



March 5, 2026

## PROPOSED AMENDMENT TO RESIDENTIAL SETBACK REGULATIONS

City of Oelwein, Iowa

Presented to the Planning & Zoning Commission

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### 1. Purpose of the Proposal

The purpose of this amendment is to modernize the residential setback regulations in the R-1 and R-2 zoning districts in order to:

- Increase infill development flexibility
- Make smaller and existing lots more buildable
- Eliminate counterintuitive lot-line-based restrictions
- Maintain reasonable fire separation between structures
- Improve consistency where right-of-way widths vary throughout the city

The current setback regulations were adopted under older planning models that do not always reflect current building practices, building codes, or the realities of existing lot patterns within the City of Oelwein.

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### 2. Background and Need for Change

#### A. Current Regulations

The current general residential setback requirements are:

- Front Yard: 25 feet
- Rear Yard: 25 feet
- Side Yard: 8 feet

While these standards provide uniformity, they can be overly restrictive in several common situations:

- On narrow lots, the required side yards significantly reduce buildable width.
- On lots where the right-of-way depth varies (deep ditches, irregular ROW widths), front setbacks from the property line produce inconsistent and sometimes excessive building setbacks.
- The current regulations restrict reasonable infill housing opportunities on existing platted lots.
- The regulations do not account for modern building code requirements governing fire separation.



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### 3. Rationale for Updating Setback Standards

#### A. Modern Building Code Already Addresses Fire Separation

The 2021 International Residential Code (IRC) regulates:

- Fire separation distance
- Wall fire-resistance ratings
- Limitations on wall openings near lot lines

This means life-safety objectives related to fire protection are already governed by building code requirements. Zoning setbacks are no longer the primary life-safety tool.

#### B. Infill Development & Small Lot Constraints

Many existing lots in Oelwein are narrow or were platted under older subdivision patterns. The current side yard requirements can:

- Prevent practical home construction
- Discourage redevelopment of vacant lots
- Reduce investment in established neighborhoods

Allowing flexibility in side setbacks — while maintaining minimum building separation — increases the feasibility of infill housing without compromising safety.

#### C. Variable Right-of-Way Widths

In some areas of the city, front property lines are located significantly farther from the center of the roadway due to:

- Wide drainage ditches
- Irregular right-of-way widths
- Historic road design

A uniform 25-foot setback from the property line does not produce consistent building placement relative to the street.

Using a centerline-based front setback (or an averaging method) would create more consistent streetscapes while restoring usable lot depth.

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### 4. Proposed Conceptual Changes

#### A. Replace Fixed Side Lot Line Setbacks with Minimum Building Separation

##### Current Standard:

- 8 feet on each side

##### Proposed Concept:

- Permit a 0-foot side setback on one side
- Require a minimum 10-foot setback on the opposite side
- Maintain a minimum 10-foot building separation between principal structures on separate lots

Additional safeguards:

- If located within 5 feet of a lot line, the wall must meet IRC fire-resistance requirements.
- Openings (windows/doors) must comply with IRC limitations.



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**Benefit:**

- Makes narrow lots buildable
- Encourages redevelopment
- Maintains fire safety
- Allows flexibility while preserving neighborhood spacing

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**B. Modify Front Yard Measurement Method**

**Option 1 – Centerline-Based Front Setback**

- Require minimum setback from centerline of adjacent roadway (e.g., 45 feet), OR
- 15 feet from front property line, whichever results in greater setback

**Option 2 – Front Setback Averaging**

Where 30% or more of structures on the same block face are set back differently than district minimum, the required front setback shall be the average of those structures.

**Benefit:**

- Addresses inconsistent right-of-way widths
- Produces more consistent streetscapes
- Allows reasonable buildable depth on constrained lots

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**C. Rear Yard Flexibility**

Consider reducing rear yard requirement from 25 feet to 15–20 feet in R-1 and R-2 districts to improve buildable envelope without impacting street appearance.

Rear yards primarily serve private open space purposes and are less visible from the public right-of-way.

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**5. Expected Outcomes**

If adopted, these amendments would:

- Increase feasibility of residential infill development
- Make smaller platted lots buildable again
- Encourage reinvestment in established neighborhoods
- Modernize zoning to align with current building code standards
- Preserve reasonable spacing between structures
- Maintain public safety and neighborhood character

This proposal does not eliminate setbacks; it replaces rigid lot-line setbacks with more performance-based standards focused on actual building separation and contextual front-yard alignment.



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## **CURRENT CODE & CHANGE RECOMENNDATIONS**

### **Current Code R-1 -- 202.4:**

<b>202.4. Minimum Lot Area and Width Height</b>	<b>Minimum Yard Requirements</b>	<b>Maximum</b>
Single-family dwellings	Front: 25 feet	35 feet
Area 7,000 square feet	Rear: 25 feet	Accessory buildings shall not exceed 15 feet in height to peak.
Width 60 feet	Side: 8 feet	

*Except:* Any lot existing and platted prior to November 9, 1970, the minimum lot area shall be 6,000 square feet.

*Except:* The side yard shall not be less than five feet on any existing lot that is less than 60 feet in width.

Two family dwellings:

Area: 10,000 square feet.

Width: 60 square feet.

*Except:* Any lot existing and platted prior to November 9, 1970, the minimum lot area shall be 6,000 square feet.



