# memo

to     **Kevin Cook and Megan Gibb, Multnomah County**

from    **Emma-Quin Smith, Carrie Brennecke, and Matt Hastie, MIG**

re     **Focus Group Interview Summary, Multnomah County Code Improvement Project Task 3.2 and DLCD/Multnomah County Clear & Objective Standards Project, Task 2.5**

date   **05/22/2025**

## Introduction

Matt Hastie, Carrie Brennecke, and Emma-Quin Smith from MIG, conducted six group or individual focus group interviews with a total of 10 people to help identify potential opportunities for improving the County's Zoning Code. County staff attended two of the focus group interviews to provide additional project context. Interview participants included a variety of community members involved with the provision of housing and other development in Multnomah County, as well as local residents, public agency representatives and other interested parties. The interviews were conducted by MIG via Zoom meetings or phone. Those interviewed included:

- **Planning professionals** with experience using the Multnomah County Code and preparing or submitting land use applications in the County, as well as in other codes throughout Oregon and California.
- **Public agency representatives** from Metro, the Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT) and the East Multnomah County Soil and Water Conservation District.
- **Private citizens** who have submitted development applications, a former County planner, a former planning commissioner/applicant and other community members.

## Key Themes

Below is a summary of recurring themes and comments originating from the interviews. A full list of interview questions is included in Appendix A.

### Application Process Challenges and Opportunities

- Lot of record verification process is long and onerous. Interviewees felt it requires too much paperwork to verify a lot that, in some cases, has been verified many times before. There should be a more clear and objective verification process. A former planner notes that Multnomah County applies these requirements to virtually every application while other counties apply them in only limited circumstances.
- Permit processing timelines are long and can lead to other project delays related to labor and materials availability, loss of funding, and seasonal weather challenges.
- The "why" of some steps of the process is unclear and leads to frustration. For example, an interviewee noted that it seems redundant to require a zoning review after a land use

decision process is complete. It feels like there should be opportunities to reduce the number of steps in the process.
- Application filing fees are reasonable, but the amount of consultant time and effort needed to address the application requirements (i.e. geotechnical surveys, environmental reviews, etc.) represents a substantial investment.
- There is not a straightforward way to change or update applications once they have been submitted. The application process seems to assume that applicants are ready to build, essentially combining the building permitting and entitlement process into one application, which makes it difficult to make changes to projects that are in earlier stages of design or planning.
- Planners sometimes deem applications incomplete for minor inaccuracies which can be easily fixed without resubmitting the application or for issues that are related to compliance with planning standards, rather than submittal requirements. This can slow down the review process.
- Permit extension and expiration timelines are not clear.
- It would be helpful to have an opportunity to create a fast track for partner agency permits that have tight funding timelines and higher levels of project oversight in addition to the County.
- An easy-to-understand roadmap of the application process with a clear list of application requirements available on the County website would be helpful at the outset of projects.
- Create more paths to type 1 review and expand standards for developments that have minimal impacts.
- County planners interpret many code provisions very literally, often leading to longer processes and challenges for applicants.
- Participants generally complemented County staff on their efforts working with applicants and the code. They say that staff appear to do the best they can with limited resources and too much work. Improving the code would help free up their time and reduce their potential to be overwhelmed.
- It would be helpful to applicants to have a staffed in-person development services counter where it would be a one stop shop to talk with staff and get assistance on various applications and permits.
- Locating all the applicable permit requirements is challenging for applicants. Developing "How to" guides for different types of developments with checklists and references to the application requirements would help applicants navigate the process.

## Permit Application Requirements
- Review criteria are redundant and there are multiple paths to take. It's unclear which path to take and why there are so many findings to make for straightforward criteria.
- Many review criteria are disproving negatives which leads to making redundant findings and lots of text.
- Full compliance review process for a small change to a property is onerous and causes major cost and delays to applicants, especially those who are engaged in relatively small projects or limited actions.
- Code is more restrictive than it needs to be. Some requirements on the application form are nearly impossible to fill out at the time of application submittal (e.g., the number of dump trucks to be used for fill or removal on a geohazards application).

