

Mount Rainier

Neighborhood Conservation Overlay Zone

March 2020

PART

1

Planning Background

In 1994, the mainly commercial properties along Rhode Island Avenue and 34th Street were rezoned Mixed-Use Town Center (M-U-TC). Concurrently, the first development plan was approved by the District Council to promote redevelopment and revitalization efforts that support a pedestrian-friendly, mixed-use town center. The Mount Rainier M-U-TC Zone is the core of the city and is surrounded by single-family residential neighborhoods.

In 2004, the *Approved Sectional Map Amendment for the Gateway Arts District* superimposed a Development District Overlay Zone (DDOZ) on the municipalities of Hyattsville, Brentwood, North Brentwood, and Mount Rainier. Zoning Ordinance standards for the R-55 (One-Family Detached Residential), R-35 (One-Family Semidetached, and Two-Family Detached, Residential), R-20 (One-Family Triple-Attached Residential), and R-T (Townhouse) Zones were replaced with those for the TRN (Traditional Residential Neighborhood) character area.¹ The TRN standards allowed smaller residential lots, more liberal setbacks, and more lot coverage. The City of Mount Rainier and its citizens became concerned by what they saw as the potential for incompatible redevelopment and sought exemption for the city's R-55-zoned properties. Because there was no mechanism to amend the standards, work began first on legislation to allow this.²

By 2005, residents and the city council had become concerned by the erosion of residential neighborhood



character by alterations and additions to single-family dwellings. In January 2006, City Councilmember, and former Mayor, Bryan Knedler organized a public meeting titled, "Managing Future Development in Mount Rainier." Prince George's County Planning Department staff and the Mount Rainier Design Review Board (DRB)³ participated in a panel discussion about the pros and cons of local historic district designation (regulation by Subtitle 29 of the County Code), conservation overlay zones, and zoning authority. The panel concluded a local historic district would be "too restrictive." An architectural conservation zone of some kind was believed to be "more reasonable."⁴

The District Council amended the Gateway Arts District Sector Plan and Sectional Map Amendment with Resolution 80-2007, exempting the City of Mount Rainier R-55 properties from nine of the TRN standards including lot coverage, lot frontage, minimum lot size, front setbacks, side setbacks, accessory building height, sidewalk widths, and two related to parking. However, still frustrated with a lack of control over continuing changes to dwellings in the city's residential neighborhoods, the Mount Rainier City Council passed Resolution 18-2008 asking the District

¹2004 *Approved Sector Plan for the Gateway Arts District*, p. 138; 142.

²CB-5-2007

³The DRB is established under city code and acts in an advisory capacity to the Mount Rainier City Council. See section 3.B. of this document.

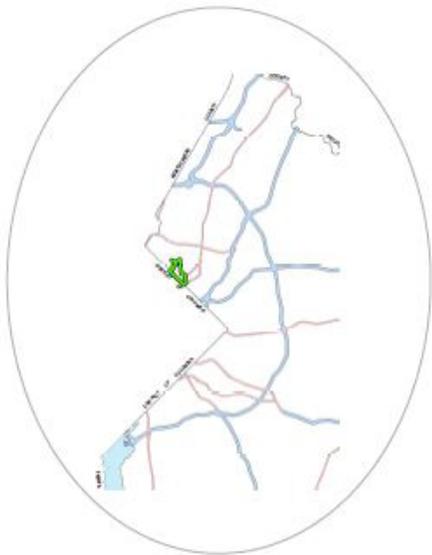
⁴Bryan Knedler, "ACDZ History." Unpublished, c. 2014, M-NCPCC CPD files.



Date Map Updated: 12/4/2019, Tewelde M.
Request ID: 3522

Proposed Neighborhood Conservation Overlay (NCO) Zone Mount Rainier, MD

-  Property
-  Proposed NCO Zone (RSF-65 and RSF-A)
-  City of Mount Rainier Municipal Boundary



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Council to establish an Architectural Conservation Overlay (ACO) Zone for Mount Rainier's residential neighborhoods "to preserve the character of our city's architecture but not create a local historic district which would be overly burdensome and restrictive for the city's residents."

