



The Housing Game Has Changed: What Ohio Planners Need to Know About the 21st Century ROAD to Housing Law

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Ohio planners spend countless hours developing comprehensive plans, updating zoning codes, engaging residents, and identifying future housing needs. But what if the biggest obstacle to solving the housing crisis isn't planning, it's implementation?

For years, the housing conversation has largely focused on a single question: how do we get more housing built?

The recently enacted 21st Century ROAD to Housing Law represents one of the most significant housing initiatives in decades. Much of the attention surrounding the legislation has focused on zoning reform, regulatory modernization, and federal incentives designed to encourage local housing production. Those provisions matter. They reinforce a growing national recognition that housing outcomes are shaped by planning decisions as much as by market forces.

But for Ohio planners, the most important aspect of this legislation may be something different.

This law is less about planning *theory* and more about *implementation*. It is less about debating whether housing should be built and more about helping communities actually build it.

The Ohio Planner Housing-Ready Checklist

The communities that compete best for road to housing funding will not be the ones that simply say “we need more housing.” They will be the ones that can say: “we know exactly what housing we need, where it should go, what barriers stand in the way, and we have the partners ready to build it.”

- ✓ complete a housing needs assessment (if you don't have one)
- ✓ identify priority housing sites
- ✓ review zoning barriers
- ✓ prepare a housing implementation strategy
- ✓ create an adaptive reuse inventory
- ✓ establish public-private partnerships
- ✓ collect baseline housing data
- ✓ identify projects that could move within 1–3 years
- ✓ coordinate with regional partners

Communities that can convert plans into projects will be best positioned to address housing shortages, support economic development, and remain competitive for residents and employers.

The Housing Challenge Is an Implementation Challenge

Across Ohio, housing challenges look different from one community to the next.

Growing suburban communities struggle to keep up with demand. Legacy cities are working to stabilize neighborhoods while attracting new residents and investment. Rural communities face workforce housing shortages that make it difficult to retain employers and support local economic growth. Nearly every community is confronting rising construction costs, labor shortages, aging infrastructure, and increasingly complex development regulations.

In many cases, planners already know what needs to be done. The challenge is finding the resources, political support, and technical capacity necessary to implement those solutions.

That is where the ROAD to Housing Law becomes particularly important.

The legislation includes new planning and implementation grants, support for code innovation, incentives tied to housing production, and tools designed to reduce the time and uncertainty associated with housing development. For local governments, the message is clear: communities that modernize processes, streamline approvals, and create predictable pathways for development will be better positioned to compete for future housing investment.

The Most Important Planning Conversations Are Shifting

For much of the past decade, housing discussions have centered on whether local governments should reform zoning regulations.

That conversation is still important. However, the more pressing question today may be how communities can translate planning goals into actual housing production.

Every planner has seen projects delayed by unclear processes, outdated standards, duplicative reviews, or uncertainty regarding approvals. Each delay adds cost. Those costs eventually appear in rents, home prices, subsidy requests, or projects that never move forward at all.

The most significant contribution of the ROAD to Housing Law may be its acknowledgment that housing shortages are often the product of implementation barriers rather than planning failures. Helping communities build faster, more predictably, and with less risk may ultimately produce more housing than years of policy debate alone.

Adaptive Reuse May Be One of the Most Powerful Tools in the Bill

One of the most practical and potentially transformative provisions of the legislation is support for adaptive reuse through the new RESIDE program. The program is designed to encourage the conversion of vacant and abandoned commercial or industrial buildings into housing. While national headlines frequently focus on office-to-residential conversions, Ohio's opportunity is much broader.

Across the state, communities are filled with underutilized assets:

- Vacant schools
- Former hospitals
- Aging hotels
- Dead malls
- Underperforming retail centers
- Historic institutional buildings
- Obsolete industrial facilities

These structures often sit in locations already served by infrastructure, transit, utilities, and community amenities. Converting them to housing can simultaneously address blight, preserve historic resources, strengthen neighborhood vitality, and increase housing supply.

For planners, adaptive reuse offers something particularly valuable: a way to align housing policy, economic development, historic preservation, and community revitalization around a common objective.

In many communities, adaptive reuse may also be more politically achievable than large-scale greenfield development because it repurposes existing assets rather than expanding into undeveloped areas.

