

CITY PLANNING DEPARTMENT



Memorandum – Ordinance Recommendation

To: City Plan Commission
From: Jonas Bruggemann, Assistant Planning Director/Principal Planner
Date: May 27, 2026
RE: Ordinance – “Requirements for two-family dwellings”
Proposed Amendment to the Zoning Ordinance – Ordinance # 4-26-04

Proposal

The subject ordinance would amend upon passage Sections 17.20.040 (Conformance to district regulations required) and 17.88.010 (Substandard lots of record and lot mergers) of the Zoning Ordinance to:

- a. Clarify that two-family structures are permitted on substandard lots of record.
- b. Reduce the minimum lot size requirements of single- and two-family structures from 6,000 sf for single-family lots and 8,000sf for two-family lots to 4,000 sf for both development types. Minimum lot frontage, setbacks, and maximum lot coverage requirements are adjusted accordingly.
- c. Aligns lot size requirement for multifamily structures to mirror the 4,000 sf requirement for the first two units.

Planning Analysis

Planning Staff believe that this bill will have five significant impacts:

1. It will make base zoning better reflect the lot sizes that single- and two-family homes in the B-1 and B-2 zoned areas are already platted and built to.
2. It capitalizes on using existing utility infrastructure with minimal chance that roads and utilities will be expanded to accommodate development, meaning much lower cost for the City compared to expanding development in other parts of the City with less infrastructure.
3. It will allow a portion of the city’s housing goals to be met by permitting two-family homes on smaller lots and streamlining development processes.
4. It will make a substantial number of existing homes conform to zoning, making it easier for owners to invest in property improvements.
5. It will significantly reduce staff time spent on infill lot development.

One of the most frequent inquiries the Planning Department receives is requests to develop single- and two-family homes on undeveloped lots on the eastern side of the City. These lots are typically associated with a home on an adjoining lot as side yards or additional parking that the homeowner now no longer needs. With high costs of housing and intensive demand for new housing, homeowners are increasingly looking to sell unused or underused land for others or themselves to build more housing. However, while the smallest lot minimum lot size in Cranston’s zoning ordinance is 6,000 square feet, the vast majority of residential lots in Cranston’s B-1 and B-2 neighborhoods are platted at less than 6,000 square feet; typically,

between 3,200 square feet and 5,000 square feet. Most neighborhoods were platted and developed prior to the current zoning ordinance that overlaid much of eastern Cranston with 6,000 sf minimum lot size requirements in 1966 and therefore brought the historic development pattern of these neighborhoods to a halt.

