



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: MPC Staff

DATE: March 31, 2026

SUBJECT: Text Amendment to the City of Savannah Zoning Ordinance

Re: **Amendment 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)*

Applicant: Bridget Lidy for The Mayor and Aldermen
of the City of Savannah, GA

MPC FILE NO: 26-001109-ZA-TEXT

REQUEST: A Petition to amend Articles 5.0 (Base Zoning Districts) and 9.0 (General Site Standards) to extend building height setbacks, establish a new heavy industrial land use classification, and mandate stricter physical buffer and screening requirements for intensive industrial developments.

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

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.

SECTION MODIFIED	PROPOSED MODIFICATION	PURPOSE & EFFECT
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.

BACKGROUND:

Based on recent development trends, MPC and City/County Staff have acknowledged that the current zoning Ordinances, which contain a maximum potential buffer of only 40 feet, are inadequate for modern, industrial developments located near residential areas. The encroachment of heavy industrial facilities, waste transfer stations, and large-footprint logistical

warehouses has created severe environmental justice issues for legacy neighborhoods, subjecting them to noise, odor, visual blight, and particulate matter.

During recent Board discussions, commissioners stressed that *physical buffers alone do not fix poor planning*. 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.

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. With regard to the City of Savannah Zoning Ordinance, the forthcoming text amendment would create a new "Class 7" buffer specifically for high-intensity industrial uses abutting low-intensity uses/zoning (such as single-family homes). This new standard mandates a 100-foot buffer, the installation of a berm (a new concept for the local ordinance), dense plantings, and adjusted building height restrictions. In response to the presentation of these new standards, Board members strongly requested that the text amendments explicitly prioritize the *preservation of existing mature trees*, rather than allowing developers to clear cut centuries-old growth just to build the required berms.

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. While the present text amendment is exclusively for the **City of Savannah Zoning Ordinance**, Chatham County has been supportive and actively engaged in discussions regarding the need for modification of existing standards. Joint City-County adoption of analogous standards ensures a uniform level of protection for all residents of the metropolitan area regardless of municipal boundaries. County modifications are anticipated for presentation to the Planning Commission and County Commission in the near future.

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 amendment is 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 amendment is necessitated by the rapidly changing scale and nature of industrial development in the region. Recent years have seen the proliferation of million-square foot warehouses, logistical transfer stations, and freight facilities directly adjacent to residential areas. The existing maximum 40-foot buffer requirement was not contemplated with a view toward modern, high-intensity industrial development. The introduction of mandatory earthen berms represents a necessary new idea to physically mitigate the potentially undesirable impacts these developments present for nearby residents.*

- 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 amendment directly improves upon existing, ineffective standards. The current maximum visual buffer of 40 feet (Type E) and the 50-foot building height setback have proven to be inadequate standards for separating heavy industry from residences, failing to mitigate noise, odor, and visual blight. The proposed text corrects these deficiencies by mandating a 100-foot buffer, replacing fence requirements with 8- to 20-foot earthen berms, and expanding the height restriction transition zone from 50 feet to 100 feet.*

- 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, particularly the City of Savannah GPS Equity Implementation Framework. This framework explicitly directs the City 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 the City's mandated equity and environmental justice goals.

POLICY ANALYSIS:

The proposed text amendments primarily seek to mitigate the adverse impacts of heavy industrial development on adjacent residential neighborhoods, aligning site development standards with the precepts of the *Savannah GPS* Strategic Plan. Specifically, the amendments advance *Goal 2* (Equitable Community Development & Resiliency) and *Goal 4* (Livable Environment & Infrastructure) by establishing robust physical separations that protect the health, safety, and quality of life of residents.

A critical policy shift involves operationalizing the City's *Equity Implementation Framework*. Historically, inadequate buffer standards have resulted in a precarious interface that has disproportionately burdened marginalized and low-wealth communities with industrial nuisances like noise, odor, and visual blight. By isolating high-intensity uses into a new Land Use Class 7 and mandating 100-foot buffers with substantial earthen berms and acoustic walls, the amendment institutionalizes protective barriers to directly address these systemic issues.

The amendment also addresses the practical reality that the scale of modern industrial logistics has outpaced existing zoning protections. Current standards, which cap buffers at 40 feet and require only 50-foot height transitions, were designed for a prior era of development and are presently inadequate in the face of million-square foot warehouses and logistical transfer stations now frequently erected mere feet from single-family homes. The shift to performance-based, 100-foot Type F buffers and 100-foot 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.

Feedback from the reviewing bodies highlights a strong consensus on the need for these changes, though it raised notable policy questions regarding environmental preservation versus engineered buffering. While the MPC generally supported the introduction of berms and expanded buffers, Commissioners expressed serious concern that the new berm requirements might inadvertently incentivize the clear-cutting of mature tree canopies. The Board emphasized that the ordinance text must strictly prioritize the preservation of existing mature vegetation over the construction of artificial berms whenever feasible. Board members also noted that while physical buffers are a necessary immediate fix, future zoning policy and comprehensive planning must proactively utilize *transitional zoning* (such as Office-Institutional or Commercial) and *strategic overlays* to protect residential character and prevent heavy industry from being inappropriately sited too close to less intense uses in the future.

Ultimately, the amendment represents a necessary evolution in local zoning policy, shifting the burden of impact mitigation from vulnerable residential neighborhoods to the industrial developers generating the externalities.

The proposed text amendment will impact a range of potentially noxious industrial uses other than warehouses -- it specifically targets the most intensive industrial activities. In addition to warehouses and waste-related uses, the newly proposed *Class 7* also captures Industry, Manufacturing and Processing (excluding Artisan/Craft), Container Storage Yards and Outdoor Storage Yards, Intermodal Freight Yards and Railyards, Vehicle and Freight Terminals, and Data Centers.

MPC STAFF RECOMMENDATION:

MPC Staff recommends **approval** of the proposed amendments to Sections 5.17.5 and 9.5.4 of the City of Savannah Zoning Ordinance.