City of La Crosse, Wisconsin

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LA CROSSE ZONING AND SUBDIVISION CODE UPDATE

Overview
The project team has started the existing conditions analysis. This covers a review of existing City plans and policies, as well as an analysis of the existing code.

The project had its first engagement push on the Forward La Crosse website. River Travel Media saw great engagement with the post. There was an excellent open rate, engagement, and click-throughs, and an increase in web traffic to the site. The next pushes will include zoning 101 content to start educating the community about the importance of zoning and this update.

The engagement team is still collaborating with Habitat for Humanity and will have two scheduled events, during housing week. They are scheduled for 12-1 on April 30th and 5pm-6pm on May 1st. In-between those scheduled events we are planning on hosting some pop-up events around town, and having stakeholder discussions. More information to come on the programming of the events.

Attached for the commissions review is a short summary of the existing conditions review and a diagnostic summary of the residential zoning districts.

Project Next Steps

- Finalize zoning 101 content for public engagement pushes.
- Finalize community survey
- Continuation of Existing Conditions Analysis

Memo 1

To: City of La Crosse

From: MSA Zoning Code team

Subject: Existing Conditions Analysis Summary

Date: February 26, 2025

The City of La Crosse has several plans with goals and policies pertaining to zoning. Our analysis of these plans allows us to ensure continuity between policy plans and the code. This memo provides a very brief summary of our analysis of the 2040 Comprehensive Plan, Imagine 2040 La Crosse Downtown Plan, and the 2024 Housing Study.

The Comprehensive Plan outlines the importance of aligning the updated code with the Future Land Use (Neighborhood, Districts, Corridors) Map. The NDC organizes the City into a mix of uses rather than isolated land uses, which opens the opportunity for this code update to integrate form based sections. The form-based approach focuses on the physical relationship of development as the existing built form and how it interacts with the public.

There were several elements of the comprehensive plan that had recommendations relevant to the code update.

1. Environmental
    a. Urban Agriculture and having code amendments that allow for community gardens, local food production and urban farming.
    b. Wellhead protection and code amendments for setbacks
    c. Stormwater Management and Impervious Surface Coverage – amending ordinances decrease allowed impervious coverage.
    d. Shoreland and Floodplain regulation updates to align with State Statute.
2. Historic Preservation (also a big theme in the Imagine 2040 La Crosse Downtown Plan)
    a. Update ordinances to prevent demolition and establish design standards to integrate new construction in those areas.
    b. “the maintenance and care of older buildings should continue to remain a priority for preserving the history of La Crosse” – Community Engagement from Imagine 2040 La Crosse Downtown Plan
3. Housing
    a. Affordability
    b. Infill Development (also theme in Imagine 2040 La Crosse Downtown Plan)
        i. Surface lot re-use
        ii. Neighborhood infill
        iii. Allow for mix of housing types
    c. Property conditions

The City of La Crosse Housing Study from 2024 also outlines several very specific code updates, and provides great direction. In summary.

1. Allowing two-unit homes by right in R-1 and amend the # of bedrooms rule.
2. Provide a better understanding in the code of what mix use is and allow them by right in commercial and high density areas.
3. Provide clearer language in the code update.
4. Reduce minimum lot sizes in R-1, R-2, R-3
5. Reduce residential parking to one space per unit
6. Allow more options for Accessory Dwelling Units.

MSA Memo 2

To: City of La Crosse

From: MSA Zoning Code team

Subject: Diagnostic Summary: Residential Zoning Districts
(Commercial, Industrial and Subdivision review pending)

Date: February 21, 2025

The La Crosse Zoning Code is found in Chapter 115 of the Municipal Code and is defined by seven articles and contains the following:

- A total of 211 pages
- 21 districts and 2 overlay districts
- Definitions, penalties, administration, appeals and amendments are found in Articles I and II
- District regulations are found in Article IV; dimensional standards that apply for each district begin on page 26.
- Overlay regulations are defined in Article V.
- Generally, urban standards (and dimensional requirements) are written out in extended sentences and are often difficult to follow.
- It seems, in general, that most of the residential districts share dimensional standards and regulations subject to different time periods, going back to the 1938 edition of the code.
- The word 'special' is used in the title for the R-3 and R-6 districts but it isn't clear exactly what this means or designates.

