

Implementing YMY (Yes My Yard) in Ferguson Township

Elliott Killian

February 12th 2025

Executive Summary

Ferguson Township faces increasing housing challenges, including a shortage of affordable options, pressure from university-related housing demand, and a lack of workforce housing for the Centre Region. Traditional zoning regulations, particularly in **R1, R1B, and R2 districts**, limit homeowners' ability to use their land efficiently and create additional housing options.

Yes My Yard (YMY) is a zoning approach that **empowers homeowners to expand and improve their properties** while maintaining the character of their neighborhoods. Instead of relying on large-scale developments, YMY allows for **gradual, small-scale housing growth** through updates to zoning laws that increase flexibility and encourage responsible development.

Key Recommendations

1. **Standardize side yard setbacks to a flat 10 feet** instead of using a percentage-based system, making zoning regulations clearer and easier to follow.
2. **Increase the height limit for accessory structures to match primary buildings (40 feet)**, allowing for more functional uses such as accessory dwelling units (ADUs).
3. **Expand impervious surface allowances** for homeowners who adopt **modern stormwater management technologies**, enabling greater use of land without increasing runoff concerns.
4. **Align building coverage with impervious surface limits** to allow **up to 50% of a lot** to be used for structures.
5. **Consider reclassifying all R1 and R1B zoning districts as R2**, permitting single-family and two-family homes while simplifying zoning rules and increasing housing opportunities.

Community Benefits

Implementing YMY principles would:

- **Increase housing availability** without the need for large, high-density developments.
- **Support property values and homeowner flexibility** by allowing for responsible expansion.
- **Encourage sustainable development** through incentives for modern stormwater solutions.
- **Provide new opportunities for rental income** and multi-generational living arrangements.

Next Steps

To move forward, Ferguson Township should engage with the community, update zoning ordinances, develop incentive programs, and implement changes in phases. These zoning updates will support smart growth, create more housing choices, and ensure a thriving, homeowner-friendly future for Ferguson Township.

Introduction

Housing Challenges in Ferguson Township

Ferguson Township, like much of Centre County, faces significant housing challenges. These issues make it difficult for many residents to find affordable, suitable housing close to where they work. Several key factors contribute to this problem:

- **NIMBY Opposition (Not In My Backyard):** Many residents resist new housing developments due to concerns about traffic, neighborhood character, and property values. This opposition limits the growth needed to accommodate a changing population.
- **University Housing Demand:** Penn State University creates a high demand for student housing, which puts pressure on the local rental market. This can lead to rising costs, making it harder for non-students to find affordable housing.
- **Workforce Housing Shortages:** Many people working in the Centre Region—including teachers, healthcare workers, and service industry employees—struggle to find housing within the county. As a result, they must commute long distances, adding to traffic congestion and reducing quality of life.

These challenges highlight the need for a balanced approach that allows for responsible growth while maintaining the township's character.

How YMY Can Help

YMY (Yes My Yard) is a zoning approach that **empowers homeowners to create more housing options on their own properties**. Instead of relying on large-scale developments that often face community opposition, YMY allows for gradual, homeowner-led housing growth. This strategy benefits both individual property owners and the broader community by:

- **Allowing accessory dwelling units (ADUs)** – Homeowners can add backyard cottages, garage apartments, or basement units, increasing rental availability.
- **Encouraging more efficient land use** – Updates to zoning rules can allow homeowners to expand their homes without excessive restrictions.
- **Maintaining neighborhood character while adding housing** – Small, incremental changes prevent the drastic shifts often associated with large developments.
- **Providing more housing for local workers** – More rental and ownership options close to job centers reduce long commutes and strengthen the local economy.

By giving property owners the freedom to **add housing on their terms**, YMY removes many of the obstacles that make traditional housing development difficult.

Current Zoning Limitations in R1, R1B, and R2

Right now, zoning in Ferguson Township places strict limits on what homeowners can do with their land, making it difficult to expand housing options:

- **R1 (Single-Family Residential):** Only allows one primary dwelling per lot, restricting density and housing availability.
- **R1B (Suburban Single-Family Residential):** Similar to R1.
- **R2 (Two-Family Residential):** Allows both single-family and duplex homes, but still has limitations on accessory structures and impervious surface coverage.

Under these zoning rules, homeowners have **limited flexibility** to build additional housing or expand their properties. **YMY proposes to update these zoning laws** to allow for more housing options, either by modifying R1, R1B, and R2 rules or by transitioning R1 and R1B into R2 zoning.

