



C H A T H A M C O U N T Y - S A V A N N A H

METROPOLITAN PLANNING COMMISSION

"Planning the Future - Respecting the Past"

M E M O R A N D U M

TO: The Planning Commission

THROUGH: Melanie Wilson, Executive Director and CEO

FROM: Subhashi Karunaratne, Planner – Development Services

DATE: April 21, 2026

MPC FILE NO: 26-001109-ZA-TEXT (City of Savannah) and
Z-0410-000516 (Chatham County)

SUBJECT: Text Amendment to the City of Savannah Zoning Ordinance and
Text Amendment to the Chatham County Zoning Ordinance

APPLICANT/S: Bridget Lidy for The Mayor and Aldermen of the City of Savannah, GA
and Marcus Lotson for Chatham County

REQUEST: This is a joint petition by the City of Savannah and Chatham County to
amend their respective zoning ordinances to establish a new high-intensity
industrial land use classification, expand height transition standards, and
strengthen buffering and screening requirements for intensive industrial
uses.

City of Savannah - Amendments to Sections:

*5.17.5 (Development Standards for Permitted Uses),
9.5.4c (Exemptions),
9.5.4.e.i (Land Use Classes),
Table 9.5-1 (Determination of Buffer Type),
9.5.4.e.iii (Use Buffer Types and Options),
9.5.4.e.v (Design Standards for Use Buffers)*

Chatham County – Amendments to Sections:

*3-12.4.D (Manufacturing and Industrial Buffer Requirements)
3-12.6.D (Type F Buffer Provisions)*

For brevity, the proposed text amendments have been summarized as follows. The full texts can be found attached to the related Agenda item.

Text Amendment to the City of Savannah Zoning Ordinance

SECTION MODIFIED	PROPOSED MODIFICATION	PURPOSE & EFFECT
SEC. 5.17.5 (DEVELOPMENT STANDARDS FOR PERMITTED USES)	Modifies Footnote 1 to increase the height restriction transition zone from 50 feet to 100 feet from a Residential zoning district.	Provides a larger setback for building heights for industrial developments near residential areas, pushing taller industrial buildings further away to reduce visual and physical impacts.
SEC. 9.5.4.C (BUFFER EXEMPTIONS)	Adds "wetlands" to the areas exempt from visual buffer requirements, alongside marshland.	Clarifies that natural wetland areas provide their own separation, alleviating the need for developers to build artificial visual buffers in protected ecological zones.
SEC. 9.5.4.E.I (LAND USE CLASSES)	Removes intensive industrial uses (like outdoor storage and waste-related uses) from Class 6 and creates a new "Class 7" category for them, adding container storage, warehousing, intermodal freight yards, railyards, and data centers.	Categorizes the most intensive and potentially disruptive heavy industrial activities into their own specific class so stricter screening and buffer requirements can be targeted to them.
TABLE 9.5-1 (DETERMINATION OF BUFFER TYPE)	Updates the buffer matrix by adding a row for the new Class 7 uses, mandating a "Type F" buffer when a Class 7 use is adjacent to a Class 1 (Residential) use.	Ensures that heavy industrial, freight, and warehouse uses provide the highest level of screening and separation when developed next to residential areas.
SEC. 9.5.4.E.III (USE BUFFER TYPES AND OPTIONS)	Introduces "Type F Buffer Planting Standards," which include a mandatory 100-foot buffer width and specific earthen berm requirements (a standard 8-foot berm, or a 20-foot berm with no fence/wall required for sites >25 acres or DRI). Additionally, changes the Type E buffer requirement from a 'fence' to a 'wall'.	Establishes highly rigorous, performance-based screening standards (using significant physical barriers and varied plant densities) to effectively mitigate noise, dust, and visual blight from heavy industry.
SEC. 9.5.4.E.V (DESIGN STANDARDS FOR USE BUFFERS)	Strikes out the language requiring fences or walls to be located either "within one (1) foot of the property line or set back at least 20 feet from the property line," replacing it with the simpler requirement that the fence or wall "shall be located within the required buffer".	Provides developers and site engineers more flexibility in the exact placement of fences and walls within the buffer area to better accommodate the new, massive earthen berms and extensive tier plantings.

