

What is a Character Overlay Zone?

A character overlay is a general reference to a zoning tool to provide overlay zoning provisions to a property(ies) for a variety of purposes. Some of the common types/names of character overlays include business, character, conservation, downtown, historic, neighborhood, and preservation. The overlay zone purpose is more important than the generic class or name of overlay types.

The provisions of a character overlay typically include performance objectives to create, preserve and enhance the general appearance and continuity of an area that they are applied. To achieve these objectives, the provisions of the overlay typically include design guidelines, design review processes and modified property development standards. Some overlays may also incorporate additional land uses to allow for specific activities to occur.

Each overlay is customized to the area that it is to be applied and may include provisions that are unique to that area, such as colors, forms, materials, landscaping, architectural styles and architectural vernacular. It is not uncommon for the overlay zone to include historic preservation elements in the overlay provisions in a hybrid format. When historic preservation is included, it is common to include provisions and references to The Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties.

