

Minimum Lot Size Reduction & Resilience

Minimum Lot Size Reduction

- Reducing minimum lot size allows for denser, more affordable development and reduces negative environmental impacts due to sprawl.
- Structuring zoning to lower minimum lot sizes near transportation hubs encourages transportation-oriented development.

Minimum Lot Size zoning codes require developable land parcels to be a minimum size per home in residential areas. In Connecticut, a study by Desegregate CT found that 81% of residential zoned land required minimum lot sizes of one-acre or larger. Larger minimum lot sizes allow fewer homes to be built within an area, resulting in constrained housing supply, housing cost inflation, urban sprawl, and fragmentation of forests. Larger lot sizes lead to auto-centric communities, contributing to high emissions of greenhouse gas from transportation, making statewide emission reduction goals harder to achieve. Large lot zoning spreads development over a larger area, increasing road, sewer, and utility costs.

Minimum Lot Size as a Tool for Municipal Climate Resilience

Municipalities with smaller minimum lot sized zones in appropriate areas can be more resilient to climate impacts and are more equitable than those with only large lot zoning.

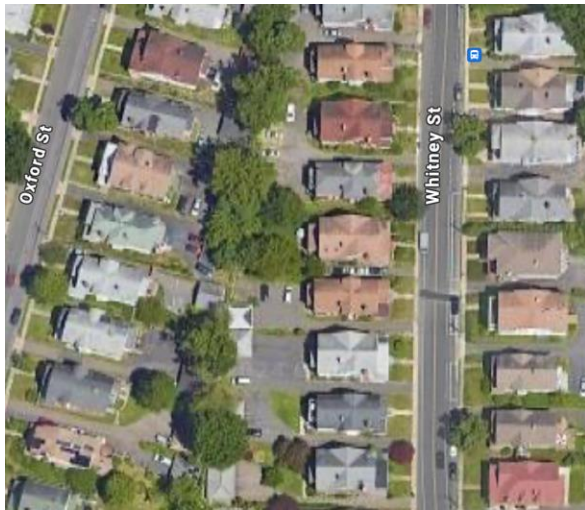
By reducing minimum lot sizes, development of forest and agricultural land can be reduced, and municipalities can increase housing without sacrificing natural resources. Smaller lot sizes can form clusters of moderate density development and when paired with open space or watershed/riparian corridor protections, preserving ecosystem services, and increasing climate resilience. For example, open space can be used for controlled flooding in areas prone to increased flooding, or it can be used to increase tree canopy growth in areas prone to excessive heat. Open space can create additional community recreational space, increase wildlife habitat and allow for nature-based solutions to climate impacts.

Smaller minimum lot size zones near transportation hubs allow more residents to use multimodal transportation options, reducing the need for cars, and thus reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Desegregate CT's Issue Brief on small lot zoning found average households in the 68 towns in Connecticut with the largest minimum lot sizes had 36.1% higher annual transportation related carbon emissions than average households in the other 101 towns in the state with small minimum lot sizes. Adopting smaller minimum lot sizes and compact residential and mixed-use development zones would allow for more variety in housing type, fewer transportation related GHG emissions, and could foster 'social resilience', an important component of community cohesivity.



Reduced Minimum Lot Size & Housing

Larger lot size minimums can create barriers to home ownership due to increased land costs. By reducing minimum lot sizes in some zones, municipalities can see an overlap in the goals of housing affordability and climate resilience. With smaller lot sizes, owning or renting property becomes more affordable and addresses historic racial and economic injustice. When small lot zoning is encouraged near transportation corridors, residents are less reliant on individual vehicles. Small lot zoning can also be appropriate for diverse ‘missing middle’ housing types in addition to single-family homes like duplexes, triplexes, townhouses or small apartment style housing as infill. Clustering small lots into ‘cottage communities’ with shared common spaces also promotes neighborhood cohesion- an important component in overall community climate resilience.



Aerial view of Hartford CT neighborhood with pre-existing small lot development, not currently allowed in much of the state. Google Maps, 2024.