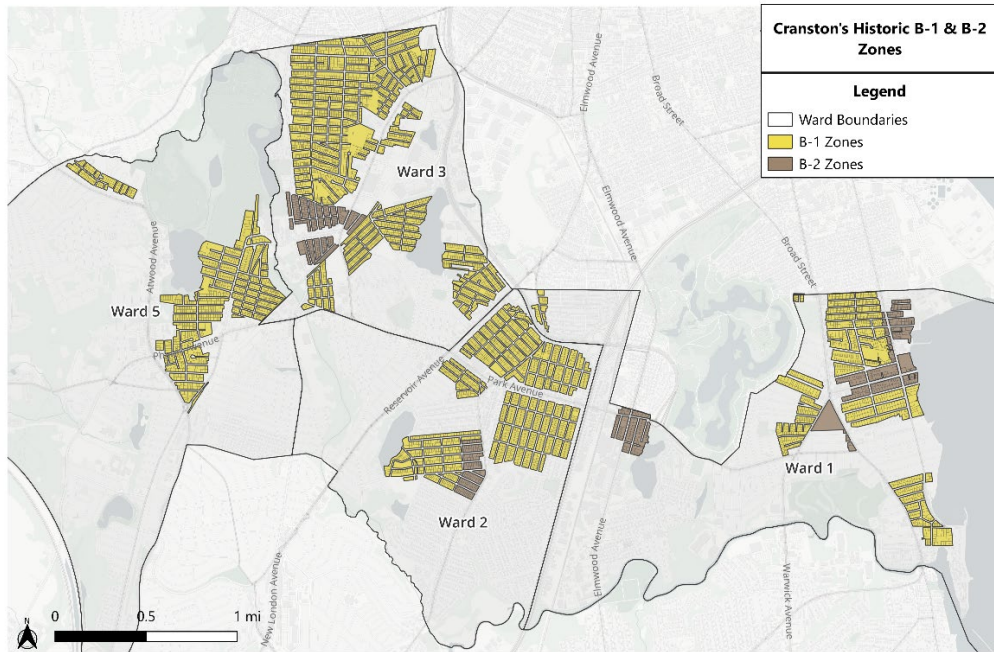


Figure 1: B-1 and B-2 Zoning Districts in Cranston. These zones cover only 5.2% of Cranston's land area but contain almost a third of the city's housing stock.

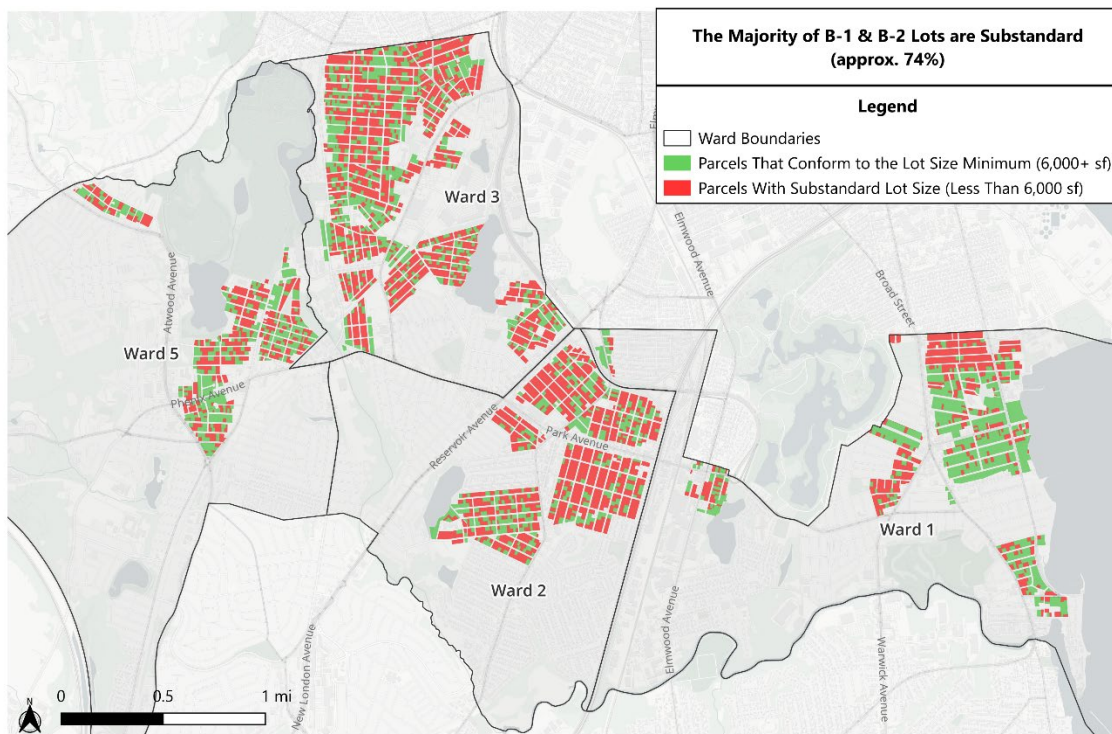


Figure 2: Conforming vs substandard lots. These areas were platted typically between 3,200 sf and 5,000 sf.

Consequently, development expanded westward where farmland and forests were bought up and replaced primarily by larger-lot single-family development. Cranston is now at a point where the vast majority of easily developable land west of I-295 has been built on, but demand for more housing still remains primarily driven by housing construction since the 2008 financial crisis lagging behind household formation. Developers have responded by seeking more difficult areas to develop as the high cost and demand for housing has allowed development in these areas to become economically feasible. Additionally, some landowners in eastern Cranston are seeking to sell or further develop their land to increase property value and create new housing units.