- Some types of requirements may not belong in the development code and are very challenging for planners to administer such as erosion control and ground disturbance (e.g., grading and filling). In other jurisdictions, these are handled through the building permit application process or by engineering staff. Given the technical nature of these requirements, it is challenging for land use planners to address them. Stormwater management requirements have similar issues.
- The code prioritizes conservation and Goal 5, which interviewees felt was overall a good thing. However, this leads to a mismatch in how restrictive standards are for relatively low impact developments. With changes to jurisdiction boundaries (i.e., less of the County remaining in urban areas), the code does not need to manage as much urban development as it once did and could be updated to reflect this. Meeting participants also note that Significant Environmental Concern overlay standards are not clearly written and are difficult both to comply with by applicants and administer by staff.
- The permit application online system does not allow right-of-way (ROW) to be selected as the project location which leads to challenges for ODOT-led projects.

## Code Format and Accessibility
- Two-column format is hard to follow.
- Code narrative is verbose and full of "legalese" which makes it challenging for a non-planning professional to understand.
- Many cross-references make it difficult to keep track of all development and application requirements that must be met.
- Minimally hyperlinked PDF is difficult to navigate. Interviewees indicated that it would be helpful to have the code hosted online on a searchable, easy to navigate platform similar to MuniCode.
- Hard to find the Comprehensive Plan, which is referenced in the list of Planning Commission review criteria.
- Graphics that depict standards, processes, and definitions would help make the code more user-friendly.
- Significant Environmental Concern (SEC) overlay zone requirements are hard to follow and it is hard to discern which type of SEC application applies to which property, where rules apply, etc.
- Although the code is very long, it provides little direction for applicants or users in terms of how to understand and navigate it. County planners spend a lot of time helping applicants with this aspect of the code.

## **Appendix A: Focus Group Discussion Questions**

- What has been your experience using the County's Zoning Code (MCC Chapter 39)? In what ways have you used the zoning code?

- Have you worked on development projects in Multnomah County? What types (land divisions, site plan review, smaller projects)?

- Have you coordinated with the County to review development projects in Multnomah County or worked on development projects in the County? What types of projects or applications (land divisions, site plan review, smaller projects)?

- Are there examples of specific standards that you have found to be unclear or that you consider to be barriers to the development of housing or new businesses in Multnomah County?

- Some of the areas our team and County staff have identified as topics for improvement include definitions, lot of record verification process, format and organization of code, conflicting information in different sections, cross references, procedures for variances (e.g., variances vs. adjustments), and application criteria and processes. Do you have any thoughts about standards or processes related to these items in particular? Which of these seem like they should be the highest priority to address? (Please provide specific examples.)

- Do you have any overall or specific suggestions for how the Code can be improved to make it easier to use and/or reduce barriers?

- Are there parts or provisions that work well compared to other jurisdictions?

- Are there any types of housing either not allowed now or that are challenging to develop that would benefit from changes to the Code? If so, what and how?

- Do you have recommendations to improve the accessibility of the Code and related documents, forms, etc.?

- Do you think the processes for submitting and reviewing applications work the way they should? Is the speed of processing of applications appropriate?

- Who else should be involved in this process?

- What is the best way to communicate with you and get further feedback from you about this process?

- Is there anything else we should be thinking about as we move forward?

## Appendix B: Focus Group Participants

Kelley Beamer, East Multnomah County Soil and Water Conservation District

Gary Shepherd, Metro Parks & Nature

Terra Lingley, Oregon Department of Transportation

Brian Silveira, Applicant

Bradlee Hersey, Applicant

Aldo Rodriguez, Former Mult. Co. Planner

Victoria Purvine, County Planning Commissioner

Carol Chesarek, Forest Park Neighborhood Association, Land Use Chair

Claudio and Ronda Valenzuela, Applicants

Sam Huck, Applicant/Consultant