

OVERVIEW OF ZONING BOARD OF ADJUSTMENT MATTERS – PROVIDED AS INFORMATION ONLY AND NOT AS LEGAL ADVICE

The Zoning Board of Adjustment almost exclusively does its work by making **QUASI-JUDICIAL** decisions on appeals from Zoning Administrator decisions, variance requests and applications for special use permits. Strict adherence to statutorily prescribed procedures before, during and after a hearing must be followed to ensure that constitutional due process rights of all parties are preserved. As rights are determined in these hearings it may be advisable for you to consult with an attorney on these matters.

PUBLIC NOTICE OF HEARING

The Town Staff must provide notice of the hearings.

MAILED NOTICE – Notice of hearings must be mailed to the applicant, the owner of the affected property, and owners of properties located within 500 feet of the property affected. Mailings are sent first class to addresses maintained by Buncombe County Tax Office and must be sent at least 10 days but not more than 25 days prior to the scheduled hearing.

POSTING OF PROPERTY – The property that is subject to an appeal, variance request or special use permit application must be prominently posted. This posting must be on the property affected or on an adjacent street or highway right of way and must also be done at least 10 days but not more than 25 days prior to the scheduled hearing.

PUBLICATION IN NEWSPAPER –The hearing must also be advertised in a newspaper of general circulation.

INTRODUCTION AT HEARING

The Chairman of the Zoning Board of Adjustment will provide an introduction prior to the start of the hearing in order to make sure that those in attendance understand the matter to be heard, who is allowed to participate, and a general overview of the procedural aspects of the hearing including the burden of proof and standards the Zoning Board of Adjustment must apply.

BURDEN OF PROOF - The person appealing a zoning administrator decision, or applying for a variance or special use permit has the burden of proving sufficient evidence for the Zoning Board of Adjustment to conclude that the applicable standards have been met. If insufficient evidence is presented, the application must be denied or the Zoning Board of Adjustment can continue the hearing to a later date to receive additional evidence. Once sufficient evidence has been presented that the standards have been met, the applicant is entitled to approval. If conflicting evidence is presented, the Board must determine which facts it believes are correct.

STANDARDS - The Town's zoning ordinance provides specific standards for the issuance of variances and special use permits. See separate Section on Standards.

BOARD DISCLOSURES AND RECUSALS

The Zoning Board of Adjustment must make sure that it is an impartial decision maker and that all communications with the Board on the matter prior to the hearing have been disclosed.

RECUSAL FOR BIAS/CONFLICT OF INTEREST - Prior to the opening of the hearing, the Chairman will inquire of the Board members if there is any reason that they could not be an impartial decision maker. If any member has a fixed opinion prior to the hearing, a close familial, business or other associational relationship with an affected person, or a direct or indirect financial interest in the outcome he or she should not participate in that hearing, deliberation or vote. Alternate members of the Zoning Board of Adjustment have been appointed to fill a seat in those situations. If there are members who express bias or conflict of interest then the recusals of those members would be appropriate.

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OUTSIDE COMMUNICATION – The Chairman will also provide an opportunity for members of the Board to disclose any communication that has occurred prior to the hearing. Some incidental communication is common and hard to avoid. However, substantial communication that occurs outside of the hearing should be disclosed.

IDENTIFICATION OF PARTIES

Only those people who have a sufficient interest, or standing, in the outcome of matter before the Board are allowed to become a party and present evidence. Anyone that can show some “special damage,” or damage not common to all other persons who may oppose what is being requested, will have standing to contest the matter and will be a proper party. The following have standing:

- (1) Anyone that has an ownership interest in the property that is the subject of the hearing;
- (2) Anyone that has a leasehold interest in the property that is the subject of the hearing.
- (3) Anyone that has an interest in the property that is the subject of the hearing that has been created by an easement, restriction, or covenant.
- (4) Anyone that has an option or contract to purchase the property that is the subject of the hearing.
- (5) Anyone that is an applicant before the decision-making board.
- (6) Any other person who will suffer special damages as the result of the decision.
- (7) An incorporated or unincorporated association to which owners or lessees of property in a designated area belong by virtue of their owning or leasing property in that area, or an association otherwise organized to protect and foster the interest of the particular neighborhood or local area, so long as at least one of the members of the association would have standing as an individual.
- (8) The Town if the Town believes that the Zoning Board of Adjustment made a decision that it believes is inconsistent with the proper interpretation of an ordinance adopted by Town Council.

OATH OF WITNESSES

State law requires that the Zoning Board of Adjustment’s decisions be based on testimony that is given under oath. The Chairman will ask that anyone wishing to testify at the hearing come forward to be sworn under oath before the hearing begins.

HEARING IS OPENED FOR THE PRESENTATION OF EVIDENCE

The hearing is conducted in order to determine the facts relevant to the matter before the Zoning Board of Adjustment. The decision of the Zoning Board of Adjustment must be made based on competent, material and substantial evidence in the record of the hearing. The Zoning Board of Adjustment’s scope is limited to applying facts to the standards set forth in the zoning ordinance. Any testimony as to unrelated matters is inappropriate and cannot be considered.