The 6000-sf minimum lot size requirement in the Zoning Ordinance requires landowners to go through numerous lengthy, expensive, and discretionary processes with no guarantee that they will be able to build on their land even when the proposal is consistent with the surrounding area. The General Assembly has passed several pieces of legislation since 2023 with the intent to streamline housing development. However, this has resulted in minimal new development and instead has resulted in extensive analysis and review as Cranston tries to apply complicated and often unclear state laws.

This ordinance would make Cranston’s process more consistent and fair, and less of a burden on staff resources by “right-sizing” the base B-1 and B-2 zones to be much more in line with existing development patterns. Nearly three out of four lots in the B-1 and B-2 zones are less than the minimum lot size requirement of 6,000 square feet (see Figure 2) and therefore considered non-conforming. This also includes two-family homes which currently require a minimum lot size of 8,000 square feet, but only around 15% of two-family homes in the B-1 and B-2 zones conform with that designation (see Figure 3).

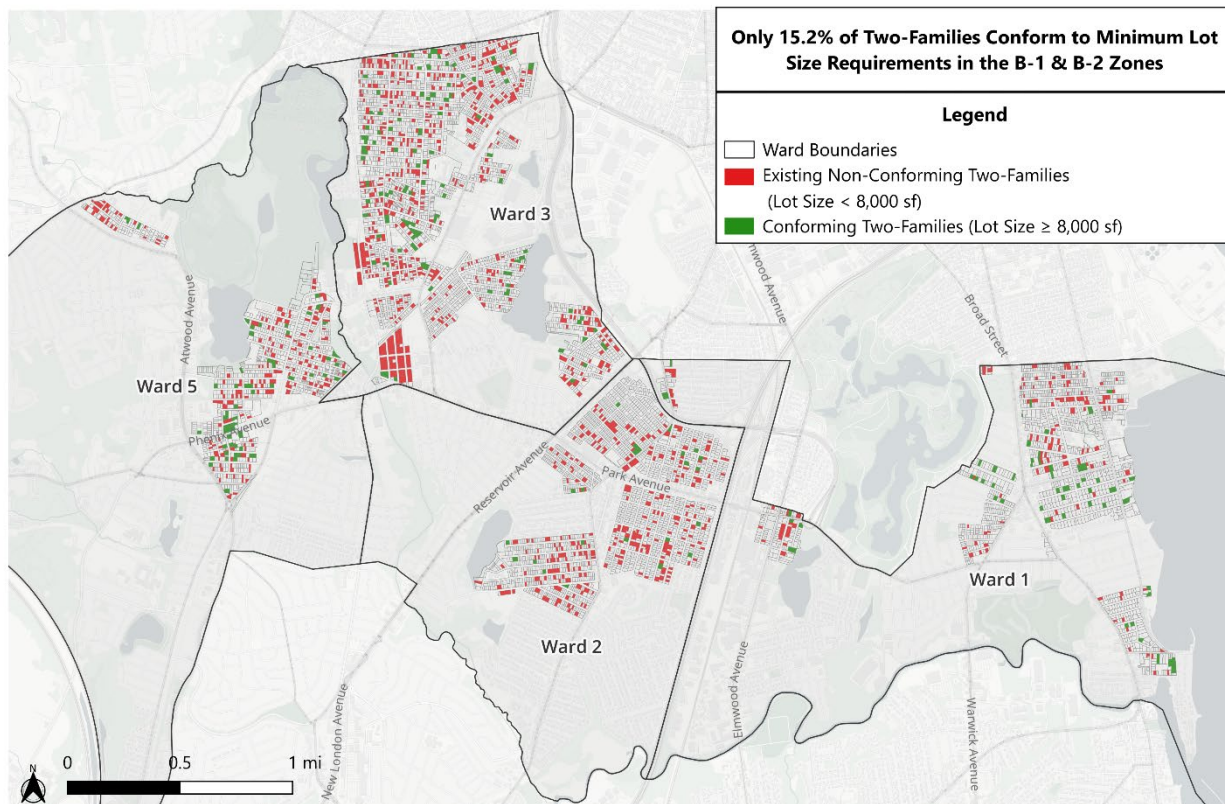


Figure 3: Minimum lot size conformance of two-family homes in the B-1 and B-2 zoning districts.

