



Planning, Development & Inspections

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To: Wake County Board of Commissioners
From: Tim Maloney, Director
Subject: Unified Development Ordinance Text Amendment OA-03-25
Date: June 16, 2025

Introduction

The Wake County Unified Development Ordinance (UDO) is a set of regulations that govern the use and development of land and buildings in unincorporated Wake County. The UDO covers a wide range of topics, including zoning, subdivision, stormwater, utilities, and site design.

Its purpose is to promote the public health, safety, and general welfare of residents and businesses while providing a guide for the physical development of the county. The UDO is an evolving document that can undergo substantive text changes (amendments) when those changes are consistent with the Wake County Comprehensive Plan.

The proposed amendments included in this request reflect changes that increase development options within the Research Triangle Park.

Created in 1959, Research Triangle Park (RTP) has been a critical driver of economic growth in North Carolina's Research Triangle region over the past 65 years. Physically situated at the geographic center of the Triangle region, RTP straddles Wake and Durham counties. Approximately 27 percent (1,936 acres) of RTP (a total of 7,101 acres) is located in Wake County. RTP's core mission has remained the same since its founding: to encourage cooperation among the region's universities, promote industry-university collaboration, and deliver an economic impact for the residents of North Carolina. RTP has turned its mission into action throughout its history by leveraging the proximity of the region's nearby research universities to recruit, retain, and support the growth of research and development companies within the Park's boundaries.

Today, an estimated 55,000 people work in RTP at over 375 companies. RTP is home to a variety of industries, including life sciences, informational technology, financial technology, and agricultural technology. All companies currently located in the Park, regardless of industry, are engaged in a research or development enterprise to support RTP's core research-focused mission.

Over the past three years, RTP has been collaboratively working on a long-range planning initiative known as RTP 3.0. The goal of RTP 3.0 is to align future development patterns in RTP with recent trends in innovation district development nationally and globally. Over the past 25 years, business parks and innovation districts have been moving toward more urban development patterns that promote greater density and a broader mix of uses to establish fully inclusive live-work-play innovation neighborhoods. Since its inception, RTP has followed a low-density

corporate campus development model enforced through local zoning ordinances in Wake and Durham counties as well as through RTP's land covenants. As a result, RTP's development pattern is now out-of-step with industry peers nationally and globally.

To address this challenge, the Research Triangle Foundation, as the non-profit administrator of RTP, has been leading the RTP 3.0 planning process in close collaboration with RTP companies and organizations since 2021. The culmination of this process is a consensus among RTP stakeholders to implement RTP 3.0 by (1) amending the RTP land covenants and (2) requesting Wake and Durham counties consider changes to their zoning ordinances to allow new and different types of development in RTP, including residential development, non-research commercial development, and more urban development patterns.

Request

That the Planning Board recommend approval to the Wake County Board of Commissioners the following amendments to the Wake County Unified Development Ordinance (UDO):

1. Amend the standards in the following sections that regulate land use and development in the Research Triangle Park (RTP):
 - a. Section 3-51 *RA, Research Applications District*
 - b. Section 4-11 *Use Table*
 - c. Section 5-20 *Conventional Development*
 - d. Section 18-13 *Electronic Changeable Message Signs*.

Applicant

Wake County Planning Development and Inspections on behalf of the Research Triangle Foundation.

Amend the standards for Section 3-51 RA, Research Applications District; Section 4-11 Use Table; Section 5-20 Conventional Development; and Section 18-13 Electronic Changeable Message Signs.

Background

RTP is the only area within Wake County's planning jurisdiction where the RA Research Applications zoning district is applied. It was created years ago with the sole intent to regulate and guide site development within RTP. Over the years, this zoning district has experienced only minor amendments to its standards. In 2012, the district was amended to relax the lot size, setbacks, parking requirements and permitted uses. These changes were a small step forward in accommodating more flexible site design, but still fostered a traditional development pattern with large lots, large surface parking and limited connections to transit, housing, and other services.

The purpose of the current proposed amendments is to accommodate a new pattern of growth and development consistent with RTP's latest vision, but also continue their mission of business and scientific research and development, training, and production. More specifically, these amendments will promote more dense mixed-use development that create a live, work, play environment in the center of the Triangle region while making RTP more attractive to the next generation of workers.

The amendments introduce several new development and re-development options that were created in partnership with staff at Wake County, RTP and Durham County.

Analysis

RTP is a unique area of unincorporated Wake County because it is served by municipal water and sewer utilities (Town of Cary). Whereas all other unincorporated areas are served by on-site wells and septic systems. Because of this, RTP is afforded the ability to develop in ways that are more dense and municipal-like. Given this context, RTP is positioning itself through this amendment to accommodate new development trends and promote a wider range of uses.

In developing the amendments, County and RTP planners worked in partnership to determine what new development standards need to be codified in the Wake County UDO, and those that should remain in RTP's restrictive covenants. This was a critical distinction in that the more standards embedded in their own restrictive covenants, the more control RTP would retain in guiding site design and development now and in the future.

Proposed Amendments

The proposed amendments introduce three new development options as an alternate from the traditional development approach, which will remain as an option in the UDO. All four options are described as follows and proposed to be incorporated in UDO Section 3-51 RA, Research Applications District:

Traditional Development Option (Existing):

- Accommodates the form and function that has been the staple of RTP for many years and reflects most of what is in place today.
- Standards remain unchanged and will still be offered as a development option.
- Accommodates large lots with surface area parking, greater restrictions on the amount of area that can be built-upon, wider setbacks, and less flexibility on permitted uses.

