

Roles and Responsibilities – The Zoning Board of Adjustment

Iowa Code §§ 335.15 (counties) and 414.12 (cities) provide identical mandates for zoning boards of adjustment. These statutes are very specific in limiting the functions of the board of adjustment to (1) hearing appeals of decisions made by the zoning administrator, (2) granting or denying special exceptions (also referred to as “special uses” or “conditional uses”), and (3) granting or denying variances.

Appeals

Zoning administrators are given the authority to make many decisions relating to the interpretation and implementation of the zoning ordinance. If a landowner is dissatisfied with a zoning administrator's decision, the landowner has a right to appeal the decision to the board of adjustment. The board's role is to review the zoning administrator's interpretation of the ordinance and the given facts, based on the purpose and intent of the regulations, and render a decision affirming or overturning the administrator's determination. If the zoning administrator's decision is reasonable, it should be given the benefit of the doubt.

Special Exceptions, aka Special Uses or Conditional Uses

In each zoning district two broad classes of land uses are explicitly identified: (1) permitted uses, which are those listed by the ordinance as being allowed by right in any location, and (2) special exceptions, which are listed by the ordinance as being permissible only at the discretion of the zoning board of adjustment. Special exceptions are generally unique uses that are slightly out of character with permitted uses. In order to be granted a special exception by the board of adjustment, the applicant must be able to show that the requested use can be made to fit into its surroundings.

Variances

A variance is a minor exception to the existing zoning rules to allow a landowner to do what is generally forbidden by the ordinance. In order to be granted a variance, the applicant carries the burden of proving to the board that strict enforcement of the terms of the ordinance will inflict an unnecessary hardship on the landowner.

Administratively, the board of adjustment is a forum of last resort. The only appeal from the decision of the board of adjustment is to the court system. In too many communities, however, this arrangement has led to the mistaken assumption that the board of adjustment is the final authority on almost all zoning matters. Individuals will go to the board any time they feel the ordinance is “too strict,” and some boards will grant almost any relief requested by landowners. In these communities boards of adjustment are treating their zoning regulations as suggestions, not as law. In reality, the board of adjustment is bound by relatively strict criteria found in the zoning ordinance that define the limits of its discretion to grant variances or special exceptions and to overturn decisions of the zoning administrator.