Our analysis shows that a 4,000 square foot minimum lot area requirement for two-family homes would make over 82% of the two-family lots in the B-1 and B-2 zones conform to the zoning ordinance. Taking this step would be a direct execution of Actions H-7 and LU-29.

Action H-7 states *“Review zoning in existing residential neighborhoods to ensure the zoning matches, as closely as possible, what has already been built. Revise in terms of dimensions and unit types, unless site constraints or specific needs determine otherwise.”*

Action LU-29 states *“Protect and stabilize existing residential neighborhoods by making zoning conform to existing uses.”*

While this ordinance does not establish different minimum lot sizes based on individual neighborhood lot layout, it will generally be consistent with the density, unit type, and character of the surrounding development in those areas (Policy H-1 & LU-12) and create immediate and large-scale conformity of our B-1 and B-2 zones to much of our existing development.

An additional benefit is that this would contribute to the streamlining of our applications. Adopting base zoning that is consistent with the underlying neighborhood means that staff can spend less time advising on these developments and processing requests for variances and modifications for new development, while landowners and developers can expect a much more efficient, predictable, and cost-effective development process (Goal ED-3).

In addition to lower costs for developers, development on existing neighborhood streets also means lower costs for Cranston residents. The existing infrastructure such as roadways and utilities is readily available and has capacity to accommodate this gentle growth in our eastern neighborhoods, particularly compared to expansion of new roadways, utilities, and city services into greenfield development in Western Cranston. Limitations of utility services are primarily found west of I-295 as we are reaching maximum sewer capacity on the RISE sewer line which runs from the facility in Johnston down Pippin Orchard Road to Hope Road. A lack of access to sewer and water capacity requires much larger lot sizes to accommodate adequate distances between wells and septic systems, putting these homes well out the budget of the average homebuyer and reducing the number of homes that can be built without utility service expansions.

Growth in already urbanized areas has other advantages too compared to fringe growth. Higher household density means greater efficiency of infrastructure and services. Cost of infrastructure per unit decreases as more households are served by fewer miles of utility lines and roadways. Because Rhode Island is not forecasting extensive growth in population, but rather growth in the number of households due to a decline in average household sizes, many services including schools and libraries should be adequate for this growth in units. Additionally, research from HousingWorks RI shows that single and two-family homes on the eastern side of the city tend to have much higher taxable value per acre than large single-family lots in Western Cranston (see Figure 4) as well as lower per unit costs for providing city services. Adding housing units on the eastern side will therefore improve City revenue over costs much more than adding similar numbers of units in Western Cranston.