Text Amendment to the Chatham County Zoning Ordinance

SECTION MODIFIED	PROPOSED MODIFICATION	PURPOSE & EFFECT
Sec. 3-12.4.D (MANUFACTURING AND INDUSTRIAL BUFFER REQUIREMENTS)	Adds clarification that when manufacturing, warehousing, or industrial uses abut residential uses or residentially zoned property, the enhanced buffer requirements of Sec. 3-12.6.D shall apply. Also explicitly includes warehousing uses and excludes artisan/craft uses.	Ensures stronger buffering standards are consistently applied when industrial-type uses are adjacent to residential areas, reducing visual and operational impacts and clarifying applicability to warehousing uses.
Sec. 3-12.6.D (TYPE F BUFFER PROVISIONS)	Introduces enhanced Type F buffer requirements for industrial uses adjacent to residential properties, including a minimum 100-foot planted or preserved buffer, an 8-foot berm topped with an 8-foot opaque fence or wall, and allowance for limited openings for access and utilities as approved by the County Engineer; further provides flexibility by allowing the average buffer width to be reduced by up to 50% for sites 10 acres or less and/or warehouse uses 50,000 square feet or smaller.	Significantly increases separation and screening between industrial and residential uses to improve compatibility and reduce visual and noise impacts, while providing flexibility for smaller-scale developments by allowing reduced buffer widths without compromising overall buffering intent.

BACKGROUND:

During recent Board discussions, Commissioners, Board members and community advocates expressed a strong desire to update the Comprehensive Plan and Future Land Use Map to ensure industrial and residential zones are separated by transitional land uses, such as Office-Institutional or Commercial zoning, rather than placing them directly adjacent to one another.

Based on recent development trends, MPC, City and County staff have determined that existing zoning standards, which allow buffers of up to only 40 feet, are inadequate for modern industrial development near residential areas. The expansion of heavy industrial uses has raised significant concerns, including noise, odor, and visual impacts on nearby neighborhoods.

To address the immediate physical buffer deficiencies, Staff from the City, County, and MPC collaborated to produce a unified set of standards to be codified as text amendments.

1. The City of Savannah text amendment establishes a new Class 7 land use category with a corresponding Type F buffer, requiring a 100-foot buffer and enhanced screening for high-intensity industrial uses near residential areas.
2. The Chatham County text amendment strengthens Type F buffer requirements, including

a 100-foot buffer and enhanced screening standards, while allowing flexibility for smaller-scale developments.

FINDINGS:

1. Under the current City of Savannah Zoning Ordinance, *Section 5.17.5* dictates that industrial buildings proposed within 50 feet of a Residential zoning district must strictly adhere to that residential district's height restrictions. From that point, the building may only increase in height by one foot for every additional one foot of distance it is set back from the residential zone.
2. For physical screening, *Section 9.5.4* mandates a "Type E" buffer when high-intensity industrial activities (*Class 6 uses*) are adjacent to residential areas. This standard currently caps the required physical separation at a maximum 40-foot buffer width accompanied by an 8-foot tall fence.
3. *Section 9.5.4.e.v* restricts site design by dictating exactly where this screening can be built, requiring that any fence or wall be located either within exactly one foot of the property line or set back at least 20 feet from the property line.
4. In Chatham County, *Sec. 3-12.4.D* mandates a "Type F" buffer for industrial uses, but *Table 3-12.5* currently limits this to a fixed 30-foot planted or 40-foot preserved width without earthen berm requirements. Additionally, *Sec. 4-6.2* currently lacks residential height step-down protections.
5. Since 2022, the City Council has consistently found it necessary to manually mandate 100-foot buffers and other site-specific design modifications for industrial petitions (e.g., Fort Argyle Road and Buckhalter Road) because the base Ordinance proved insufficient.
6. Joint City-County adoption of analogous standards ensures a uniform level of protection for all residents of the metropolitan area regardless of municipal boundaries.
7. During review, the MPC Board supported the increased buffering but emphasized prioritizing the preservation of existing mature vegetation over berm construction where feasible.

