

Severance Overlay Zone (SOZ) – Summary

Introduction: Why a Form-Based Zoning Code Matters

Traditional zoning focuses on land use separation, regulating what activities can occur in each district. The Severance Overlay Zone instead adopts a form-based approach, emphasizing the physical form and relationship of buildings to streets and public spaces. This approach is critical to transforming Severance Town Center from a conventional auto-oriented retail site into a walkable, mixed-use neighborhood that aligns with Cleveland Heights' Master Plan.

Form-based zoning:

- Creates predictable urban form through build-to-lines, frontage types, and height standards.
- Encourages economic vitality by enabling flexible mixed uses, active street edges, and civic spaces.
- Improves sustainability by supporting compact development, multimodal access, and green infrastructure.
- Simplifies development review through clear graphic standards, coordinated design rules and an expedited review process.
- Enhances community character with requirements for architecture, public realm design, and civic spaces.

The SOZ provides an optional overlay—developers can continue under existing zoning or elect to use the new form-based framework to unlock mixed-use flexibility and design incentives.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter 1149.0 – Application

Defines intent, purpose, and applicability. Establishes the SOZ as an optional overlay applying to the Severance Town Center area. Encourages compact, walkable, mixed-use redevelopment consistent with the City's adopted Master Plan. Clarifies that SOZ provisions supersede underlying zoning only when a developer chooses to use the overlay.

Chapter 1149.1 – District Standards

Creates the framework for the physical form of the district. Establishes three districts (SO-1, SO-2, SO-3) and maps their blocks, street types, and civic spaces. Introduces five Street Types (A–D, P) that define street character and the width of public and private frontages. Designates Significant Corners, Terminating Vistas, and Civic Spaces to anchor visual identity. Defines where Retail or Office uses and Frequent Entryways are required to activate street edges. Provides cross-sections and dimensional tables controlling distance from curb to build-to-line and glazing transparency.

Chapter 1149.2 – Uses and Development Standards

Details what can be built and how. Key components include:

- Permitted Uses Table (1149.21A): SO-1/SO-2 focus on mixed-use, retail, office, housing, hospitality, and civic uses; SO-3 allows lower-intensity residential and civic uses.
- Development Thresholds (1149.21B): Max build-out of 2,500 housing units; 175K SF retail; 85K SF office; 250 hotel rooms; 50K SF arts/culture; 75K SF institutional; 50K SF artisan/industrial.
- Affordable Housing (1149.22C): 20% of units affordable to $\leq 80\%$ AMI, sequenced by construction threshold, with a 30-year affordability requirement.
- Civic Space (1149.13F): 10% of site area dedicated to public space; \$35/SF fee-in-lieu allowed; adjacency credits and affordable housing exemptions included.
- Private Frontages (1149.23): Defines Storefront, Arcade, Urban, Stoop, Porch, Lightwell, Forecourt, and Terrace frontages with glazing, entry, and stepback rules.
- Active Edge Frontage (1149.23G): Retail/Office frontage required along key streets, specifying percentage of frontage per street type and entry spacing.
- Edging Elements & Architectural Standards (1149.24–25): Rules for fencing, planters, and materials; mandates high-quality architecture and street wall height limits.
- Parking (1149.26): Allows shared/structured parking, prohibits parking within 16 feet of build-to-line, counts on-street spaces toward requirements.

Chapter 1149.3 – Administration

Outlines the procedural framework for review and approvals. Describes a two-stage process: (1) Preliminary Application Review – concept plan discussion with the Technical Advisory Committee, and (2) Official Plan Submission – full submittal reviewed by the Architectural Board of Review and Planning Commission. Establishes timelines for distribution, comment, and recommendation but creates a predictable as of right condition. Provides rules for site plan amendments, chapter amendments, and permit duration (two years, extendable for good cause).

Chapter 1149.4 – Design Standards Manual

Serves as the visual and technical guide for all physical design elements. Illustrates street type designs, frontage types, and civic space templates. Includes detailed diagrams for site layout, pedestrian paths, building heights, and massing transitions. Defines architectural standards for significant corners, terminating vistas, façades, signage, and materials. Functions as a companion manual to ensure built outcomes align with the vision of a walkable town center.

Conclusion

The Severance Overlay Zone establishes a clear, coordinated framework for revitalizing Severance Town Center as a mixed-use, transit-accessible, and design-coherent neighborhood. It moves beyond use segregation to create a predictable and flexible development environment—ensuring new investment delivers high-quality architecture, civic spaces, and pedestrian-friendly design that reinforces Cleveland Heights’ identity and long-term economic growth.