

**AGENDA REPORT  
PLANNING AND ZONING COMMISSION MEETING  
March 19, 2026**

**SUMMARY**

The City of Columbia is proposing revisions to Chapter 29 of the City Code (Unified Development Code) that would revise the definition of "family" as shown in Sec. 29-1.11 [Definitions]. The proposed amendment would eliminate the difference in the number of un-related adults permitted within dwellings in the R-1, R-2, and R-MF zoning districts in favor of a **single maximum** limitation of 4 un-related adults, revise how a "family" is defined to allow non-traditional and multi-generational family formations to occupy a dwelling with no numerical limitation, and provides clarity that dwelling unit occupancy would be determined by using the adopted International Property Maintenance Code (IPMC) standards such that "overcrowding" is appropriately addressed. The amendments are proposed as a means of addressing recommendations presented within the 2024 Boone County/City of Columbia Housing Study.

**DISCUSSION**

The definition of "family" within the Unified Development Code (UDC) has existed since the city adopted its first City Plan in 1935. The definition has been amended numerous times since then (see attached May 15, 2025 Memo) with each revision generally becoming more restrictive with respect to familial characteristics and how many **un-related adults** could occupy a dwelling unit.

The current definition, last comprehensively updated in 1991, lists specific familial characteristics that often create confusion as to what constitutes a "family" among the public and staff. This confusion has and can often result in non-traditional or multi-generational family formations being unnecessarily excluded from certain dwelling units within the city. Furthermore, the current definition has specific numerical limitations with respect to the number of **un-related adults**, not total persons, that may occupy a dwelling that varies by residential zoning classification. Within the R-1 zoning district the limitation is a maximum of **3 un-related adults**. Whereas within the R-2/R-MF zoning districts the limitation is a maximum of **4 un-related adults**. The current 1991 definition has undergone few modifications since its comprehensive revision in 1991.

The October 2024 Boone County/City of Columbia Housing Study recommended that consideration should be given to eliminate preemptive zoning restrictions on the number of unrelated individuals who may occupy a single dwelling unit. This recommendation, shown on page 177 of the Study, states:

*Abolish zoning restrictions that cap the maximum number of unrelated individuals who are allowed to live together. These regulations related to the number of unrelated individuals are typically attempting to regulate potential externalities, like excessive noise and parking. Instead of regulating the number of unrelated individuals, these potential externalities should be regulated directly, through noise ordinances, parking standards, and other regulations.*

Given this recommendation and direction from the City Council, the staff and the Planning Commission conducted research and evaluated alternative definitions (see attached May 15, 2024 Memo). As a result of this research and the desire to remove unnecessary barriers to access/improve dwelling unit use throughout the city, the attached definition of "family" is being recommended.

It is important to note that the revised definition does attempt to remove all potential barriers to dwelling unit occupancy as was recommended by the Housing Study; however, such discussion did occur during Commission work sessions regarding this matter. The choice to retain a uniform **single un-related adult** limitation was deliberate given the potential for unintended consequences within certain locations of the city in close proximity to Columbia's academic institutions and already impacted by possible parking deficiencies as well as other pressures to accommodate higher residential densities.

As can be seen in the attached "map series", significant R-1 zoned property exists outside of the "central core" of the city where the proposed revisions would be most beneficial. Review of this attached "map series" also illustrates that most of the properties within the "central core" are already zoned R-2 or R-MF. As such, the revisions to the existing definition will have limited impact given they currently allow a maximum of **4 un-**

**related adults.** However, given the expansion of what constitutes familial status, the revised definition would permit housing in these areas to be more readily available to non-traditional family formations or multi-generational families with greater than **4 related adults** without unnecessary limitations or confusing regulatory language.

As part of its review and discussion, the staff and the Planning Commission gave consideration to how “over-occupancy” would be addressed within the revised definition. The attached revisions specifically incorporates provisions that will govern occupancy by the standards contained within City’s adopted International Property Maintenance Code (IPMC). The IPMC, in addition to other regulatory standards, contains specific square footage requirements that must be met (bedroom, living room, dining room, combined living/dining room) from which a dwelling unit’s occupant load is calculated.