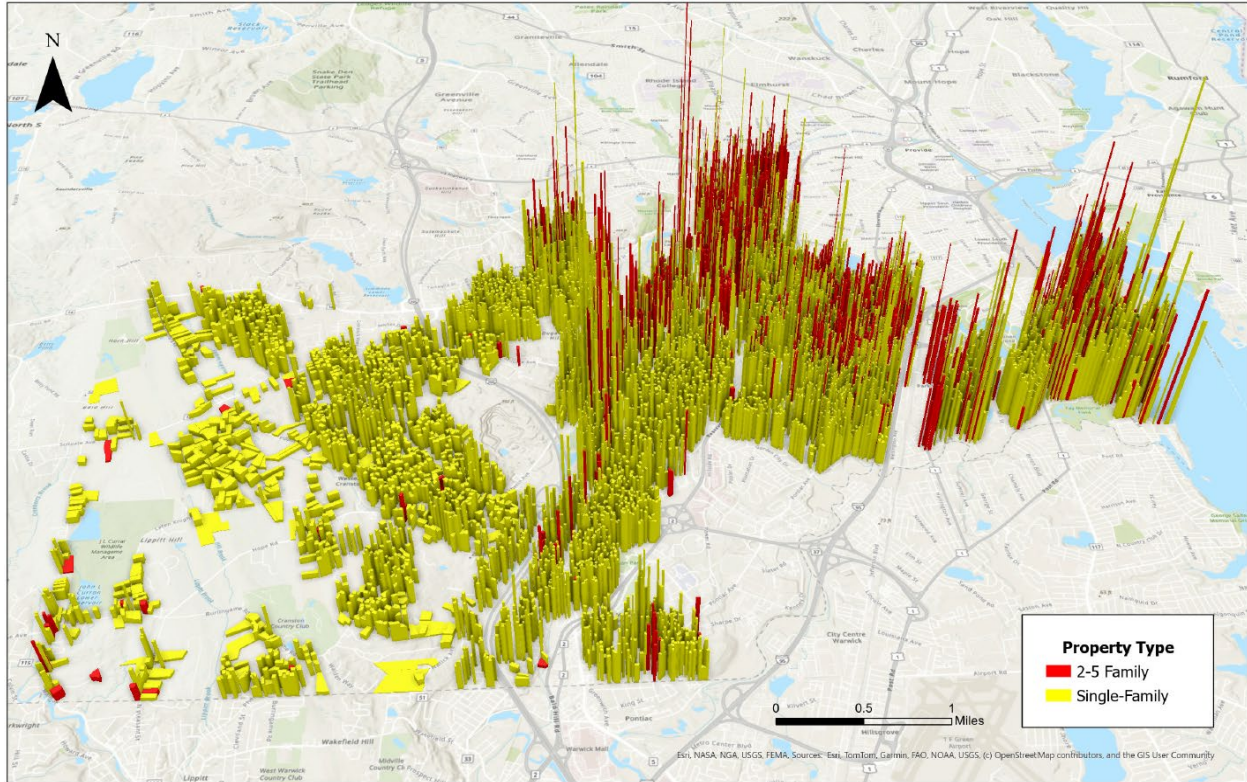


Figure 4: Average assessed value per acre of single-family (yellow) and 2-5 family (red) homes. [Source: HousingWorks RI]

The 2024 Comprehensive Plan also speaks to directing growth away from environmentally sensitive areas such as wetlands and prime farmland (Policies NR-4, NR-5, and NR-6). Demand for housing creates pressure for development in the remaining unprotected open space in Western Cranston, particularly as our Zoning Ordinance allows large-lot single family development and general prohibits small multifamily development, typically referred to as the “missing middle”. Development of a large parcel in Western Cranston can usually be done by-right while small-scale infill and multifamily development nearly always require variances from the Zoning Ordinance. A core trade-off by allowing missing middle housing in the areas of eastern Cranston characterized by this development pattern, is greater preservation of agricultural land and open space and development further away from environmentally sensitive areas.

The 2024 Comprehensive Plan also addresses creating a balance between natural resource protection and growth-related needs (Goal NR-2). More spread-out development means more impervious surfaces and therefore more stormwater runoff. Provided that Cranston already has areas experiencing issues with coastal, riverine, and runoff flooding, Planning Staff recommend that, alongside this ordinance, the City pass regulations to better manage stormwater. Recommended new regulations include setting a maximum on impervious surfaces for all lots which would prevent people from paving their lots without adequate stormwater management systems to offset those impervious surfaces, while guaranteeing a certain level of landscaping for stormwater infiltration and aesthetic purposes. A stormwater utility fee could also help create a dedicated fund to help maintain and improve the stormwater systems in the city. This should help to improve existing flooding issues even while continuing to allow new investments in home construction.

The proposed changes to B1 and B2 regulations will help us reach our housing production goals for 2046 and Housing 2030, provide new housing options for the constrained housing market in the city (Goal H-2 & H-4, Policy H-3, H-4 & H-6), and boost jobs related to construction (Policy ED-21). The Rhode Island Executive Office of Housing’s action plan entitled “Housing 2030” estimated that Cranston is 1,376 units

below what is needed for the community and set a goal that 205 of those units should be for low- or moderate-income families. This legislation would make 150 vacant lots buildable and therefore permit up to 300 new units assuming all vacant lots construct two-family homes. Up to an additional 100 units are estimated to be allowed if this legislation passes in combination with Ordinance #4-26-03.

Additional units could be created through additions, renovation, or replacement of existing homes. Legalizing the vast majority of single and two-family lots could also promote the redevelopment of aging or deteriorating housing stock by removing regulatory barriers to reconstruction (Policy H-11, ED-23).

Not only would this be the lowest impact method for the city to gain traction towards its housing production goals, but it would also a more varied and affordable mix of housing stock in the City which is in line with both our Comprehensive Plan goals and policies (Goals H-2, H-4; Policies H-3, H-4, H-6, H-9).