A high level review of the R districts follows; titles are spelled out as they appear in the body of the code.

Agriculture and Exclusive Agriculture Districts
The code includes an AG district and an Exclusive AG district. The AG district's purpose is to act as a preserve for future urban development. The Exclusive AG district is intended to preserve lands for food and fiber production.

R1 District
Unlike the AG and EX AG districts, the R1 district does not include a direct purpose statement. The R1 Single Family district does allow two-family dwellings provided they were in existence on September 13, 1984 with an odd requirement that a new two family dwelling can replace an existing two family dwelling if it is limited to 2 bedrooms in each unit; no additional bedrooms can be added I any case.

There is no direct mention of lot area and dimensional standards except for the reference to the 'Residence District' (this is a reference to the 1938 zoning code which included two residential districts: Residence and Multiple Dwelling) - apparently this is assumed to refer to the R2 District and these standards apply to R1.

Language and requirements like this this will need to be resolved regarding the uses in the R1 district:

- *Two or more family dwellings provided that such were in existence on April 10, 1997, have not discontinued the number of dwelling units for a period of 12 months or more, and are located within the area bounded by 9th Street-Farnam Street-east-west alley north of Green Bay Street-West Avenue, and*

provided further that such two or more family dwellings may be replaced by another two or more family dwellings as long as such replacement shall not contain more units or bedrooms than existed on April 10, 1997 and other applicable building and zoning code requirements for the R-1 District are met.

R2 District

Like the R1 District, the R2 District does not have a specific purpose statement. It allows two family dwellings but only if they contain no more than three bedrooms per unit. It allows churches that were in existence on August 10, 1989. As in other districts, language makes multiple references to specific dates in time that provide a threshold for permitted uses.

Language and requirements like this this will need to be resolved regarding the uses in the R1 district:

- *The side yard regulations in subsections (3)a. and b. of this section shall apply to all lots including corner lots, except that in the case of a reversed corner lot which faces intersecting streets, the side yard on the street side of such reversed corner lot shall have a width of not less than 50 percent of the front yard depth required on the lots in the rear of such reversed corner lot, and no accessory building on such reversed corner lot shall project beyond the front building line of the lots in the rear of such reversed corner lot; provided, however, that this regulation for reversed corner lots shall not have the effect of reducing the buildable width for the main building to less than 26 feet, or for an accessory building to less than 20 feet, on any lot of record August 27, 1938.*

R3 Special Residence District

This district is meant to allow single family, two-family and up to four or more dwellings provided they were in existence on April 10, 1997. Lot and dimensional standards are the same or similar to R1 and R2.

Standards for yards are laboriously overwritten (similar to R1 and R2) and difficult to interpret in a single reading. These will benefit from summary and simplification:

a. *On every lot in the Special Residence District, there shall be two side yards, one on each side of the building, and except as hereinafter provided, neither of such side yards shall be less than six feet in width, and provided further that for any main building other than a one-family dwelling neither of such side yards shall be less than seven feet in width, except that lots occupied by each attached dwelling unit which is located within a single structure, which is attached along a lot line which is approximately perpendicular to the street right-of-way line, shall not be required to meet this requirement other than the outer side yards of the structure in which the two attached dwelling units are located shall not be less than seven feet in width.*
b. *On any lot having a width of less than 44 feet, and of record on August 27, 1938, the width of no side yard shall be less than that heretofore prescribed less one-fourth foot for each foot said lot is less than 44 feet in width; provided further, however, that no side yard shall be less than four feet in width in any case.*
c. *The side yard regulations in subsections (2)a and b of this section shall apply to all lots including corner lots, except that in the case of a reversed corner lot which faces intersecting streets, the side yard on the street side of such reversed corner lot shall have a width of not less than 50 percent of the front yard depth required on the lots in the rear of such reversed corner lot, and no accessory building on such reversed corner lot shall project beyond the front building line of the lots in the rear of such reversed corner lot; provided, however, that this regulation for reversed corner lots shall not have the effect of reducing the buildable width for the main building to less than 26 feet, or for an accessory building to less than 20 feet, on any lot of record August 27, 1938.*

Low Density Multiple Dwelling District (R4)

This district is shown as the R4 district on the map but is not titled as that in the body of the code and allows multiple dwelling buildings that contain more than 4 units. Similar to the other R districts language and standards regarding lot area and yards are very overwritten and can benefit from simplification and more direct language.