DOCUMENTARY EVIDENCE/EXHIBITS - Examples of documents that can be entered into evidence include: the application, staff reports, supporting documentation, documents from witnesses, maps, photographs, videos, studies.

FACTUAL TESTIMONY – Testimony about facts within the personal knowledge of a witness can be fully considered by the Zoning Board of Adjustment. Factual testimony should be limited to those facts which relate to the standards. The Zoning Board of Adjustment can only rely on opinions offered by qualified experts. The testimony of lay witnesses offering only opinions or conclusions is not considered as competent evidence on which the Board can basis its determination.

OPINION TESTIMONY BY QUALIFIED EXPERTS – Opinion testimony should be provided only by properly qualified experts. North Carolina law specifically prohibits the use of non-expert testimony on how the use of a property would affect property values, the increase in vehicular traffic resulting from the proposed development would pose a danger to public safety, or any other matters that a court would require expert testimony in court. Non-expert opinions on these technical matters are not considered to be competent evidence upon which a decision can be made.

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CROSS-EXAMINATION

In order to preserve constitutional rights, parties have the right to cross-exam or question all witnesses. Board members are also free to pose questions to anyone presenting evidence.

HEARING IS CLOSED AND BOARD DELIBERATION BEGINS

At the close of the hearing the Board then takes an opportunity to review the evidence in light of the standards that the Board must apply. The Board's review should focus on contested facts. Where conflicting evidence is presented, the Zoning Board of Adjustment has the responsibility of deciding how much weight to accord each piece of evidence. The Board also has the responsibility of determining credibility of witnesses. In its discussion the Board can consider conditions that might be imposed in order to bring the project into compliance with a standard.

VOTING

For most matters coming before the Zoning Board of Adjustment a simple majority vote is all that is needed. For variance applications, however, North Carolina law requires a super majority of at least 4/5.

WRITTEN DECISIONS

The Board's decision must be reduced to writing; however, this is usually done at a subsequent meeting. Prior to that it is permissible to issue a temporary order consistent with the Board's deliberations and vote. The written decision must determine any contested facts and apply the facts to the applicable standards. Staff drafts a written decision and presents it to the Board at the Board's next meeting for consideration and adoption.

APPEALS

Anyone "aggrieved" by a decision of the Zoning Board of Adjustment can appeal a decision by filing a petition for writ of certiorari with the Buncombe County Superior Court within 30 days of the mailing of the written decision or the filing of that decision with the Board's clerk or secretary, which is later. It is important to remember that the time is not measured from the date of the decision, but from the mailing of the written decision. It is also important to note that appeals are not heard by Town Council.

STANDARDS

The standards as adopted by the Town Council must be set forth in an unambiguous manner so that the Zoning Board of Adjustment can apply those standards to the facts of a particular case. This doesn't mean that the standards must all be objective standards, subjective standards (such as "general welfare" and "hardship") are permissible.

STANDARDS FOR SPECIAL USE PERMITS

- (1) The establishment, maintenance, or operation of the special use will not be detrimental to or endanger the public health, safety, morals, comfort, or general welfare.
- (2) The special use will not be injurious to the use and enjoyment of other property in the immediate vicinity for the purposes already permitted nor substantially diminish and impair property values within the neighborhood.
- (3) The establishment of the special use will not impede the normal and orderly development and improvement of the surrounding property for uses permitted in the district.
- (4) The exterior architectural appeal and functional plan of any proposed structure will not be so at variance with the exterior architectural appeal and functional plan of the structures already constructed or in the course of construction in the

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immediate neighborhood or with the character of the applicable district as to cause a substantial depreciation in the property values within the neighborhood.

- (5) Adequate utilities, access roads, drainage and/or other necessary facilities have been, are being or will be provided.
- (6) Adequate measures have been or will be taken to provide ingress and egress so designed as to minimize traffic congestion in the public streets.
- (7) The special use shall, in all other respects, conform to the applicable regulations of the district in which it is located, except as such regulations may, in each instance, be modified by the zoning board of adjustment.

STANDARDS FOR VARIANCES

- (1) Unnecessary hardship would result from the strict application of [the zoning ordinance].
- (2) The hardship results from conditions that are peculiar to the property, such as location, size, or topography; however, hardships resulting from personal circumstances, as well as hardships resulting from conditions that are common to the neighborhood or the general public may not be the basis for granting a variance.
- (3) The hardship did not result from actions taken by the applicant or the property owner.
- (4) The requested variance is consistent with the spirit, purpose, and intent of [the zoning ordinance] such that public safety is secured and substantial justice is achieved.
- (5) The variance is not a request to permit a use of land, building or structure which is not permitted in the zoning district in which the property is located.
- (6) The variance is not a request to permit a prohibited sign.