These changes would **not force** anyone to develop their property but would **give homeowners the choice** to use their land more efficiently. By modernizing zoning laws, Ferguson Township can address its housing challenges **without disrupting its neighborhoods or relying on large-scale developments**.

Proposed Zoning Changes

Ferguson Township's current zoning regulations place significant restrictions on how homeowners can develop their properties. By adjusting these rules, the township can create more flexibility while maintaining responsible growth. The following proposed changes align with YMY principles, providing a balanced approach that benefits both homeowners and the broader community.

A. Standardized Side Yard Setbacks

- **Current Rule:** The township currently uses a percentage-based system for side yard setbacks, with a minimum of 10 feet. This approach results in inconsistent requirements across properties.
- **Proposed Change:** Implement a flat **10-foot side yard setback** for all properties, regardless of lot size. This standardization will simplify zoning rules and provide greater clarity for homeowners and developers.
- **Benefits:**
 - Establishes uniform setback requirements, making zoning regulations easier to understand and apply.
 - Creates more **usable space** on residential lots without increasing density.
 - Reduces administrative complexity in zoning approvals.

B. Increased Accessory Structure Height

- **Current Rule:** The maximum height for a **primary structure** is **40 feet**, while accessory structures (such as garages and sheds) are limited to **25 feet**.
- **Proposed Change:** Allow accessory structures to **match the height of the primary structure**, up to **40 feet**. This adjustment enables homeowners to make better use of their accessory buildings, such as adding second-story living spaces.
- **Benefits:**
 - Allows for **second-story accessory dwelling units (ADUs)**, increasing housing options.

- Supports **multi-generational living** by enabling homeowners to provide housing for family members on their property.
- Enhances storage and workspace opportunities for homeowners.

C. Impervious Surface Adjustments Using Modern Stormwater Technology

- **Current Rule:** The township enforces strict limits on impervious surface coverage to prevent excessive runoff and flooding. These limits often restrict homeowners from expanding driveways, patios, or structures.
- **Proposed Change:** Allow homeowners to **increase impervious surface coverage** if they implement modern stormwater management technologies, such as **permeable pavement, rain gardens, and underground retention systems**.
- **Benefits:**
 - Promotes **environmentally friendly development** by encouraging the use of modern stormwater management solutions.
 - **Reduces barriers** to property improvements while maintaining flood prevention measures.
 - Provides **greater flexibility for homeowners** to expand driveways, patios, and building footprints.

D. Aligning Building Coverage with Impervious Coverage

- **Current Rule:** Building coverage is currently more restricted than impervious surface limits, meaning that even if a property owner has available impervious surface capacity, they may not be allowed to use it for structures.
- **Proposed Change:** Adjust zoning regulations so that **building coverage can match impervious surface limits**. This would effectively allow homeowners to use up to **50% of their lot** for structures without requiring special approvals.
- **Benefits:**
 - Provides **more flexibility** for homeowners to expand their properties without increasing environmental impact.
 - Encourages **small-scale housing growth**, such as ADUs and home expansions.
 - Simplifies zoning rules by ensuring consistency between impervious surface and building coverage regulations.

These zoning changes will **modernize Ferguson Township's residential zoning regulations** while ensuring that growth is managed responsibly. By adopting these updates, the township can **increase housing opportunities, improve property values, and provide more flexibility for homeowners**, all while maintaining environmental sustainability.

Additional Option: Zoning Reclassification – R1 to R2

An additional option to the suggestions above is to simplify zoning regulations by consolidating residential districts. Instead of modifying R1 and R1B zoning separately, this proposal suggests **reclassifying all R1 and R1B properties as R2**. This change would maintain existing single-family housing options while **allowing for moderate increases in housing density**, providing more flexibility for homeowners and encouraging gradual growth.

A. Expand R2 Zoning and Phase Out R1 & R1B

- **Current Rule:**
 - **R1 and R1B** zoning restrict housing to **single-family homes only**, limiting the ability to create additional housing.
 - **R2** zoning allows for **both single-family and two-family residential buildings**, providing more options for property owners.
- **Proposed Change:**
 - Convert all **R1 and R1B zoning districts into R2**, ensuring that existing single-family homes remain permitted while allowing homeowners the **option to build duplexes or two-family homes**.
- **Benefits:**
 - **Increases housing options** without requiring additional rezoning applications.
 - **Encourages gradual, homeowner-driven development** rather than large-scale projects that often face resistance.
 - **Streamlines zoning regulations**, making it easier for homeowners and developers to understand and navigate the process.
 - **Reduces administrative burdens** for the township by eliminating the need for frequent zoning variances or exceptions.

