

ZONING FROM A TO Z

Residential districts – Part 2 (Chapter 17-2)

By Judith Lauth Casey

As explained in “Residential Districts Part 1” in the November/December 2005 issue of SNA, categories of residential (“R”) districts are differentiated primarily on the basis of maximum floor area ratio and minimum lot area requirements; however, the code imposes other significant limitations on structures in R districts, as well.

Height Limitations. Historically, the Chicago zoning code did not impose height limitations on residential structures. Faced with ever-taller new construction, the city enacted height limitations in certain R districts. These were incorporated into the new code along with limitations for the remaining R districts.

Most of the residential housing in Sheffield is designated RT4, which carries a maximum height of 38 feet for principal residential buildings. In the western portion of Sheffield where there are a few pockets zoned RS3, the maximum height is 30 feet.

Building height is the vertical distance from grade to the highest point of the underside of the top floor’s ceiling joist on a building with a flat roof. On a building with a gable, hip, mansard or gambrel roof, the building height is the vertical distance from grade to the mean height level between the eaves and the ridge of the roof. (Grade is the curb level adjacent to the front property line or the mean level of the finished lot, whichever is higher.) In one of the improvements over the former version of the code, the new version provides illustrations of this measurement.

Setbacks. A setback is an open, unobstructed area required to be provided from the furthestmost projection of a structure to the property line of the lot. Residential districts are subject to front, side, and rear setbacks.

Front. Front setbacks are the distance from the front property line and are determined either by minimum fixed standards or in accordance with average setback standards.

The minimum standard front setback in RT4 districts is 15 feet or 12% of the lot depth, whichever is less. In RS3 districts, the minimum standard front setback is 20 feet or 16% of the lot depth, whichever is less. Thus, on a standard lot with a depth of 125 feet, the minimum standard setback in an RT4 district is 15 feet, while the minimum standard setback in an RS3 district is 20 feet.

In lieu of complying with this fixed standard, an owner may choose to set back the structure a distance equal to the average front yard depth that exists on the nearest 2 lots on either side of the subject lot, or 20 feet, whichever is less. For example, if the nearest 2 lots on either side have front setbacks of 12, 10, 9, and 11, the front setback required on the subject lot is 10.5 feet. Use of average setback standards generally results in more consistent setbacks on a block where the existing setbacks differ from the standard minimums.

Additional rules govern lots that front a primary boulevard, the calculations for adjacent lots that are vacant, corner lots, and the like. Again, the new code provides illustrations.

Side. A side setback is the setback required between a building and the side property line of the lot.

In RT4 districts, the combined total width of side setbacks must equal 20% of lot width with neither setback less than 2 feet or 8% of lot width, whichever is greater. No side setback is required to exceed 5 feet. Thus, on a standard lot with a width of 25 feet, the total width of side setbacks must equal 5 feet, with neither setback less than 2 feet.

In RS3 districts, the combined total width of side setbacks must equal 30% of lot width with neither required setback less than 4 feet or 10% of lot width, whichever is greater. Thus, on a standard lot with a width of 25 feet, the total width of side setbacks must equal 7.5 feet, with neither setback less than 4 feet.

Different regulations govern townhouse developments and reversed corner lots. In addition, a separate code section specifies standards to ensure adequate separation between exterior building walls that serve as a primary source of natural light and air for dwelling units, such as in the case with courtyard buildings.

Rear. The rear setback is the setback required between a building and the rear property line. In residential districts, the minimum rear setback for detached houses is 28% of the lot depth or 50 feet, whichever is less. Thus, on a lot with a standard depth of 125 feet, the required rear setback is 35 feet. Different requirements apply to buildings with accessible dwelling units and principal buildings other than detached houses.

In addition, the new code introduced requirements for rear yard open space, which shall be reviewed in a subsequent article.

Character Standards. The new code introduces character standards that, although minimal, are important. The first requires that windows and/or main entrance doors must comprise at least 17.5% of the area of each building façade that faces a street. This requirement eliminates blank walls and ensures “eyes on the street.”

The second requires that in most residential districts, including RS3 and RT4, all off-street parking must be accessed off the abutting alley, unless the lot lacks access to an improved alley.

This is the second in a series of articles designed to educate the community about the basics of the new zoning code adopted in late 2004. If you would like to learn about a particular topic, contact the Association by calling 773-929-9255 or by sending an e-mail message to sheffieldneighborhoodassociation@hotmail.com; please be as specific as possible when describing your topic or question.

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