

CRACKING THE CODE

The organization of Olympia's 'sort of' Unified Development Code

The current structure of Title 18 of Olympia's Municipal Code, also known as the 'Unified Development Code' or just the 'Development Code,' is the result of three principal factors:

- The structure of the previous 'zoning code'
- A model 'Unified Development Ordinance' popular in the 1980s
- An intent to eventually include all development regulations in this on code

The "UDC" includes:

Article I – Basic Provisions - Chapter 18.02. In this section you'll find the relationship of the code to state laws and the Comprehensive Plan, adoption of the zoning map, the special definitions for some terms in the code (although most words have "Webster's" definitions), and similar over-arching provisions.

Article II – Residential, Center, Village, Commercial and Industrial Districts -- Chapters 18.04 thru 18.08. These chapters form the core of what would be a traditional zoning code. They describe what land uses are allowed in each district (commonly called zones), which uses require special approvals, and the basic standards such as height and setbacks in each zone. Special requirements related to a particular land use and details of exceptions from a zone's standards are also in these chapters. Note that Chapter 18.05A contains the basic design guidelines (requirements) for the center and village zones – a few years ago other design regulations were moved to the chapters starting with Chapters 18.100. Separate 'master plans' add unique standards for each Village and the Evergreen Park Planned Unit Development.

Article III – Overlay Districts -- Chapters 18.10 to 18.16. These chapters describe additional regulations applicable to specific mapped areas designated by the City. These include the various special height limits, historic sites, and downtown pedestrian 'priority' streets. Note that 'overlay' zones differ from regulations such as wetland rules because the City defines the boundaries of the area – while wetlands are where you find them.

Article IV – General Regulations – Chapters 18.32 to 18.44. This article includes regulations that, at least potentially, apply to every property and development in the City.

- 18.32 Critical Areas – the rules for development near wetlands, streams, steep slopes and similar special features
- 18.36 Landscaping and Screening – requirements and standards for structures and plantings outside of a building (also see tree regulations of Title 16, and street standards in the 'EDDS')
- 18.37 Nonconforming and Conforming Buildings and Uses – rules for continuing activities that might not be allowed if new
- 18.38 Parking and Loading – governs the size and form of parking for motor vehicles and bicycles
- 18.40 Property Development and Protection Standards – miscellaneous citywide general standards such as fence heights, utility lines, and outdoor storage, plus rules applicable to operation of a development, such as noise and lighting limits

- 18.42 Signs – zone-related standards for communication displays (but not art), note that this chapter groups the land use zones differently than Article II
- 18.44 Antennas and Wireless Communications Facilities – rules generally applicable if a project includes certain types of radio transmitters or receivers

Article V – Discretionary Approvals – Chapters 18.48 to 18.66. Unlike the previous chapters that describe the physical limitations of development, these focus on the many and varied processes for obtaining approval for different types of developments. Often other chapters identify the type of process applicable, such as ‘a conditional use permit’ being required, and these chapters will provide the details of that process, such as chapter 18.48 ‘Conditional Uses.’ Some processes lead to a staff-level decision, while others lead to decisions by the Hearing Examiner or the City Council.

Article VI – Administration – Chapters 18.72 to 18.90. Put simply, these chapters describe the duties of the staff, the Hearing Examiner, the Design Review Board and others. Among other things, they establish time limits for processes, identify authority for making decisions, and describe requirements for public notice. Note that these chapters include provisions related to the Shoreline Master Program and Subdivision regulations that are in other parts of the Olympia Municipal Code.

[Article VII] – Design Review – Chapters 18.100 to 18.180 While the other sections describe basic limitations, such as the size of a building, these chapters describe the more subtle rules for the exterior architecture of buildings and related landscaping features. Which design criteria are applicable to which projects, the process for review, and the specific design requirements and guidelines are all set forth in these chapters.

Some examples:

- Interested in dividing the ownership? See Title 17, subdivision ordinance.
- Have a use but not location in mind? Look for the use in every chapter of Article II.
- Concerned with a specific property? Check the zoning standards in appropriate chapter of Article II; and check Article III and Chapter 18.100 to see if additional standards apply to the site.
- Got critical areas nearby? See chapter 18.32.
- Want to or have to add landscaping, screening, parking, a sign, or an antenna? See appropriate chapter or chapters in Article IV.
- Wondering if an existing use can continue, or a building can be remodeled? See Chapter 18.37.
- Interested in more details, like fence or noise rules? See Chapter 18.40.
- Discovered that a special approval is needed? Learn more in Article V.
- Want more info about processes, such as which projects get notice signs, or want to understand what authority Council has granted to others, such as to the Hearing Examiner? See Article VI.

Yes, it’s complicated. Can’t find something, need an interpretation, or simply confused? Olympia’s planning staff is happy to be of assistance. For help call 360.753.8314, email cpdinfo@ci.olympia.wa.us, or drop by City Hall.