

DOCKET: UDO-CC32
STAFF: [Dan Roberts](#)

REQUEST

Planning and Development Services staff is proposing an ordinance amendment to modify Chapter 8 of the *Unified Development Ordinances (UDO)* to remove section 8.4.6.B, “Graded Slopes, Mechanically Stabilized Slopes and Fills”.

BACKGROUND

Planning and Development Services staff received a request from the Assistant City Manager for Public Works to review the current approval process for mechanically stabilized slopes (retaining walls). Our UDO currently allows walls or wall sections of less than ten or fifteen feet in height (depending upon the purpose of the wall) to be approved by erosion control staff; alternative compliance processes exist for proposing walls which exceed this height limit. Most of Winston-Salem’s peer communities, however, do not include height limits or other technical details related to retaining walls and stabilized slopes in their development ordinances. Instead, the relevant staff in these communities evaluate each retaining wall based on the merits of the proposed design, as certified by a licensed engineer. This approach promotes greater design flexibility, allowing engineers to best address the unique conditions of each project and site.

ANALYSIS

The UDO currently limits most retaining walls to ten feet in height unless such walls are broken up into multiple vertical sections. In these situations, no wall segment shall be taller than ten feet, and a terrace a minimum of ten feet in width shall be provided between each vertical section of the wall. As noted above, the UDO also includes two alternative compliance processes for specific types of retaining walls:

- Walls of up to fifteen feet in height may be approved by the City Manager for Public Works in Winston-Salem, or by the Planning Board in Forsyth County, where no practical alternative exists and where the design of such walls includes adequate safety protections.
- Additionally, wing walls which support buildings, bridges, and similar infrastructure, as well as stormwater channels, may be approved by the Stormwater Director (City Stormwater reviews requests in the Winston-Salem municipal limits as well as unincorporated Forsyth County). The UDO does not include a height limit for walls approved through this process.

While the requirements for mechanically stabilized slopes are currently contained in the UDO, Planning staff is not responsible for their review or approval. In Winston-Salem, retaining walls are reviewed by Engineering and Field Operations (Erosion Control and Stormwater) staff, who have the technical engineering expertise necessary to assess these proposals.

In unincorporated Forsyth County, North Carolina Department of Transportation staff review retaining walls that are adjacent to state rights-of-way, and City Field Operations staff review other walls shown on grading and erosion control plans.

Based on discussions with Public Works, staff believes the requirements for mechanically stabilized slopes should be moved from the UDO to the *Infrastructure Development Standards* (IDS), which contain the technical specifications for streets, sidewalks, utilities, and similar infrastructure. Furthermore, staff believes our standards for retaining walls should not include specific height limits but should instead allow project engineers the flexibility to propose wall designs which can best respond to unique conditions on site. Public Works staff will be developing new IDS standards for retaining walls based on this direction.

CONCLUSION

Staff believes the proposed change will provide a more streamlined review process for developments which incorporate mechanically stabilized slopes. Rather than requiring alternative compliance review for taller retaining walls, these design elements will be reviewed holistically with other grading, erosion control, and stormwater features by an interdepartmental team of relevant public works staff. This amendment will also move the technical standards for mechanically stabilized slopes from the UDO to the *Infrastructure Development Standards*, which contains other infrastructure requirements.

RECOMMENDATION: APPROVAL

CITY-COUNTY PLANNING BOARD

PUBLIC HEARING

MINUTES FOR UDO-CC32

JANUARY 8, 2026

Dan Roberts presented the staff report.

PUBLIC HEARING

FOR: None

AGAINST: None

WORK SESSION

MOTION: Clarence Lambe recommended that the Planning Board find that the request is consistent with the comprehensive plan.

SECOND: Salvador Patiño

VOTE:

FOR: Walter Farabee, Haley Gingles, Jason Grubbs, Clarence Lambe, Salvador Patiño, Dixon Pitt, Lindsey Schwab, Brenda Smith, Jack Steelman

AGAINST: None

EXCUSED: None

MOTION: Clarence Lambe recommended approval of the ordinance amendment.

SECOND: Salvador Patiño

VOTE:

FOR: Walter Farabee, Haley Gingles, Jason Grubbs, Clarence Lambe, Salvador Patiño, Dixon Pitt, Lindsey Schwab, Brenda Smith, Jack Steelman

AGAINST: None

EXCUSED: None

Chris Murphy, AICP/CZO
Director of Planning and Development Services