



UDO - FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

1. What is a "unified development ordinance" or "UDO"?

A unified development ordinance (UDO) is a consolidation of the County's development-related regulations into one "unified" document. The UDO combines regulations related to zoning, landscaping, open space, density, subdivision and infrastructure, lighting, signs, watershed and floodplain regulations and other design standards into a single document, which aligns with the North Carolina General Statutes found in NCGS 160D.

The regulations in the UDO implement the Catawba County Comprehensive Plan, which the County Board of Commissioners adopted in April 2024. The comprehensive plan is an expression of the community's vision for Catawba County over the next 15 years or so.

2. Doesn't Catawba County already have a UDO?

Yes. Catawba County adopted a UDO in 2007. This would be an update to the UDO currently in effect.

3. Why is the UDO being updated now?

The UDO is being updated to streamline current processes, make the code more user friendly, and incorporate the policies set forth in the Comprehensive Plan adopted in 2024.

4. What geographic area does the UDO apply to?

The UDO regulates land use and development in unincorporated Catawba County. It does not apply in the incorporated cities and towns of Hickory, Newton, Conover, Maiden, Claremont, Long View, Catawba and Brookford.

5. How will this UDO be more user-friendly?

Changes are proposed to the UDO which make the document easier to use and understand. These changes include:

- Reorganization to consolidate administrative processes, zoning districts, development regulations, nonconformities, violations and enforcement, definitions and floodplain regulations;
- A digital document format that allows quicker access through use of

hyperlinks;

- More tables and illustrations to show standards and outline processes;
- Modernized graphics to illustrate important principles and standards; and
- Updated definitions.

6. What are the main differences between the new UDO and the current UDO?

The most significant differences between the current UDO and the proposed UDO include:

- Establishing density maximums for multi-family residential development;
- Increasing standards for cluster subdivisions –allow only when public water and sewer are available, increase minimum lot size, front setbacks and open space, require sidewalks on both sides of the street;
- Subdivisions of 75 lots or more would be required to request rezoning to a Planned Development (legislative public process). Subdivisions of 74 lots or less would be considered through a “by-right” subdivision review process;
- Requiring applicants to hold community meetings for all conditional and special district rezoning requests;
- Establishing tree preservation requirements within new residential and commercial developments;
- Consolidating uses and introducing standards for new uses;
- Increasing open space requirements in residential developments;
- Increasing tree planting requirements within landscape buffers;
- Increasing percentage requirements for active and passive open space within subdivisions;
- Updating flood control regulations consistent with federal regulations;
- Allowing property line adjustment betterment;
- Updating procedures for clarity and compliance with state enabling legislation.

7. Will the zoning of my property change?

No. Amendments to the Catawba County Official Zoning Map are not proposed.

8. How do I tell whether the UDO would affect what I can do with my property?

If you know the zoning district of your property, you can refer to the use table in Section 44-227: Use Table (Table 227-2) of the draft UDO. This table lists uses that are allowed in each zoning district. You can review the uses allowed in your zoning district to see if your current or planned use is allowed. If you do not know the zoning district that applies to your property, you can find that information on the [County's Zoning Map](#) or by contacting Planning Department staff at 828-465-8380.

Other requirements applicable to most development include setbacks (Table 204-1, Dimensional Standards). Some developments are also subject to site design standards such as landscaping and screening (Article 3, Division 3), tree preservation (Section 44-322), outdoor lighting (Section 44-315), and building design (Article 2, Division 3 and 4).

9. If a new regulation makes an existing structure or use of my property “non-conforming,” what does that mean?

A nonconforming use or structure is one that was established before the rules were in place or was allowed by different rules that were in place at the time the use began or the structure was built, but is not allowed by the new regulations. For example, a structure built before setbacks were established that does not meet current setback requirements would be nonconforming.

The proposed UDO update allows uses and structures legally established under current rules to continue without any changes. If changes are proposed to a nonconforming use or structure after the new UDO is in effect, the new rules would apply to that proposed change.

Article 4, Nonconformities, in the draft UDO explains the limitations on development and redevelopment for nonconforming lots and structures. If you have questions about whether your lot or structure is nonconforming, feel free to contact Planning Department staff at 828-465-8380 to discuss your situation.

10. How will the County make a final decision on the UDO?

The Catawba County Board of Commissioners (BOC) is the ultimate authority responsible for formally approving and adopting the proposed UDO.

The County will hold an informal public drop-in on Tuesday, September 22, 2026 where community members can review the proposed changes, ask questions of staff, and provide

feedback.

On Monday, September 28, 2026 the Planning Board will hold a public hearing to review the proposed UDO and make a recommendation to the BOC.

On Monday, October 19, 2026, the BOC will hold a public hearing to consider the proposed draft UDO and make a final decision on its adoption.

The proposed UDO is available for review at:

https://www.catawbacountync.gov/site/assets/files/11844/2026_09_11_cwb_draft_udo_public_draft.pdf.

11. How are the perspectives of residents incorporated into the UDO process?

Public feedback has guided this project from the beginning. Perspectives gathered through community surveys, public meetings, and targeted focus group helped form the policies and recommendations found within the 2024 Catawba County Comprehensive Plan. Another round of public surveys and focus groups with stakeholders (design consultants, real estate professionals, business owners, surveyors, builders, etc.) formed the basis of the proposed revisions. The proposed UDO was drafted using information from the Comprehensive Plan, meetings, an online public survey, and staff feedback.

12. Does the UDO stop growth?

No, the UDO does not prohibit growth in any areas of unincorporated Catawba County. The UDO is intended to help the County have a balanced and deliberate approach to development while preserving aspects of life that make Catawba County a desirable place to live.

13. How will the UDO affect future growth?

The UDO will facilitate growth where it is appropriate and at levels that align with the recommendations in the 2024 Comprehensive Plan by promoting responsible land use, accommodating population growth, fostering economic development and preserving environmental integrity and community character.

14. Does the UDO address infrastructure?

The UDO includes standards for subdivision road design, stormwater management, and connectivity between developments. For example, it establishes when developers must build roads, how roads are designed and constructed, which developments must connect to public water and sewer infrastructure, and when improvements like sidewalks are required.

15. What does "by-right" mean?

“By-right” means a particular use or development type is allowed in a zoning district without legislative or quasi-judicial approval (such as a rezoning or special use permit). By-right development still requires administrative County approval, such as a zoning permit or preliminary plat approval, to ensure the request meets basic County requirements. By-right approvals do not allow for County discretion in determining whether the permit should be approved, so long as the minimum criteria in the ordinance are met.

The UDO sets clear standards so that numerous uses and developments are allowed by-right, making the process faster and more predictable for everyone.

16. How does the UDO impact developments that are already approved?

New rules do not apply to previously approved development. New rules would apply to new development or expansions to existing development.