



Columbus, OH MSA

Regulatory Order/Family: Traditional/Middle America

Summary

With a city of over 700,000 residents at its core and a suite of smaller cities around it, the Columbus metropolitan area has a framework that allows and accommodates growth without the dominance of exclusionary zoning. Neither, however, does growth management appear to be a strong priority in the region, partly because the state legislature has not given the counties and townships the authority to adopt several important land use tools. The cities in the region, especially Columbus, have annexed aggressively, providing urban services and maintaining moderate density at the suburban fringe. But large lot single family subdivisions are becoming more common in the rural townships. In no rural areas do counties or townships report a formal containment policy, nor does containment appear to be a strong priority for most of the municipalities. This is a recipe for decentralized growth that is moderated principally by municipalities that accommodate growth through zoning and infrastructure provision.

Governance Framework and Growth Trends

The Columbus MSA has about 1.5 million residents living in six counties and 75 cities. It is the fastest growing region in Ohio with a growth rate of 15 percent in the 1990s. The city of Columbus accounts for over 700,000 residents, and is unusual among Ohio cities for its ability to continue annexing outlying territory. Another two dozen cities and villages, seven of which have a population between 20,000 and 40,000 residents, share Franklin County with Columbus (most of these cities are pockets surrounded by Columbus.) Franklin County also has about 90,000 residents outside municipal boundaries. The urban core county of the metro area is separated by agriculture, forests, and scattered low-density residential development from the small to medium-sized county seats of the five counties that surround it. A much higher share of the Columbus metro area's population lives in municipalities than they do in the Cincinnati metropolitan area (79 percent, compared with 56 percent). The six counties in metropolitan Columbus have 102 townships among them, only six of which have over 10,000 residents and none of which have more than 20,000. Sixty two have fewer than 25,000 residents.

Sprawl has arguably been less severe in metropolitan Columbus in the last two decades than elsewhere in the state. As developed acreage grew between 1982 and 1997 by about 100,000 (31 percent) and population grew by 240,000 (19 percent), density dropped from 3.8 to 3.4 persons per urbanized acre, about 9 percent. Even so, density in Columbus remains lower than that in either of the other two metro areas, both of which are anchored by higher-density central cities. About 7 percent of the land in metro Columbus was publicly owned in 1992.

Regulatory Environment

There is an evident hierarchy in zoning in the Columbus region with the highest densities attainable mainly in the urban core. Columbus and Bexley (an incorporated "island" within Columbus) both allow density to attain levels over 30 dwellings per acre, but no other jurisdictions in the region



permit such high density in their zoning ordinances. Our results suggest that about 55 percent of the municipalities maintain low-density-only zoning ordinances, with 34 percent barring our hypothetical apartment development altogether. These cities and villages are mostly small, accounting for only 8 percent (low-density-only) and 5 percent (no apartments) of the metropolitan area's municipal population, 95,000 and 65,000 residents, respectively. Most people live in the 10 percent of cities where densities may attain at least 15 dwellings per acre; these account for over 800,000 residents.

In unincorporated areas, an estimated 94 percent of the land area is covered by either county or township zoning. Low-density-only zoning is in force in approximately 45 percent of the townships, with all but about five other townships (5 percent) allowing densities between 8 and 14 units per acre. Our hypothetical apartment development would be allowed at least by special permit, if not as of right, in an estimated 60 percent of unincorporated jurisdictions covering a little over half the unincorporated land area.

Three of the six counties responded to our survey; two, Franklin and Delaware (north of Columbus), have zoning which is commonly supplemented or superseded by stricter township zoning resolutions. Although Licking County (east of Columbus) does not have zoning, all but four or five of its two dozen townships have adopted zoning resolutions with the holdouts lying at the extreme eastern edge of the region. None of the other three counties responded to our survey but partial information for all three was available on-line. The least populous of the three, Madison, has countywide zoning that has been accepted by at least 10 of its 12 townships. According to county web sites, one township in Pickaway County and two in Fairfield have not passed zoning resolutions but all the others have.

Planning is not mandatory in Ohio and when it exists does not take precedence over the zoning ordinance. An estimated 75 percent of jurisdictions have comprehensive plans but most of the larger cities, including Columbus, have a plan. Therefore, 94 percent of the incorporated land area is covered by municipalities with plans. County planning commissions adopt plans for the unincorporated areas and two of the three counties that responded to the survey have plans. One of the three counties that did not respond had evidence on its web site of a land use plan. Fourteen of the 18 townships that responded also said they had comprehensive plans.

Other tools are uncommon in almost any format in metropolitan Columbus. The city of Columbus does not impose impact fees, an APFO, or a containment policy. Impact fees do exist in some cities and villages, adopted by an estimated 37 percent of jurisdictions representing just 20 percent of the population. Most of these are suburbs of Columbus and the county seats. An estimated 18 percent of cities have an APFO, and 14 percent have a containment measure of some kind. None has a permit cap. In unincorporated areas, none of these land use tools are present.

An estimated 10 percent of the municipalities, including Columbus, have incentive based affordable housing programs. A small handful of townships may also have affordable housing programs, based on positive responses from two of the 18 townships that responded to the survey. However, these jurisdictions employ measures other than density bonuses and inclusionary zoning to make new housing affordable: mainly fee waivers and permit streamlining.