In 2009, the city began offering a local property tax credit for 10 percent of the cost "of the properly documented expenses of a private owner taxpayer for the restoration and preservation of a structure with historic value within the City of Mount Rainier."⁵

In 2013, the city adopted Resolution 6-2013 (updating Resolution 18-2008 requesting an ACO Zone) adding additional requests for a pattern book and an architectural conservation plan that included a section regulating "mansion-ization."⁶

In 2014, the Community Planning Division selected Cunningham Quill Architects as the consultant to assist staff with the preparation of an architectural conservation plan, pattern book, and ACO design standards to preserve and protect the architectural and historic character and scale of the City of Mount Rainier's single-family neighborhoods. They would also assist with the promotion of context-sensitive infill, additions, and renovations.⁷ A ground survey of the dwellings within the proposed ACOZ was undertaken by a subcontractor. Several community and stakeholder meetings were held from October 2014 to December 2017.

However, in 2014 the County Council approved a new general plan, Plan 2035, that identified the creation of a new, twenty-first-century zoning ordinance as a critical step. Work began immediately on a rewrite. By 2016, Clarion Associates, the rewrite consultant, recommended reduction or elimination of existing overlay zones—including the ACOZ. The ACOZ would be replaced with a new zone, the Neighborhood Conservation Overlay (NCO) Zone. Standards developed with the community and the city for the ACOZ were adapted for the NCO Zone and presented to the city. In November 2017 the District Council decided that specific NCO Zones would not proceed with the Zoning Ordinance rewrite but would be undertaken in a future work program. The architectural survey work was completed, and the nonregulatory *Mount Rainier, Maryland Pattern Book* was published in 2018 by M-NCPPC. When it was determined in October 2019 that the Mount Rainier NCO Zone was to be applied to the zoning map through the Countywide Map Amendment in spring 2020, work resumed to refine the proposed zone standards with the city council, the DRB, and the community.

⁵Mount Rainier City Code, §2A-101.

⁶A requirement for a detailed site plan for every application had made the ACO Zone unworkable. It was not until 2012 that the District Council adopted CB-5-2012, amending the ACOZ ordinance to limit this requirement.

⁷See RFP 34-131, M-NCPPC "Consultant Service for the Preparation of an Architectural Conservation District Plan and Architectural Conservation Overlay Zone for the City of Mount Rainier." Upper Marlboro: January 29, 20[14].

PART
2

Overview of the Neighborhood

In the late 1800s and early 1900s, Washington, D.C. experienced significant growth, creating a need for then-suburban communities such as Mount Rainier. The expansion of the Baltimore and Ohio railroad line made it easy for Mount Rainier residents to access the city. In 1897, a streetcar line connecting Mount Rainier with downtown Washington, D.C. also began operating. The streetcar, operated by the Maryland and Washington Railway, stopped in Mount Rainier at the intersection of Rhode Island Avenue and 34th Street. The presence of affordable and modern transportation became the most important factor in the growth of the area.

By 1902, there were approximately 15 houses within a half-mile of the station and the population of the area was approximately 50 people. Soon Mount Rainier transformed into one of Washington, D.C.'s first "streetcar suburbs." The predominant architectural house types included variations on late-Victorian styles, most notably Queen Anne. By 1910, development in Mount Rainier was predominantly concentrated within walking distance of the streetcar station. The city was incorporated on April 14, 1910. From 1910 to 1919, roughly 250 buildings were constructed, and the town's population nearly doubled. New residential construction was scattered throughout the subdivisions as well as extending away from the town center. The use of previously popular late-Victorian styles slowed in favor of newer styles such as Colonial Revival, Prairie, and Craftsman.

The 1920s represented the greatest period of growth for Mount Rainier; more than 400 dwellings were constructed throughout the city. Craftsman-style bungalows became the prevailing trend. Only 126 houses were built during the Great Depression (1930–1939), and only 75 houses were built from 1940 to 1959. The Cape Cod, a modest variant of the Colonial Revival style, continued to be built as well as newer Ranch-style houses.

September 7, 1958, marked the end of an era in Mount Rainier: the streetcar that served the city for 60 years was discontinued. By the 1960s and 1970s, the population began to drop, and the city's housing began to show signs of neglect. Families became smaller and

moved out of the city, and the overall population became older. This trend continued until the 1980s, when younger families became aware of the charm of the former streetcar suburb and began returning.

Starting in the late 1980s, city residents and officials began to recognize the appeal and history of their housing stock. This recognition led to the 1990 listing of the city as a historic district in the National Register of Historic Places.¹

Today, Mount Rainier's single-family residential neighborhoods comprise approximately 1,069 dwellings. The largest portion of these (53 percent) are Bungalow/Craftsman in style; Victorian, Colonial Revival, and Queen Anne represent twelve percent each (36 percent together) of the total, and the remaining 11 percent is divided between Modern, Ranch, Prairie School, and Tudor Revival styles.² The residential portion of the city (zoned R-55, R-20 and R-30) is anchored by its commercial core, containing a mix of historic and modern buildings, and is zoned M-U-TC. The M-U-TC Zone will continue under the new Zoning Ordinance as the Legacy Mixed-Use Town Center (LMUTC) Zone.