ORDINANCE ANALYSIS:

Per *Section 3.7.7*, Savannah's *Zoning Ordinance* offers four (4) review criteria for consideration of proposed text amendments:

- a. **Consistency** – The extent to which the proposed text amendment is consistent with the remainder of the Zoning Ordinance, including any purpose and intent statements.

MPC Staff Comment: *The proposed amendments are consistent with the purposes of the Zoning Ordinance, specifically its mandate to "protect existing residential neighborhoods by preventing the encroachment of incompatible land uses," "minimize conflicts," and "promote desirable living conditions." By reorganizing the most intensive industrial uses into a new Land Use Class 7 and requiring a robust, 100-foot Type F buffer when adjacent to residential areas, the amendment creates internal consistency between the stated intent of the code and its actual performance standards.*

- b. **New or Changing Circumstances** – The extent to which the proposed text amendment

represents a new idea not considered in the existing Zoning Ordinance, or represents a revision necessitated by changing circumstances over time.

MPC Staff Comment: *The amendments respond to the increasing scale and intensity of industrial development, where existing buffer standards are no longer adequate to mitigate impacts on nearby residential areas. The introduction of expanded buffers and screening elements, including berms, represents a necessary update to address these conditions.*

The amendments apply broadly to high-intensity industrial uses, not just warehouses, such as manufacturing and processing (excluding artisan/craft), container and outdoor storage yards, intermodal and railyard facilities, vehicle and freight terminals, data centers, and waste-related operations.

- c. **Error or Inappropriate Standard** – Whether or not the proposed text amendment corrects an error in the Zoning Ordinance or otherwise improves upon existing requirements or standards.

MPC Staff Comment: *The amendments directly improve upon existing standards in both jurisdictions. The proposed text corrects deficiencies by mandating a 100-foot buffer, replacing fence requirements with earthen berms, and expanding the height restriction transition zone.*

- d. **Compliance with Higher Law** – Whether or not the proposed text amendment revises the Zoning Ordinance to comply with state or federal statutes.

MPC Staff Comment: *While not prompted by a change in state or federal statute, the amendment brings the Zoning Ordinance into compliance with higher-level municipal policy directives. This framework explicitly directs to address and correct historical injustices, including the disproportionate environmental burdens (such as industrial noise and air pollution) placed on disproportionately impacted, marginalized, and/or low-income communities. This amendment institutionalizes protective barriers to comply with equity and environmental justice.*

POLICY ANALYSIS:

The amendments address the increasing scale and intensity of industrial development, which has exceeded the capacity of existing zoning standards. Current buffer and separation requirements are insufficient to mitigate impacts associated with large-scale warehouse and logistics facilities, particularly where such uses are in close proximity to single-family residential development. The shift to performance-based, 100-foot Type F buffers and increased height transition zones aims to rectify this deficiency.

Further, by coordinating these text amendments between the City of Savannah and Chatham County, the policy ensures jurisdictional parity, preventing developers from exploiting weaker buffer rules in one jurisdiction over the other.

Reviewing bodies expressed strong support for the amendments while raising concerns about balancing engineered buffering with environmental preservation. The MPC emphasized that ordinance language should prioritize the retention of existing mature vegetation over berm construction where feasible. Commissioners also noted that while enhanced buffers address

immediate impacts, long-term solutions should include transitional zoning and planning strategies to better separate industrial and residential uses.

MPC STAFF RECOMMENDATION:

As the proposed amendments represent a necessary update to local zoning policy to better mitigate impacts associated with large-scale warehouse and logistics facilities, particularly where such uses are in close proximity to single-family residential development, MPC staff recommends **approval** of the proposed amendments to the following sections:

City of Savannah Zoning Ordinance Sections:

- 5.17.5 (Development Standards for Permitted Uses)
- 9.5.4(c) (Exemptions)
- 9.5.4(e)(i) (Land Use Classes)
- Table 9.5-1 (Determination of Buffer Type)
- 9.5.4(e)(iii) (Use Buffer Types and Options)
- 9.5.4(e)(v) (Design Standards for Use Buffers)

and

Chatham County Zoning Ordinance Sections:

- 3-12.4.D (Manufacturing and Industrial Buffer Requirements)
- 3-12.6.D (Type F Buffer Provisions)