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Critical Area Ordinances Terminology Guide

Comprehensive plan:

A plan defining a community's long-term growth and development goals and needs. The Metropolitan Council requires every county, city, and township in the seven-county metro area to update their comprehensive plan every ten years. The plan includes topics such as land use, transportation, housing, infrastructure, parks and trails, water resources, etc. Cities and townships in the Critical Area must also include a section dedicated to assessing and planning for the land around the Mississippi River.

Comprehensive plans are strategy documents, not binding laws. The plan's goals and activities are carried out through local government action and ordinances.

Conditional Use Permit (CUP):

Similar to a variance, a CUP allows a case-by-case deviation from zoning requirements related to land use. CUPs are used a little differently in different communities, mostly for land uses that might not generally be appropriate but are allowable when the project meets certain conditions. In the Critical Area, cities can opt to allow CUPs for buildings that exceed height limits as long as visual impacts are assessed and mitigated.

Mississippi River Corridor Critical Area (MRCCA):

Often referred to as "MRCCA" or simply "Critical Area," this is the state-designated protected area in and around the Mississippi River. The Critical Area extends through 25 cities and townships in Anoka, Hennepin, Ramsey, and Washington, and Dakota counties. It was established by the Minnesota Legislature in 1976. By state law the Critical Area "conserves the scenic, environmental, recreational, mineral, economic, cultural, and historic resources and functions of the river corridor."

Mississippi National River and Recreation Area (MNRRA):

The national park dedicated to the Mississippi River through the Twin Cities metro. Established by Congress in 1988, the national park shares the same boundaries as the Critical Area. Because the federal government owns very little of the land within the park boundary, MNRRA is managed in partnership with the local governments within its borders.





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Mitigation:

Measures to reduce the impact of a variance or conditional use permit, such as increasing vegetative screening and using natural-looking building materials on a tall structure, or improving stormwater management for a large parking lot. Mitigation is required in the Critical Area when a variance or CUP would harm primary conservation areas or public river corridor views.

Ordinance:

A law. This term usually refers to laws created and enforced at the local (county, city, township) government level.

Primary Conservation Area (PCA):

Key Critical Area resources and features, including shorelines, bluffs, floodplains, wetlands, gorges, river confluences, natural drainage routes, unstable soils and bedrock, native plant communities, cultural and historic properties, significant existing vegetative stands, tree canopies, etc. Each MRCCA community's comprehensive plan must catalog these areas.

Public River Corridor View (PRCV):

Views toward the river from public parkland, historic properties, or public overlooks, as well as views toward bluffs from the ordinary high-water level of the opposite shore, as seen during the summer months (when leaves are out). Each MRCCA community's comprehensive plan must catalog these views and the impact on PRCVs must be considered in development planning processes.

Variance:

A deviation from zoning requirements, as granted by the city. A variance does not change the law but grants a waiver from the requirements on a case-by-case basis. Variance requests must demonstrate that there is an unnecessary hardship in complying with the zoning requirement (such as complying with building setback requirements on an unusually-shaped lot). Financial hardship alone is not sufficient to be granted a variance.

Zoning:

Government regulations to guide growth and development. Zoning ordinances regulate land use (which activities/uses are acceptable where) and may also define development requirements such as building size, design, materials, and placement.

Looking for more Critical Area terminology?
Check out the state's list at www.revisor.mn.gov/rules/6106.0050.