Reducing Minimum Floor Size Area

Reducing minimum floor size area is another way to increase density without increasing use of land. While building codes control the minimum size of a home or multi family unit, zoning codes can also regulate minimum floor areas, often setting minimums larger than allowed by building code. This can be an equity issue forcing building of larger, more expensive homes and exclude people from modest means from living in an area. Reducing floor size area can increase climate resilience by allowing greater diversity of housing and greater density in low climate risk areas. Allowing “tiny homes” on smaller lots can be a way of expanding affordable housing options while increasing future climate resilience.

Smaller Lot Size and Environmental Preservation

Smaller lot sized zones in appropriate areas can allow municipalities to encourage the development of housing without sacrificing land preservation. While parts of Connecticut remain heavily forested, particularly the northwest and northeast, with large lot zoning, core forested areas are unprotected except by the high cost of land purchase and development. By designating areas for smaller lot sizes, intact core forest can be identified for future preservation either by municipal acquisition for open space or through conservation easements.

Connecticut has defined Core Forests as unfragmented forest land 300 feet or more from the boundary non-forest land. Core forests are crucial wildlife habitats that protect biodiversity and natural resources and provide recreational opportunities. Core forests have suffered fragmentation from urban sprawl and road network expansions influenced by large lot zoning. Poor water quality and heavier runoff can result from the loss of core forests. By reducing minimum lot sizes and encouraging reforestation, core forests can provide environmental benefits and influence natural climate resilience by carbon sequestration and absorption of stormwater, while protecting wildlife populations dependent on these resources.

California

The state of California passed two zoning reform bills in 2021. [SB9](#) permits homeowners to subdivide their lot into two parcels and develop duplexes on single-family lots, reducing minimum lot size to 1,200 sq.ft., though localities can adopt smaller lot sizes with approval. [SB 10](#) permits local governments to rezone land parcels within transit or urban districts to up to ten housing units, allowing for increased density in specific areas and by-passing minimum lot size regulation. These bills create more affordable housing in areas that encourage walkability and reduce car use. SB10 does not apply to high fire risk areas or impact publicly owned open-space land ensuring the increased housing density does not increase climate related risk.

Massachusetts

Providing more housing in locations close to public transit, or creating Transit-Oriented Communities (TOC), can stimulate the local economy, inspire affordable housing, and most importantly reduce greenhouse gas emissions by lessening reliance on cars. The state of Massachusetts has adopted the Housing Choice Bill, which “would require communities served by the MBTA to designate one reasonably sized district near a T station in which multi-family building is allowed by right (Schoenberg, 2021).” This Bill will make housing development less challenging and create increased housing density in suitable areas.

Connecticut

In 2024, HB 5390 was introduced in the Connecticut General Assembly. Among other provisions, the bill called for the creation of guidelines for Transit-Oriented Communities, including smaller lot sizes. The bill passed the House but was not brought up for a vote in the Senate during the short legislative session, though housing advocates have indicated they will try again. Most municipalities in Connecticut have large lot zoning in the majority of the town. This bill would be a compromise applying only to those areas within reasonable access to transportation hubs.

Context Specific!

All zoning practices are context specific and may or may not be beneficial within a community. Understanding the interplay of climate related risk, need for affordable housing, transportation corridors, and environmental preservation is necessary to determine the best use of zoning tools in a community.

Thinking ahead...

Connecticut has some of the largest lot size requirements in the nation. Our neighbor Massachusetts has adopted smaller lot sizes in areas close to public transit to better influence Transit-Oriented Communities and create better housing opportunities. This may be a prospect for CT to consider when also thinking about carbon emission goals and complying with climate incentives. To learn more, click the [Massachusetts Housing Choice Act](#).



Scituate, MA – January 8: MBTA commuter rail train (Staff Photo By Stuart Cahill/Boston Herald)

More information

Learn more about Desegregate Connecticut and the difficulty of current zoning practices, the environmental, equity and economic benefits of Minimum Lot Size reform and a proposal for lot size reform:

[Issue Brief: Small Lots in Smart Places: A Right Sized Solution for CT](#)

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