Multiple Dwelling District (R5)
This district is "nested" into the R4 and thus any use allowed in R4 is permitted in this district. Uses include boarding house, room houses, fraternities and sororities (occupied by less than 6 persons). Height is allowed up to 55 feet and may exceed this per section 115-390 (Art. VII Supplemental Regulations).

R-6 Special Multiple Dwelling District
This district is "nested" into the R5 and thus any use allowed in R5 is permitted in this district. Uses include boarding house, room houses, fraternities and sororities (occupied by less than 6 persons). Height is allowed up to 55 feet and may exceed this per section 115-390 (Art. VII Supplemental Regulations).

Washburn Neighborhood District (R-7)
The purpose of the district is to encourage people to work and live in the City of La Crosse and will encourage single family dwellings. The district standards and regulations are "nested" in the R1 district (but excludes section 114-142(a) (10). A unique condition in this district is the requirement of Architectural Control that is to encourage physical development to a higher degree of aesthetic satisfaction per approval of the Design Review Board.

Map Diagrams
In a separate document we reviewed lot sizes for R-1, R-2, R-3 and the Washburn zoning districts based on the threshold of 5000 sf, lots that fall between 5000 -7200 sf and lots over 7200 sf. Lots under 5000 sf are shown in red and based on how the districts are defined many of these lots, we assume, were platted in 1938 or earlier so are not technically nonconforming. Nevertheless there is a distinct pattern (and a significant number) of smaller lots that seem to be functioning well today. More analysis is needed which will help determine how best to define appropriate standards.

R-1 = 10,833 Parcels
>7,200 sqft = 4,878 Parcels (45%)
5,000-7,200 sqft = 4,454 Parcels (41%)
<5,000 sqft = 1,501 Parcels (13.9%)

R-2 = 1,298 Parcels
>7,200 sqft = 504 Parcels (38.8%)
5,000-7,200 sqft = 522 Parcels (40.2%)
<5,000 sqft = 272 Parcels (20.9%)