Opportunity Zones Could Become a More Effective Housing Tool

Another important but underappreciated aspect of the legislation is its connection to Opportunity Zones.

Historically, Opportunity Zone investments have often gravitated toward projects that offered the strongest financial returns, which frequently meant market-rate developments in rapidly appreciating areas. While housing projects have benefited from the program, affordable and workforce housing have not always been the primary recipients of Opportunity Zone capital.

The new housing-focused incentives create an opportunity to change that equation.

For Ohio, this may be particularly significant because the state already has its own Opportunity Zone Tax Credit program. When combined with the housing and revitalization tools included in the ROAD to Housing Law, planners and developers could potentially assemble stronger capital stacks for projects located in distressed communities.

This creates opportunities to align:

- Federal housing incentives
- Federal Opportunity Zone benefits
- Ohio Opportunity Zone Tax Credits
- Local planning objectives
- Public infrastructure investments
- Traditional housing finance tools

Taken together, these resources could make challenging projects more feasible while directing investment toward neighborhoods that need it most.

For communities seeking economic revitalization, housing production, and private investment simultaneously, the combination of federal and state Opportunity Zone incentives may become one of the most powerful tools emerging from this legislation.

Why This Matters to Both Public and Private Sector Planners

Planning no longer occurs exclusively within city hall.

Public planners continue to shape policy, zoning, infrastructure priorities, and community vision. Private-sector planners, consultants, developers, engineers, architects, and economic development professionals increasingly play critical roles in implementing those plans.

This legislation recognizes that reality.

The housing challenges facing Ohio are too large and too complex to be solved by any single sector. Success will require partnerships capable of aligning public goals with private expertise and investment. The most successful communities will not necessarily be those with the most comprehensive housing plans. They will be the communities that build effective partnerships, create predictable development processes, and consistently move projects from concept to completion.

The Real Opportunity for Ohio

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the final legislation is what it says about the future of planning.

For decades, planners have been asked to prepare plans. Increasingly, we are being asked to deliver outcomes.

Housing affordability, workforce attraction, economic competitiveness, and neighborhood revitalization all depend on whether communities can translate plans into housing production.

The 21st Century ROAD to Housing Law reflects that shift. It recognizes that housing shortages are not simply the result of insufficient planning. They are often the result of insufficient implementation.

For Ohio planners, that creates both an opportunity and a challenge.

Can we use new resources to modernize regulations? Can we unlock underutilized buildings through adaptive reuse? Can we leverage Opportunity Zone incentives to attract investment into neighborhoods that have historically been overlooked? Can we build the partnerships needed to move projects forward more quickly and predictably?



CALL TO ACTION

The 21st Century ROAD to Housing Law *authorizes* important housing programs, but many still *need* federal funding. Help turn policy into progress by contacting your members of Congress and urging *full appropriations*. Visit the APA Planners' Advocacy Network for resources and guidance.

The communities that thrive over the next decade will not necessarily be the ones with the best plans. They will be the ones that figure out how to turn those plans into homes.

While the passage of the 21st Century ROAD to Housing Law marks a significant milestone, much of its potential still depends on continued federal funding and implementation. According to the Bipartisan Policy Group's implementation tracker, many of the programs authorized by the legislation have yet to receive appropriations. **This is an important moment for planners to do more than prepare communities - they can also help shape the policies and investments needed to bring these tools to life.**

By engaging with their members of Congress and advocating for full funding of these programs, planners can help ensure that communities across Ohio and the nation have access to the resources necessary to address housing challenges. The American Planning Association's Planners' Advocacy Network offers guidance and resources for contacting federal legislators, providing a practical way for planning professionals to extend their impact beyond local practice and help advance housing solutions nationwide.

Learn More:

- APA's guiding policy framework around housing:
 - <https://www.ohioplanning.org/policy>
 - <https://planning.org/blog/9331403/housing-reform-win-21st-century-road-to-housing-act-crosses-the-finish-line/>
- 21st Century ROAD to Housing Act Implementation Tracker:
 - <https://bipartisanpolicy.org/hub/21st-century-road-to-housing-act-implementation-tracker/>
- Read the Act:
 - <https://www.congress.gov/bill/119th-congress/house-bill/6644/text>
- APA Planners' Advocacy Network (for contacting federal legislators and advocating for implementation and funding):
 - <https://planning.org/advocacy/>

About APA Ohio:

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