

“They told me I need a variance. What do I do now?”

## A Practical Guide to the Variance Process



Zoning Board of Appeals  
City of Bristol, Connecticut  
September, 1994  
Revised December, 2009

### What Is a Variance?

In general terms, a variance is the legal relaxation of the city's Zoning Regulations in a specific situation where an unusual or unique condition associated with a parcel of land



makes it impossible to meet one or more requirements of the regulations; this unusual or unique condition is referred to formally as a “hardship.” Variances are obtained from the city's Zoning Board of Appeals (ZBA), a five-member board of citizens appointed by the Mayor and City Council and given the authority by state and local law to consider and act upon requests for variances (among other duties).

*EXAMPLE: The Goodfellows want to add a 12-foot-wide garage onto the side of their house, which is located 18 feet from their side property line. According to the city's Zoning Map, their lot is in an R-15 Residential zone; the city's Zoning Regulations require that in the R-15 zone there be a minimum distance of 10 feet between the building and the side property line (the “side yard”).*

*As proposed, the Goodfellows' addition would extend into this required 10-foot side yard by some four feet. In order for the Goodfellows to build the garage in the desired location, they need to apply for and obtain a variance of the minimum side yard requirement.*

### How Do I Obtain a Variance?

The ZBA meets once a month to hear and act upon requests for variances. In order for your variance request to be placed on the ZBA's meeting agenda for a public hearing, you must first file an application with the Board. This is done at the Land Use Office, which is located on the ground floor of Bristol City Hall in the Public Works Department. The Land Use Office acts as the administrative arm of the ZBA and is responsible for processing all ZBA applications; the staff there will provide you with the necessary application forms, offer assistance and advice, and try to answer your questions.

The Land Use Office is open from 8:30 AM to 5:00 PM, Monday through Friday. The telephone number is (860) 584-6225.

### Filing the Application

An application for a variance consists of a completed application form, four copies of a map or plan, the filing fee and, on occasion, other additional information.

**Application Form:** The one-page application form, available at the Land Use Office, is largely self-explanatory. The Land Use staff can assist you with filling out the form and provide you with certain technical information you will need to complete it, such as the Assessor's Map and Lot numbers, zoning district, and type of variance.



A couple of important reminders: (1) the application form must be signed by each and every owner of the property (e.g., both you and your spouse, if you own the lot together); (2) the completed application form is going to be copied and distributed to Board members for their review and thus needs to be legible. So, when filling it out, please print or type all required information!

**Map:** The map or plan should show the existing features of your property (e.g., lot lines, location of the house, driveways), the proposed activity for which the variance is needed (e.g., location and size of the proposed garage), and the location and extent of the proposed variance (e.g., the shortest distance between the proposed garage and the side property line). The map or plan should be drawn by a design professional such as a surveyor or an engineer. An existing plot plan of your property, brought up to date, may be acceptable; check with the Land Use Office.



**Fee:** The application fee is payable at the time you file your application with the Land Use Office. The fee helps defray the cost involved with processing your application (staff time, legal notices, etc.). Checks should be made payable to “City of Bristol”. Please note that the fee is generally not refundable or waivable.

**Other Information:** Occasionally, a variance is requested for a situation that cannot be shown on a map or plan—for example, a height variance for a garage or a size variance for a sign. If you are applying for this type of variance, you should submit additional explanatory materials such as measured drawings or sketches which clearly illustrate the type of variance you are requesting. Again, check with the Land Use Office.

Each ZBA meeting has an application filing deadline associated with it; the deadline falls approximately two-and-a-half weeks before the meeting. In order for your variance application to be heard by the Board at a particular meeting, you must submit your completed application to the Land Use Office no later than 12:00 noon on the filing deadline day for that meeting. There are no exceptions to this rule. The Land Use Office maintains a list of the ZBA's meeting dates and filing deadline days for the current year.

### **Before the Meeting**



At least 12 days before the hearing on your application, you will need to post a "notice of public hearing" sign on your property which informs the public that your property is the subject of a variance request. The sign must be posted for this

entire period, which does not include the day the sign is posted or the day of the meeting. If the sign is posted improperly (or not at all), the ZBA will not hear your application as scheduled and will postpone the hearing until its next meeting. The Land Use Office has more detailed information concerning sign postings and can also give you a list of local sign makers who have signs available.

About one week before the hearing on your application, you will receive a copy of the meeting agenda from the Land Use Office. (The ZBA usually meets on the first Tuesday of the month at 7:00 PM in the Council Chambers on the first floor of City Hall.)

### **At the Meeting**

The ZBA usually hears the applications in the order in which they appear on the agenda. When your application is announced, you (or your representative) should step up to the podium and address the Board. Speak clearly into the microphone and give your name and address; then briefly explain to the Board what it is you propose to do, why you need a variance, what your hardship is, and any other information which will give the board a full understanding of your request. During the hearing, Board members may ask you questions about your application.

When you have finished, the Chairman will give the public the opportunity to speak either in favor of or against your application. If anyone speaks against it, you will be given the opportunity to respond to their comments.

When all parties have spoken, the Board will close the public hearing on your application. Sometimes, however, the Board may feel that it needs additional information regarding an application; if so, it may choose to leave the hearing open and continue it to the following month's meeting, to allow the additional information to be provided and entered into the record of the public hearing.

After the public hearing is closed, the Board will discuss your application and take a vote to either approve or deny it. Once the hearing is closed, no member of the public, including yourself, is allowed to address the Board regarding the application.

Your application needs four affirmative votes of the ZBA in order for your variance to be approved. In approving your variance, the Board may attach conditions that it feels necessary to protect the public health, safety and welfare.

### **The ZBA's Timetable**

By State law, the Zoning Board of Appeals operates within the following timetable:



The Board has 65 days from the "day of receipt" of your application to begin the public hearing. The day of receipt is the day of the next regular meeting of the Board after you have filed your application with the Land Use Office, or 35 days after filing,

whichever is sooner. The Board usually will begin the hearing on your application at the meeting it first appears on the agenda, unless a postponement is requested (e.g., you cannot be present) or is necessary (e.g., the public hearing sign was not posted).

Once the public hearing begins, the Board has 35 days in which to complete it.

Once the public hearing is closed, the Board has 65 days in which to make a decision. Usually (but not always), the Board tries to make a decision on your application right after the close of the public hearing.

The Board has the right to extend these time limits but needs your consent in order to do so.

### **After the Meeting**

Within 15 days after the Board's decision on your variance application, you will receive a letter from the Land Use Office stating the outcome of your application request:



approval, denial, withdrawal, postponement or continuation. If your application was approved, you will also receive an "8-3d form" with the letter of decision. This form, which describes the approved variance, must be filed on the land records in the Office of the City

Clerk in order for your variance to become effective. There is a recording fee for this filing.

If your application was denied, you may appeal the ZBA's decision to the Superior Court or file a new application for hearing by the Board. A court appeal is a legal matter, and you should consult your attorney about it. If you file another application, you should be aware that, under State law, the Board is not required to hold a public hearing on the same or substantially the same variance request if your previous application was decided upon within the past six months.



### **Some Tips:**

- At any time during the process of obtaining a variance, you may represent yourself or have someone else represent you, such as an attorney. That decision is entirely up to you; there is no requirement that anyone else represent you.
- Your hardship cannot be self-created or based upon economic or financial considerations.
- You should bring anything to the public hearing that you think might help clarify or support your application, such as letters from neighbors or visual aids such as photographs.
- The variance you request should be the smallest variance needed to accomplish your objective.