Mixed-Use Node Option (New):

- Accommodates high density/intensity development that embodies key elements of walkable urbanism, including but not limited to walkable and bikeable areas that are well-connected to the regional transportation network through a range of transit options.
- Accommodates a mix of uses including research and development, offices, retail, entertainment, public and quasi-public uses, and moderate and higher density residential uses.
- Promotes the establishment of a strong public realm of sidewalks, pedestrian ways, trails, streets, and open spaces that support a pedestrian-friendly environment with focal points for engagement.
- Encourages the vertical mixing of uses. The horizontal mixing of stand-alone uses is also allowed, provided the development is well-integrated in terms of complementary uses, access and circulation, and compatible design.

Residential Neighborhood Option (New):

- Accommodates traditional neighborhood development in a compact form and with a neighborhood center (and potentially sub-centers).
- Includes primarily residential development (with a range of housing options), and a mix of additional uses (including neighborhood supporting retail uses and civic uses).

- Ensures the establishment of a strong public realm that is human-scale and pedestrian-oriented, with integrated open space and recreational opportunities.

Enhanced Corporate Campus Option (New):

- Accommodates the expansion and redevelopment of the existing corporate campuses in the RTP, or the development of new corporate campuses, in a form that allows for a broader mix of uses and greater densities/intensities than is allowed under the RA district regulations for the Traditional development option, and a broader mix of uses.
- The allowed uses include research and development, offices, retail, eating and drinking establishments, and recreational uses.
- Encourages horizontal and vertical mixed-use development.
- Requires the redeveloped or new Enhanced Corporate Campus include improved pedestrian and street connections between existing and new buildings, enhanced walkability and pedestrian-friendliness, support RTP's multimodal transportation plan, improve street connections both internal and external to the campus, and maintain a reasonable amount of open space.
- Requires redevelopment to infill the existing development site.

In addition to the new development options, several other sections of the UDO must be amended that incorporate new standards for the RA zoning district. They are as follows:

- 1) UDO Section 4-11 *Use Table* is proposed to be amended that identifies the wider range of permitted uses within the RA zoning district. The range of new permitted uses includes most of the residential uses, commercial uses such as eating and drinking establishments, entertainment/recreation, and other daily service needs for those who work and live in the district.
- 2) UDO Section 5-20 *Conventional Development* is proposed to be amended to reflect the lot and building standards for the new alternate development options in the RA zoning district. The standards include but are not limited to: maximum building height, minimum lot width, and maximum lot coverage area.
- 3) UDO Section 18-13 *Electronic Changeable Message Signs* is proposed to be amended by prohibiting the use of electronic changeable message signs in the RA zoning district.

Owners & Tenants Engagement

RTP 3.0 is the result of nearly three years of work and close collaboration between the Research Triangle Foundation and the RTP Owners & Tenants Association, which is made up of companies with a physical presence in RTP. The Foundation has held over 120 meetings with RTP companies and additional stakeholders throughout the RTP 3.0 process to date.

Additionally, the Association appointed a working group of 15 companies that met regularly from June through December 2024. This working group was tasked with developing consensus on key elements of the RTP 3.0 proposal. The working group's work concluded with a recommendation in December to move forward with a full vote of the Association on the proposal. That vote was held on January 31, 2025, where the Association approved revised land covenants and to authorize the Foundation to pursue zoning changes in RTP to implement RTP 3.0 with a 96% majority vote.

Staff Findings

The proposed amendment:

1. Introduces three new development options as an alternate from the traditional development approach in the RA zoning district.
2. Promotes more dense mixed-use development that creates a live, work, play environment in the center of the Triangle region while making RTP more attractive to the next generation of workers.
3. Allows RTP to retain development plan review and approval for consistency with their covenants and restrictions.
4. Furthers the latest vision of RTP 3.0, while continuing their mission of business and scientific research and development, training, and production.
5. Is consistent with the Wake County Comprehensive Plan in that it delegates authority for area planning to the Research Triangle Foundation.

Staff Recommendation

Staff recommends that, in the matter of OA-03-25, the Planning Board finds that the adoption of this proposed text amendment is consistent with the Wake County Comprehensive Plan and Wake County Unified Development Ordinance and are reasonable and in the public interest and hereby make a motion to recommend approval to the Wake County Board of Commissioners.

Planning Board Recommendation

At the April 2, 2025, Planning Board meeting:

1. The Wake County Planning Board voted unanimously to recommend that the Board of Commissioners adopt the statement of consistency for Ordinance Amendment 02-25 as presented.

and by separate motion

2. The Wake County Planning Board voted unanimously to recommend that the Board of Commissioners adopt Ordinance Amendment 03-25 as presented.

Effective Date

The Research Triangle Foundation is working concurrently with Durham County on the same amendments to their development ordinance. Durham County is expected to adopt the changes later this year as part of their development ordinance update. It is the Foundation's desire, if possible, for the changes in both counties to become effective at the same time. Therefore, the effective date of this amendment by Wake County will be enacted as the earlier of (i) the forthcoming date, yet to be determined, of Durham County's adoption of similar amendments, or (ii) May 1, 2026.