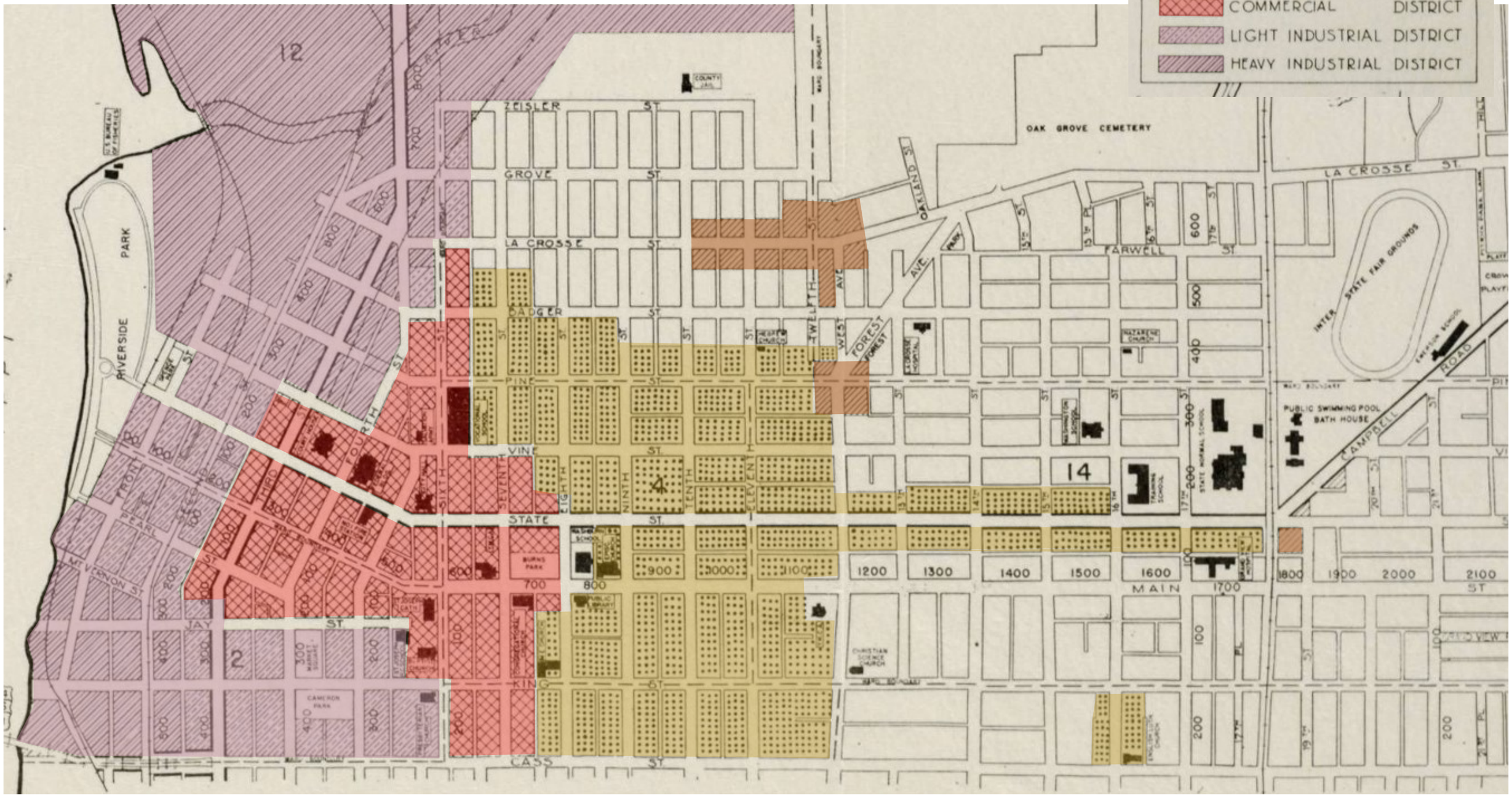
R-3 = 4 Parcels
>7,200 sqft = 1 Parcel (25%)
5,000-7,200 sqft = 2 Parcels (50%)
<5,000 sqft = 1 Parcel (25%)

Washburn Neighborhood District = 451 Parcels
>7,200 sqft = 185 Parcels (41%)
5,000-7,200 sqft = 111 Parcels (24.6%)
<5,000 sqft = 155 Parcels (34.4%)

Attachments
Attachment 2.1 - Summary Table of Dimensional Standards

Attachment 2.2 Historic Zoning Map
Also attached as a zoning map from 1938 that shows the very simple zoning organization of industrial, commercial, multi-family and single family zoning districts. This simplistic approach may have some benefits as we continue to consider regulations and how best to apply them.

Attachment 2.1: Summary of Dimensional Standards

	AG	EX AG	R1	R2	R3	R4	R5	R6	Washburn
lot area	7200	35ac							
before 1938 less than:	5000sf		5000sf	5000sf	5000 sf	5000 sf	5000 sf	5000sf	5000sf
between 1938 & 1966:	5000+sf		5000+sf	5000+sf	5000+ sf	5000 sf	5000+ sf	5000+sf	5000+sf
after 1966:	7200sf		7200sf	7200sf	7200 sf	7200 sf	7200 sf	7200 sf	7200sf
other		20,000sf							
lot area per per family					1800 sf/unit	1800sf/unit	1500sf/unit	400sf/unit	
front yard			25 fyt	25 ft	25 ft	20 ft	20ft	15 ft	25 ft
side yard		6 ft	6 ft	6 ft	6 ft	6 ft	6 ft	6 ft	6 ft
lots as of 1938 or before			4 ft	4 ft					4 ft
rear yard		6 ft	20% depth	20% depth	20 % depth	20% depth	20% depth	20% depth	20% depth
max. height		35 ft	35 ft	35 ft	35 ft	35 ft	55 ft	100 ft	35 ft
max. height, other		2x fr nearest					55ft		
		lot line							
public street frontage	min 30 ft	none	min. 30 ft	min. 30 ft	min 30 ft	none	min 30 st	min 30 ft	min 30 ft
court width not to exceed							24 ft	24 ft	
architectural control									Design Rev Bd.

Attachment 2.2: Excerpt from 1938 Zoning Map