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**RECOMMENDED CHANGE:**

**Delete sections 202.4 and 203.4 and 202.3(8) and 203.3(8)**

**Replace with:**

**202.4 Lot Area and Setbacks (THIS WOULD ALSO REPLACE 203.4)**

- A. Minimum Lot area: 5000 Square Feet
- B. Minimum Lot Width: 50'
- C. Minimum Front yard: 15'
- D. Minimum Rear yard: 15'
- E. Minimum Side Yard:

Each principal residential structure shall provide two (2) side yards.

The minimum side yard setback shall be five (5) feet.

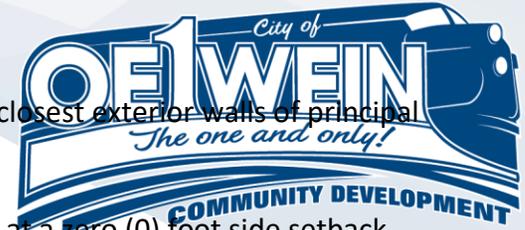
One (1) side yard may have a setback of zero (0) feet from the interior side lot line, provided the opposite side yard complies with Subsection F of this section.

In no case shall both side yards be less than five (5) feet unless otherwise permitted under approved townhouse or attached dwelling provisions.

**F. Minimum Building Separation:**

1. A minimum separation distance of ten (10) feet shall be maintained between principal structures located on separate lots.





2. Building separation shall be measured as the horizontal distance between the closest exterior walls of principal structures.
3. Where an existing or proposed principal structure on an adjacent lot is located at a zero (0) foot side setback along a common property line, any new principal structure constructed on the adjoining lot shall maintain a minimum ten (10) foot setback from that same property line.
4. Compliance with the ten (10) foot minimum building separation requirement shall supersede the minimum five (5) foot side yard requirement where necessary.

#### **G. Building Code Compliance.**

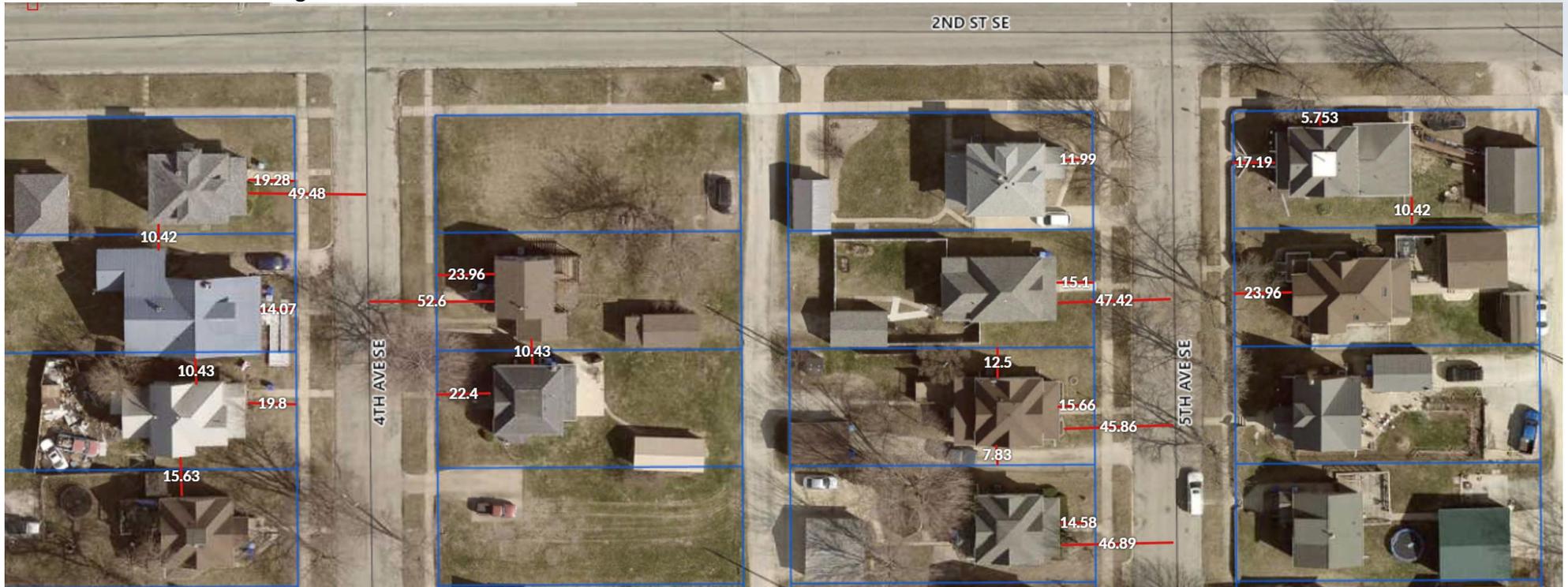
Any structure located less than five (5) feet from an interior side lot line shall comply with applicable fire-resistance rating and opening protection requirements of the adopted International Residential Code. Nothing in this section shall reduce or eliminate building code requirements governing fire separation distance.

#### **H. Corner Lots.**

The side yard adjacent to a public street on a corner lot shall not be eligible for a zero (0) foot side setback and shall comply with the required street side yard setback for the district.



An existing area in Oelwein SE area



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Another Oelwein Existing Area



A development in Cedar Falls



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Another Cedar Falls Development Area



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