The IPMC standards do not apply to **private** residential homes. However; should the revised definition of “family” be adopted, application of the IPMC standards would be possible on a case-by-case basis to respond to public concerns of over occupancy. The IPMC’s standards are presently used in determining occupant load compliance with the City’s Rental Unit Conservation Law as well as short-term rental regulations.

Finally, as a part of its research, the staff and the Planning Commission identified that the UDC did not include a definition of a “single housekeeping unit”. This term has been referenced in all city-adopted definitions of “family” dating back to 1935. As a result, review of peer community definitions relating to this term was undertaken and following extensive discussion a merged definition from two peer communities, believed to be best calibrated for Columbia, was created. The proposed definition provides clarity on what a “single housekeeping unit” would look like and is viewed as being broad enough to capture the unique dwelling unit rental arrangements seen within the Columbia market.

This matter was distributed for public comment through the City’s public engagement portal, Beheard, from January 21 through approximately March 3. Additional public comments relating to this matter was shared with staff from the Planning Commission Chairperson’s private Facebook account. All public comments are attached to this report and identified as “Public Comments”.

Comments receive were supportive of eliminating the zoning district distinction; however, showed clear preference for reverting to an earlier version of the city’s definition of “family” that did not contain numerical limitations on dwelling unit occupancy. Furthermore, comments received recommended that the term “family” not be defined and that the revised definition focus more on occupancy limits.

These sediments were shared with the Planning Commission during its February 19 work session after which there was discussion with respect to eliminating the numerical limitation. Commissioners gave significant consideration to the opportunities that could be created if the limitation were eliminated. However, after significant internal debate, the Commissioners concluded the attached revisions and their reduction in confusion as well as barriers to access housing were appropriate at this time. The Commission acknowledged that while the amendment may not be as “far reaching” as some expressed desirable, moving forward with the revisions proposed did not preclude an opportunity to make further adjustments in the future, if needed.

## CONCLUSION

Staff views the proposed changes as an incremental step forward toward addressing removal of unnecessary barriers to access more efficient use of the housing stock especially within the R-1 zoning district. Furthermore, the proposed revisions are viewed as removing confusion with respect to what constitutes a “family”, broadens the number of **related** individuals that can cohabitate together, provides clear guidance on how over-occupancy will be evaluated, and defines the term “single housekeeping unit” which has consistently appeared in the definition of “family” since 1935 notwithstanding it has never been defined.

While the proposed revisions stop short of fulfilling completely the recommendation of the 2024 Housing Study, given the unique characteristics of the city’s neighborhoods and the impacts that a student-centric community presents the revisions are believed the most appropriate at this time. The City of Columbia is one of several identified participants in meeting the goals, objectives, and recommendation of the Housing Study. While the City is the most densely populated and often best equipped to address “urban” issues, the other identified

participants must also take an active part in addressing the issue of housing access and availability. To this end, it is important to note that Boone County is presently taking steps to revise their definition of "family" and zoning regulations such that they are more inclusive and "occupancy" focused instead of being limited by an un-related person cap. While the strategies between the City and County differ, these differences are seen as appropriate based on historical practices, significantly different densities of development, and influences of specific land uses upon each geographic area.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

Approve the proposed revision to the definition of "family" as shown in attached Public Hearing Draft Definition of "Family"

## **ATTACHMENTS**

1. Public Hearing Draft Definition of "Family"
2. Staff Report to Planning and Zoning Commission – Background Research (5-15-25)
3. City-wide Residential Zoning "Map Series"
4. Public Comments

## **PUBLIC NOTIFICATION**

A public hearing ad for this matter was placed in the Tribune on March 3, 2026.

**Public Notification Responses:** None

**Notified neighborhood association(s):** None - city-wide text change

**Correspondence received:** Public comments (Beheard and Facebook) are attached. None post advertising.

Report prepared/approved by: Patrick Zenner