¹Excerpted and adapted from *Mount Rainier Pattern Book*, prepared by Cunningham, Quill Architects, EHT Tracerics, R. McGhee & Associates for M-NCPPC and the City of Mount Rainier. Upper Marlboro: 2018, pp. 15-24.

²Ibid, p. 26 and architectural survey data compiled in 2015 by EHT Tracerics, Inc. for M-NCPPC.



Minimum Standards for the Approval of a Neighborhood Conservation Overlay Zone

Section 27-4403(a)(3) of the adopted Zoning Ordinance contains the minimum standards for designation of an NCO Zone. An NCO Zone may only be approved by the District Council if the following standards are met:

(A) At least 65 percent of the land area within the proposed NCO Zone, not including street and other rights-of-way, is developed.

Approximately 99.7 percent of properties within the proposed NCO Zone can be categorized as “developed” at the \$15,000 assessed-value threshold.¹

(B) Development patterns in the NCO Zone demonstrate an effort to maintain or rehabilitate the character (including, but not limited to, the historic character of existing communities) and physical features of existing buildings in the zone.

Mount Rainier retains the development patterns from its first plat (1903) and earliest seven subdivisions (1910-1919). Four additional subdivisions were added 1920-1939, and the characteristics of these are retained as well. Although dwelling development was scattered throughout these subdivisions from the earliest, there were concentrations along major streets (29th, 30th, Perry) and the triangle bounded by 31st Street, Taylor Street, and Rainier Avenue.² Ninety percent of the dwellings in the zone were constructed before 1950.³ Municipal and County efforts to maintain or rehabilitate the character of existing communities are documented under the Planning Background section of this publication. In addition, the city established its own Design Review Board (DRB) in 1992⁴ to advise the City Council on design-related issues including, but not limited to, fences, retaining walls, public plantings, construction proposals, building alterations, and regulations of design issues and zoning.⁵ The DRB has been active for 27 years.

(C) The development standards proposed to be applied to the zone will encourage the retention of the general character and appearance of existing development in the zone.

The proposed standards include the restriction of setbacks, coverage, height, accessory buildings, and the retention or recreation of distinctive design features to encourage the retention of the general character and appearance of existing development.

(D) The area must possess one or more of the following distinctive features that create a cohesive identifiable setting, character, or association:

(i) Scale, size, type of construction, or distinctive building materials;

The Mount Rainier NCO Zone area maintains the picturesque character common to many early-twentieth-century North American towns and suburbs—regularly laid-out streets populated with closely spaced frame dwellings in vernacular versions of popular architectural styles.

(ii) Lot layouts, setbacks, street layouts, alleys, or sidewalks;

The street grid is laid over a gently rolling landscape complimented by a mature tree canopy. Most blocks and lots are rectangular, although variations are introduced by the diagonals of Rainier and Rhode Island avenues. Most blocks do not have alleys; those that exist are near the commercial area (M-U-TC Zone). Sidewalks are present on nearly every block. Most dwelling lots are approximately 6,500 square feet, (50 feet wide facing the street and 130 feet deep); houses are set back from the street curb about 25 feet. Most dwellings occupy only one lot.

(iii) Special natural or streetscape characteristics, such as creek beds, parks, gardens, or street landscaping; or

(Not applicable)

(iv) Land use patterns, including mixed or unique uses or activities.

(Not applicable)

¹Based on a spatial analysis of relevant Mount Rainier properties using their related tabular Maryland SDAT data, compared with the proposed NCO overlay.

²Ibid, pp. 21- 27.

³Architectural survey data compiled in 2015 by EHT Tracerics, Inc. for M-NCPPC.

⁴The original resolution that created the DRB is 14-92. Source: personal communication from City Councilmember Bryan Knedler to Daniel Sams, November 13, 2019. E-mail.

⁵The DRB is established under Chapter 4, Title 1 of the Mount Rainier City Code.

PART
4

Policy Goals for the Mount Rainier Neighborhood Conservation Overlay Zone

The goals of the Mount Rainier NCO Zone are:

1. Preserve and protect the overall character and scale of Mount Rainier's single-family neighborhoods.
2. Promote context-sensitive infill, additions, and renovations.
3. Enable a clear review and approval process with predictable outcomes.



