

Neighborhood Commercial Corridors / CS Zone Fact Sheet

CS Zone

The Storefront Commercial (CS) zone is the predominant commercial zone in many neighborhood commercial areas, especially along “main street” commercial areas in inner neighborhoods originally developed during the Streetcar-Era. Streets with CS zoning include NE Alberta, NE Fremont, N Mississippi, NW 23rd, SE Belmont, SE Hawthorne, SE Division, and SE 13th Avenue. These streets include some of Portland’s most vibrant main street business districts and are the location of many new apartment developments that are being built without off-street parking. This fact sheet summarizes information related to the development and design standards that guide development in the CS zone.

Allowed Land Uses

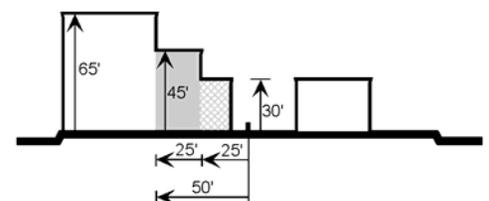
- The CS zone allows a broad range of retail, office, and other commercial uses, as well as residential development. A common development type features ground-floor commercial space and upper-floor residential units, although development can also be entirely residential, with no commercial component.

Development Scale

- **Height:** Maximum building height is 45’ (four stories). The 45’ height limitation dates from the 1959 zoning code, prior to which there was no maximum height regulation in commercial areas. The recent increase in construction of four-story buildings in the CS zone is the result of housing market factors, rather than changes in zoning allowances.
- **Height to street width relationship.** From an urban design perspective, a building height-to-street-width ratio ranging from 1:2 to 1:1 (building height equal to street space width) is generally considered to be desirable, providing enough building scale to frame the street space while retaining peripheral views of the sky. The street right-of-way width of narrow main streets (such as Division, Belmont, Fremont, Mississippi) is typically 60’, which in combination with 45’ building heights results in a height to street-width ratio that falls within this range. Note that portions of some wide streets, such as Martin Luther King, Jr. Boulevard and inner Sandy Boulevard (both of which have about 80’ of street right-of-way width), allow building heights of 65’ to 75’. Town centers and corridors served by light rail also allow building heights taller than the CS zone (up to 65’ in Lents, 65’ to 100’ along Interstate, and 65’ to 120’ in Hollywood). *See Pedestrian Scale and Urban Enclosure, below.*
- **Density:** There are no specified residential density limits. Density is constrained by the building height limits in combination with requirements for building setbacks adjacent to residential zones and building code requirements for a minimum unit size of 220 square feet.

Transitions

- CS zoning is often located in narrow bands adjacent to areas where single-family houses and other low-rise housing predominates, sometimes resulting in contrasts between the scale of new development and adjacent housing.
- Transition in building scale is required in some areas, in the form of requirements for buildings to step down to the height of adjacent lower density zoning.
- The R2.5 zone (attached residential) often serves as a transition zone between CS and single-dwelling zoning.



Example of height transition requirements in the main street corridor overlay zone.

Design-Related Standards and Compatibility

The zoning code description of the CS zone notes that the zone is intended to allow development that is compatible with the “storefront character” of older commercial areas. This compatibility is fostered by requirements that buildings be located close to sidewalks and include ground-floor windows, continuing characteristic patterns of main street development.

- Ground-floor windows required for most development (does not apply to residential units)
- Buildings must be located close to sidewalks (maximum 10’ setback)
- Parking is not allowed between building and street (intended to foster pedestrian-oriented street frontages)

Outdoor Space

- No outdoor space or landscaping is required.

Design Review

- Design review does not apply in most areas with CS zoning.
- Where the design review overlay does apply, state law requires that residential development have the option of being approved through “clear and objective” design standards (the Community Design Standards), instead of through discretionary design review. This is sometimes referred to as the “two-track design review system” (state law exempts the Central City, Gateway, and Historic Districts from the two-track system). The Community Design Standards are administered by staff and are not subject to appeal. *See Design Review Regulations, below.*

Neighborhood Contact

- Most development allowed by right in the CS zone and other commercial zones is not subject to requirements for developers to notify or meet with neighborhood associations. Neighborhood notification is required for development in the multidwelling zones and in some overlay zones that apply to commercial areas.

Relationship of CS development allowances to housing and sustainability goals

Sustainability: The compact residential development and density allowed in the CS zone contributes to Portland’s goals for energy efficiency and reducing climate change impacts:

- Small units within mixed-use or multidwelling buildings provide significant energy efficiencies.
- Locating housing in close proximity to services and transit allows for more trips to be met by walking, transit or bicycling.

Housing opportunities:

- Most CS zones are located in neighborhood areas where single-family houses predominate. The small residential units typical of CS zone development provide additional housing option in these areas, expanding housing opportunities for the increasing number of small households and for those who cannot afford to purchase or rent single-family houses.
- Allowing concentrations of housing as part of the mix of uses in the CS zone helps meet Portland’s objectives for more people to live within walking distance of commercial and community services, especially since the CS zone provides much of the additional housing capacity in many areas.

