

MEMORANDUM

To: Cleveland Heights City Council

From: Ryan Porter, MPact Collective LLC

Date: October 28, 2025

Subject: Importance of the Severance Overlay Zone (SOZ) Zoning Reform to the Future Success of Severance Town Center

Overview

The Severance Overlay Zone (SOZ) represents a transformative zoning reform for Cleveland Heights. It replaces outdated, use-based zoning with a modern, form-based framework designed to unlock investment, promote walkability, and restore Severance Town Center as the economic and civic heart of the community. This model—drawn from national best practices such as New Rochelle, NY’s Downtown Overlay Zone—gives the City a powerful, predictable, and flexible tool to catalyze mixed-use redevelopment while maintaining community benefit.

Why This Reform Matters

- Creates a Predictable, Investment-Ready Framework:

The SOZ establishes clear standards for building form, frontage design, height, and active ground-floor uses. This reduces the need for variances and eliminates uncertainty for developers—conditions that have previously discouraged reinvestment at Severance. Pre-approved standards and expedited review (via the Technical Advisory Committee) create a more transparent and time-certain entitlement process. Predictability attracts private capital and partners aligned with the City’s vision for sustainable, long-term redevelopment.

- Reactivates the Public Realm:

The SOZ prioritizes pedestrian-friendly streets, public frontages, and civic spaces that bring people back to Severance. Requirements for Storefront or Frequent Entryway Frontages (per §1149.23G) ensure ground-floor activation along key corridors. The Civic Space requirement (§1149.13) guarantees that 10% of each site contributes to a network of plazas, greens, and pedestrian paths, either on-site or through a fee-in-lieu mechanism. These measures transform Severance from a suburban shopping complex into a walkable district that supports daily life, commerce, and community events.

- Balances Flexibility with Accountability:

The overlay is optional—developers may elect to use the SOZ’s incentives in exchange for meeting its higher design and public-realm standards (§1149.03). This structure encourages participation while protecting community interests. Incentives include height flexibility, reduced parking ratios (§1149.26), and by-right mixed-use approvals. Accountability is built in through clear frontage, glazing, and civic-space performance standards that are enforceable at site plan approval.

- Environmental Sustainability:

By enabling compact, mixed-use, transit-oriented redevelopment, the SOZ reduces environmental impacts. Shared parking, fee-in-lieu options, and walkable design reduce automobile dependence. Active ground-floor retail and office uses bring daily activity and revenue back to Cleveland Heights.

- Positions Severance as a Regional Model:

Cleveland Heights now joins peer cities across the country—like New Rochelle, NY and Fayetteville, AR—that have adopted modern overlay zones to successfully reposition underperforming commercial centers. The SOZ will be poised to attract interest from private developers and institutional investors seeking clarity and predictability in the entitlement process.

Conclusion

The Severance Overlay Zone is not just a zoning amendment—it is Cleveland Heights’ blueprint for long-term resilience and prosperity. It replaces a decades-old regulatory framework that limited progress with one that fosters community-centered reinvestment. By adopting and maintaining this zoning reform, City Council ensures that Severance Town Center evolves into a vibrant, inclusive, and economically sustainable mixed-use district that reflects Cleveland Heights’ values and future aspirations.