** Many sections are inconsistent or duplicative across districts.
- **Outdated Terms & Categories:** Many district definitions and uses no longer align with contemporary development patterns or state law. (“automobile laundry,” “amusement machines”)
- **Barriers to Housing & Investment:** The code restricts higher density, “missing middle” housing, adaptive reuse, and small-scale infill
 - **Inconsistent Processes:** Layers of variances and special exceptions slow down approvals, create inequity, and discourage small developers.

Fragmented Structure

Over time, the zoning ordinance has grown through piecemeal amendments.

Challenges created by this structure:

- Similar regulations appear in different sections
- Some rules overlap or conflict
- Staff must interpret provisions across multiple articles

This fragmentation makes the code difficult for both the public and staff to navigate

Outdated Terms

Some definitions and land use categories reflect older development patterns. Examples include:

- Land uses that **no longer exist** or are **rarely used**
- Definitions that do not match modern development practices
- Ambiguities that require interpretation

Modern zoning codes have updated terminology to reflect current planning practice and development trends.

Reliance on Variances

Wilmington relies heavily on variance approvals.

A variance occurs when a project cannot meet the strict requirements of the zoning code.

Frequent variances can indicate that:

- The code does not align with real-world development conditions
- The regulations may be too restrictive or outdated
- Modernization can help reduce the need for variances.

Barriers to Housing Production



The assessment identified several zoning provisions that limit housing supply.

Examples include:

- Restrictions on housing types
- Lot and dimensional requirements
- Approval processes that add time and cost

Updating the zoning code will help support a wider range of housing options.

What Modernization Means

Modernization **does not** mean eliminating zoning protections.

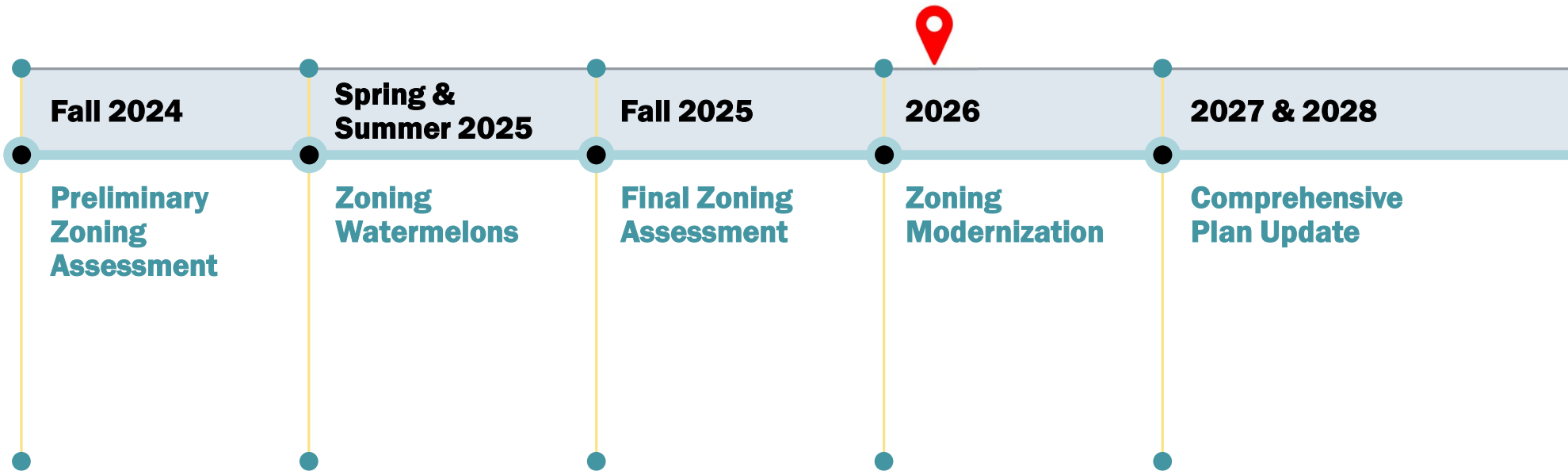
Instead, it means creating a code that is:


- Clear
- Predictable
- Easy to use
- Aligned with community goals

Many cities across the country have undertaken similar efforts.

What Happens Next

Modernization & Housing Supply





Unlock Housing Production: Permit duplexes, triplexes, quadplexes, Tiny Houses, and ADUs by right where infrastructure supports them.

Promote Economic Growth: Modernize commercial and industrial definitions to attract all business and clean-tech investment.

Simplify Development Reviews: Move predictable, low-impact projects to administrative approval; focus hearings on complex cases.

Advance Equity & Sustainability: Align zoning with floodplain overlays, tree canopy goals, and equitable access to amenities.

Improve Transparency: Integrate our zoning data with the Salesforce & Munis (permitting platform) and deploy interactive GIS maps.

Our Opportunity

Wilmington's Zoning Code shapes how the city grows.

The assessment provides a roadmap for improving how the zoning ordinance functions.

Modernization will enable our code to better support:

- Transparent and efficient processes
- Housing
- Economic development
- Neighborhood stability



Questions