Additional Information

Pedestrian Scale and Urban Enclosure

What is pedestrian scale? Why is it important?

“Pedestrian scale” is created when a building, large or small, responds and relates to the scale of the pedestrian and sidewalk environment. Historically, before widespread use of the automobile, these features catered to more people using adjacent sidewalks in front of commercial buildings. The advent of the automobile as the dominant form of transportation shifted the design of buildings away from a pedestrian scale and toward an automobile scale. This shift in scale produced buildings with smoother building materials, main entrances that faced parking lots, large expanses of wall and bigger, freestanding signs higher off the ground intended to be visible from much further away and at higher, i.e. vehicular, speeds.

There are many ways that buildings can develop pedestrian scale. Along commercial corridors or main streets, some examples include: using more textured building materials; articulating or varying the building façade; creating more depth for plays of light and shadow; incorporating ground-floor retail spaces with large windows and easy door access; and integrating building lights and signs oriented to people walking along the sidewalk.

These building elements work together to help bring the perceived scale of a large object, like a building, closer to that of a human using the sidewalk. It is possible to develop a pedestrian scale on large buildings as well as small ones, and along wide streets as well as narrow ones. Many different parts of Portland, featuring a wide range of urban forms and building sizes, can be described as having a pedestrian scale. These include the Pearl District in downtown Portland, NW 23rd Avenue, N. Mississippi, and SE Hawthorne Blvd.

Developing pedestrian scale on buildings along commercial main streets is important because it contributes significantly to a more comfortable sidewalk environment. A comfortable and pedestrian-scaled sidewalk environment is critical in the interest of increasing the attractiveness of healthier, more active modes of transportation, including walking, rolling and biking. All of these qualities contribute to more activity and vibrancy along the street, strengthening the commercial and civic vitality of each street and the neighborhood it serves.

What is visual/urban enclosure? Why is it important?

A sense of “visual” or “urban” enclosure occurs when bordering buildings on a street occupy most of a pedestrian's cone of vision. By visually narrowing the street, successful enclosure helps to create an “outdoor room” that the people on the sidewalk occupy. Drivers typically respond to the perception of a narrow street and a sense of urban enclosure by slowing down, increasing safety and making the street more friendly to those on the sidewalks.

Bringing buildings closer to the sidewalk, helping to enclose and frame activity on the street reinforces the street as the primary public space or the “front yard” of the buildings. Commercial zones along main streets are intended to foster new development that strengthens this sense of urban enclosure by

allowing larger mixed use buildings. By enclosing the street and orienting to the people on the sidewalks, the buildings help to reflect the street's significance and the multiple transportation, open space, gathering and other public functions that it provides to the surrounding neighborhoods.

There has been much discussion over the identification of an "ideal" building height-to-street-width ratio intended to assist designers, planners and engineers in the development of pedestrian-friendly commercial streets. A targeted planning effort may be required to identify the desired height to width ratio for any given street, but historically, noted architects, planners and urban designers, including Allan Jacobs, Richard Hedman and Christopher Alexander, recommend allowing buildings to be at least half the width of the street in height -- up to the full width -- to achieve a good sense of enclosure.

Design Review Regulations

Besides the of base zone requirements of the CS zone, how is design regulated and reviewed?

In many areas with CS zoning, the Design Overlay Zone does not apply and the development standards of the CS zone are the primary means of shaping the design of development. This section provides information on how design review is regulated in those areas with the Design Overlay Zone and is intended to help inform community discussion on expanding design review to other locations.

The Design Overlay Zone and related requirements are the most common approach to achieving more in-depth review of design. The intent of this overlay is promote the conservation, enhancement and continued vitality of areas of Portland with special scenic, architectural or cultural value.

State law restricts where and how requirements of the design overlay may be applied. Areas outside of the Central City, Gateway and historic districts must have a two-track approach to design review. Projects have one option of meeting objective and quantitative standards – in Portland's case the Community Design Standards in the Portland Zoning Code. In the CS zone, these standards address improvements between the building and the street, building treatment at corners, buffers between commercial projects and residential zones, height and exterior finish materials, among others. Neighborhood notification is required for projects following the Community Design Standards approach, but review of projects is staff-administered and is not subject to appeal.

If the project cannot meet the Community Design Standards or the applicant does not want to meet them, then a discretionary design review is required. A discretionary review involves a set of discretionary design guidelines and an appealable decision made by staff or the Design Commission. The Community Design Guidelines are the most commonly assigned discretionary review requirements. The discretionary design review process is flexible to encourage designs that are innovative, and are appropriate for specific locations, for this reason the guidelines are phrased as qualitative statements, unlike the Community Design Standards which are phrased as quantitative statements. Each community design guideline is followed by a list of examples of some of the ways to meet the guideline.

A few years ago, City of Portland representatives advocated to the State legislature to change the rules that limit cities from requiring discretionary design review so that this type of review could possibly also be applied along Portland's commercial corridors and mixed-use centers. Although these efforts were unsuccessful, advocacy will continue.