This approach aligns with the principles of YMY by **giving homeowners more control over how they use their land** while ensuring that residential growth happens in a way that is both predictable and sustainable. By adopting this zoning reclassification, Ferguson Township can **support housing affordability, increase property values, and provide more opportunities for residents** without dramatically changing the character of existing neighborhoods.

Implementation Strategy

Successfully adopting YMY in Ferguson Township requires a **clear, step-by-step approach** to ensure community support, regulatory alignment, and long-term sustainability. The following strategy outlines how these zoning changes can be effectively implemented.

Step 1: Community Engagement and Public Meetings

Before making any zoning changes, it is essential to **engage with residents, business owners, and community stakeholders** to gather feedback and address concerns. Public meetings, surveys, and informational sessions can help explain how YMY works, highlight its benefits, and provide a space for open discussion. This step will help **build public trust and support**, ensuring that the proposed changes reflect the needs of the community.

Step 2: Zoning Ordinance Updates and Legal Adjustments

Once community feedback has been collected, the next step is to **update Ferguson Township's zoning ordinances** to align with YMY principles. This will involve:

- Adjusting **side yard setbacks, accessory structure height limits, and building coverage rules**.
- Incorporating **new impervious surface allowances** for properties using modern stormwater management techniques.
- Considering a **reclassification of R1 and R1B into R2** to allow for a greater mix of housing options. Legal experts and planners should work together to ensure these updates comply with state and local regulations while making the approval process as straightforward as possible for homeowners.

Step 3: Incentive Programs for Modern Stormwater Solutions

To encourage responsible development, the township can introduce **incentives for homeowners who adopt modern stormwater technologies**. Potential incentives include:

- Increase the amount of impervious area.
- Reduced permitting fees for homeowners who install permeable pavement, rain gardens, or underground retention systems.
- Grants for sustainable water management improvements.
- Fast-track approval processes for property modifications that incorporate these technologies.

By promoting these solutions, the township can **increase housing flexibility while maintaining strong environmental protections**.

Step 4: Phased Implementation and Periodic Review

Rather than making sweeping changes all at once, YMY can be implemented in **phases**, starting with a pilot program or a specific zoning district. This approach allows the township to **evaluate the impact of the changes, make adjustments as needed, and expand the program gradually**. Regular reviews should be conducted to assess:

- The number of new housing units created.
- The effectiveness of stormwater management incentives.
- Community satisfaction and feedback.
- Any necessary refinements to zoning regulations based on real-world outcomes.

By following this strategy, Ferguson Township can **implement YMY in a structured, community-driven way that balances growth, sustainability, and homeowner rights.**

Conclusion

Ferguson Township has an opportunity to address its housing challenges in a way that benefits both homeowners and the broader community. By adopting YMY (Yes My Yard) principles, the township can **increase housing options, support property owners, and encourage responsible growth** without relying on large-scale developments.

Key Recommendations

- **Update zoning regulations** to allow for more **flexible side yard setbacks, increased accessory structure heights, and expanded impervious surface coverage** with modern stormwater management solutions.
- **Align building coverage with impervious surface limits** to give homeowners more options for expansion.
- **Consider zoning reclassification** by consolidating R1 and R1B into R2, allowing for gradual density increases while preserving single-family housing.
- **Implement incentive programs** for sustainable building practices and stormwater management.
- **Engage the community** through public meetings and a phased implementation plan to ensure the changes reflect local needs.

A Sustainable, Homeowner-Friendly Approach

YMY **empowers homeowners** by giving them more control over how they use their property. These zoning updates would allow property owners to **increase the value of their homes, create additional housing opportunities, and contribute to a more livable and resilient community.** By modernizing zoning laws, Ferguson Township can **grow in a way that is both sustainable and adaptable** to future housing needs.

Next Steps

Township officials should **take action** by reviewing these recommendations and initiating **the zoning update process.** This includes gathering public input, making necessary legal adjustments, and developing a phased implementation plan. By moving forward with these changes, Ferguson Township can create a zoning framework that supports both current and future residents.

Now is the time to embrace smart, homeowner-friendly zoning policies that will strengthen the community, improve housing availability, and ensure a sustainable future for Ferguson Township.