The following Comprehensive Plan Goals and Policies were mentioned above to be supportive of the proposed ordinance:

- Goal NR-2: Establish a balance between natural resource protection and growth-related needs.
- Policy NR-4: Preserve and protect critical fish and wildlife habitat areas and areas containing rare and endangered species.
- Policy NR-5: Preserve and protect environmentally sensitive natural resource areas, including prime farmlands, steep slopes, floodplains, watersheds, aquifers, shorelines, and coastal and inland wetlands.
- Policy NR-6: Direct new growth away from environmentally- sensitive areas such as wetlands, steep slopes, and soils that have severe limitations for on-site waste water disposal.
- Goal H-2: Permit a variety of residential development types to achieve multiple community objectives.
- Goal H-4: Promote housing opportunity for a wide range of household types and income levels.
- Policy H-1: Maintain zoning densities that reflect planned municipal service levels and natural resource constraints.
- Policy H-3: Enact flexible development standards that attain desired community objectives, but also provide a wide range of building types, uses, subdivisions, and site plans.
- Policy H-4: Provide housing resources to support the range of jobs that reflects the City's economic base, and encourage the development of housing at levels that are consistent with household purchasing power.
- Policy H-6: Maintain a varied housing stock, with units of different age, size and type that are affordable to a wide range of incomes.
- Policy H-9: Promote the development of new housing that is affordable to average first-time buyers living in the City.
- Policy H-11: Reduce the burden of zoning and building regulations, to enable two- and three-family unit dwellings to be easily modified, maintained and improved within the existing neighborhoods.
- Goal ED-2: Attract capital into the Cranston area and expand the City's economic base.
- Goal ED-3: The City shall have an efficient and predictable development process throughout all departments of the City.
- Policy ED-21: Preserve and increase employment opportunities for Cranston residents.
- Policy ED-23: Revitalize underused areas of the City for uses that are in keeping with the needs and values of the community.
- Goal LU-6: Protect and stabilize existing residential neighborhoods.
- Policy LU-12: Protect and stabilize existing residential neighborhoods by increasing open space, improving roadway conditions, and making the zoning conform to existing uses.

Staff therefore believe that the ordinance is consistent with the Comprehensive Plan.

Recognition and Consideration of the Purposes of Zoning in City Code §17.04.010

The general purposes of zoning as prescribed by City Code Section §17.04.010 have been recognized and considered in review of the proposed ordinances. This bill would allow construction on existing lots in the B-1 and B-2 zoning districts which would be within the character of the existing neighborhoods and provide for the current and future need of an adequate and varied housing stock in the city (§17.04.010(B) & (H)) as is supported by the goals and policies of the 2024 Comprehensive Plan (L). Furthermore, this ordinance would improve the efficiency of reviews of development proposals and expedite approval for neighborhood consistent development (N).

Therefore, the ordinance is found to be consistent with the general purposes of zoning.

Findings per City Code §17.120.030

(A): Consistency with the Cranston Comprehensive Plan 2024:

There are a significant number of Comprehensive Plan goals and policies that are in support of a positive consideration of Ordinance #4-26-04, including but not limited to Goal NR-2, Goal ED-2, Goal ED-3, Goal LU-6, Policy NR-4, Policy NR-5, Policy NR-6, Policy H-1, Policy H-3, Policy H-4, Policy H-6, Policy H-9, Policy H-11, Policy ED-21, Policy ED-23, and Policy LU-12. For these reasons, Ordinance #4-26-04 is consistent with the City's Comprehensive Plan.

(B). Recognition and Consideration of the Purposes of Zoning in City Code §17.04.010:

The general purposes of zoning as prescribed by City Code Section §17.04.010 have been recognized and considered in review of the proposed ordinances. The ordinances are found to be consistent with the general purposes of zoning.

Recommendation

Based on the findings that the rezone is consistent with the surrounding land uses and existing development pattern, the goals and policies of the Comprehensive Plan, and the general purposes of the zoning ordinance, staff recommends that the City Plan Commission forward a **positive recommendation** on **Ordinance # 4-26-04** to the City Council.

Respectfully Submitted,



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