

# QUICKNOTES

*Planning fundamentals  
for public officials and  
engaged citizens*

*This PAS QuickNotes was prepared by  
APA research staff with contributions  
from national planning law experts.*

## Understanding Planned Unit Development

A planned unit development (PUD) is a large, integrated development adhering to a comprehensive plan and located on a single tract of land or on two or more tracts of land that may be separated only by a street or other right-of-way. PUD is a form of development that, although conceived decades ago, can be used today to advance a number of important smart growth and sustainability objectives. PUD has a number of distinct advantages over conventional lot-by-lot development. Properly written and administered, PUD can offer a degree of flexibility that allows creativity in land planning, site design, and the protection of environmentally sensitive lands not possible with conventional subdivision and land development practices. Moreover, properly applied, PUD is capable of mixing residential and nonresidential land uses, providing broader housing choices, allowing more compact development, permanently preserving common open space, reducing vehicle trips, and providing pedestrian and bicycle facilities. In exchange for design flexibility, developers are better able to provide amenities and infrastructure improvements, and find it easier to accommodate environmental and scenic attributes.

PUD is particularly useful when applied to large developments approved in phases over a number of years, such as master planned communities. PUDs are typically approved by the local legislative body (city council, board of supervisors, county commissioners) after a comprehensive review and recommendation by the planning board or commission, which normally includes a public hearing. Communities considering adoption of a PUD ordinance should be mindful that while planning boards and commissions are given a good deal of discretionary power in acting on PUDs, appropriate standards are essential. Moreover, a delicate balance must be found between the desire to be flexible in order to take into account unique site characteristics and the need to spell out concrete standards and criteria.

### WHY PLANNED UNIT DEVELOPMENT IS POPULAR

PUD has grown increasingly popular, in part because standard subdivision and zoning ordinances have serious limitations. Many older vintage zoning ordinances prohibit mixed use. Single family, multifamily, and nonresidential uses are often not allowed in the same zoning district. Older conventional ordinances also contain uniform site development standards that tend to produce monotonous outcomes. Subdivision control ordinances deal with narrow concerns, such as street, curb, and sidewalk standards and lot and block layout. The lack of meaningful amounts of well-placed, accessible open space and recreational amenities is another shortfall of conventional development controls.

### TYPES OF PLANNED UNIT DEVELOPMENT

Planned unit developments can take many forms, ranging from modest residential developments where housing units are clustered and open space is provided, to mixed use master planned communities that cover thousands of acres.

**Simple Residential Cluster.** Simple cluster subdivisions allow smaller lots on some parts of the site in exchange for permanently preserved common open space elsewhere on the site. Planning boards or commissions normally require the open space to be configured in a manner to protect sensitive natural features such as streams and riparian areas, vernal pools, ponds, and lakes, and to take into account hazard areas and areas of steep slope.

Communities may either limit the gross density of the tract to what would be permitted under conventional zoning, or may choose to offer a density bonus allowing more units than would other-

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wise be allowed. By allowing a bonus, the community can require a greater percentage of the tract as common open space. Theoretically, communities can choose to allow any residential type (or combination of types) on a parcel in the cluster plan—single-family houses, attached houses, town houses, garden apartments, or high rises. As a practical matter, however, cluster subdivisions are developed mostly for single-family homes on individual lots.

**Mixed Uses.** PUD builds on the simple residential cluster idea by allowing nonresidential uses, often at higher densities. Retail and service establishments, restaurants, schools, libraries, churches, recreation facilities, offices, and even industrial uses can be included in PUDs. Downtown or village center development with apartments above shops and live-work arrangements are also possible. The extreme case is the master planned community, which usually involves substantial acreage and combines employment, office, retail, and entertainment centers with associated self-contained neighborhoods. This can include diverse housing types as well as retail, entertainment and office centers.

### WHICH ORDINANCE, WHICH AGENCY?

Individual state planning statutes control how communities handle the deliberative process leading to a decision about a PUD. In most states a PUD provision can be made part of the zoning ordinance or it may be written as a stand-alone ordinance. In either case, the decision to approve, approve with conditions, or disapprove a PUD falls to the legislative branch of local government. Some communities permit a PUD through a discretionary review process, such as a conditional or special use permit. These permits can be approved by the legislative body, planning commission, or board of adjustment, depending on the state enabling legislation and local policies. Some communities provide for the administrative approval of mixed use developments that normally require a discretionary PUD process.

The zoning ordinance is the most appropriate place to locate planned unit development regulations. Basic legislative decisions on use and density are normally the responsibility of the legislative body. Street design and infrastructure could also be resolved through PUD approval, though these considerations are normally built into a unified development ordinance. Decisions about plan details can be left to the planning board or commission and planning staff.

### ZONING FOR PUD

Communities face a number of questions when deciding how to fit planned unit development regulations into their zoning ordinances. One alternative is to provide for planned unit development as-of-right. Under this guideline the ordinance would specify the requirements for a planned unit development, and discretionary review and approval procedures would not be necessary.

Stand-alone PUD ordinances are now fairly common. Although there are variations, a typical ordinance will include a purpose clause; a statement of the type or types of PUD that are authorized; zoning procedures; and standards for approval. The ordinance may contain definitions.

### CONSISTENCY WITH THE COMPREHENSIVE PLAN

Consistency with the comprehensive plan should be required, especially if the PUD has a major effect on growth and development in the community and on public facilities. This will be true of master planned communities. Many statutes now require zoning to be consistent with a comprehensive plan, and consistency can be required by ordinance even if there is no statutory mandate. □

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