

Charrette Week and “Fixing the Code” Explained

The City of Rehoboth Beach has partnered with Dover Kohl & Partners to for a zoning code update. This is a crucial step in moving towards our newly-launched, temporarily named ReImagine Rehoboth plan, but also necessary to make civic improvements that solve problems and enhance the features and community activities of Rehoboth Beach. An update will also allow new development/re-development that matches the scale and character of a small oceanfront town.

One crucial element to this process is a chance for community involvement in a Charrette Week which will be held at the Convention Center in the City of Rehoboth Beach throughout the week of July 13-17. With input from Joe Kohl, we are aiming to provide people with more about the work they’re doing, their goals, what a Charrette Week is and how you can get involved.

Why does Rehoboth need to fix the code?

When we talk about “the code,” we mean the zoning code — the set of rules that guide what can be built and how. Zoning codes are living documents and need periodic updates. Rehoboth’s code hasn’t had a thorough, comprehensive review in many years, if ever.

Over time, parts of the code have become confusing or inconsistent. As a result, it’s difficult for property owners to understand what they’re allowed to do, and it’s difficult for the City to interpret and apply the rules consistently. No one is particularly satisfied with the current state of the code.

We often compare a zoning code to a piece of software. You can make small fixes for a while, but eventually, you need a major update — the kind where the interface changes or the whole system runs differently because quick patches aren’t enough anymore. That’s the point we’ve reached. This effort is essentially a full system upgrade.

For this phase of the project, we’re focusing on commercial properties. Just by looking around, it’s clear that some buildings have been updated while others are aging. It appears the city is on the cusp of a new wave of development and investment. And with that comes concern — many residents worry that new development will lead to unattractive or inappropriate projects.

Our goal is to prevent that from happening. By having a public conversation now, we can set clearer standards before new projects arrive. People who live, work, and play in Rehoboth Beach have plenty of ideas and perspectives, but there hasn’t really been a formal forum to collect them. This process is about giving the community that voice and using it to shape the future of development in a positive way.

Why should people be excited about Charrette Week?

A lot of people have never looked at a zoning code — and honestly, it's not exactly leisure reading. But it affects everyone. If you want to make changes to your home, whether it's something big like an addition or something simple like adding a deck or a patio, you suddenly find yourself navigating the zoning code and the building code.

That's why, as we consider more substantial updates to the commercial zoning, we think it's important to bring the community into the conversation.

One of the biggest themes we're hearing about is the shape and design of buildings: how they meet the street, how sidewalks function, where parking goes, and how all of that influences the experience of being in Rehoboth Beach — the “outdoor room” of the community.

The facades of buildings and the spaces between them are what really define the character of a place. With new development on the horizon, building height will inevitably be a major topic. Ocean views attract developers who may want taller buildings to maximize those views — but past projects have already shown that oversized buildings can clash with community expectations. Most residents value Rehoboth's character and don't want to lose it.

So the key question becomes: what physical details actually create that sense of place? Windows, doors, eaves, rooflines, balconies, colonnades — all these small elements add up to the feel of the city.

We like to look back at what buildings looked like 100 years ago. Back then, people built using instinct, craftsmanship, and a strong response to climate — often resulting in timeless designs. Some of those historic details still exist today, tucked into the streetscape. Part of our work is identifying those gems and thinking about how to highlight or reinforce them.

The city already has strong architectural guidelines, and some recent buildings have followed them well. But since they're just guidelines and not requirements, the results are inconsistent. Through this process, we may explore which suggestions should be carried forward as actual standards — not to be overly restrictive, but to help ensure new development enhances rather than erodes the character people love.

That's why Charrette Week matters. Everyone who cares about Rehoboth's look and feel gets to be part of shaping its future.

What happens during Charrette Week?

Charrette Week is all about gathering input from the people who care about Rehoboth Beach — residents, business owners, property owners, visitors, and anyone interested in the city’s future.

To make the process interactive (and not a zoning lecture!), the week includes a variety of activities:

Walking Tours

We’ll take guided walks through key streets so participants can look closely at buildings and public spaces — often noticing details they pass by every day. These walks help us understand how buildings relate to the street, how safe and comfortable the environment feels, and how design choices shape the sense of place. Participants also share stories about past issues and how they were resolved, giving valuable real-world context.

Interactive Meetings

Throughout the week, we’ll hold topic-focused meetings designed to be hands-on rather than passive. Early in the charrette, we’ll host a “map session” where we spread out large maps and hand out markers. Participants get to “be the planner,” drawing ideas, highlighting issues, and pointing out opportunities directly on the map. We document everything so no insight gets lost.

Drop-In Studio Time

Because people have different schedules, we pack activities into one week to allow flexibility. Our team will be on-site sketching, drafting early concepts, and visualizing ideas based on what we’ve heard. Anyone can drop in, look over our shoulders, ask questions, offer feedback, or just chat informally.

End-of-Week Summary

At the end of Charrette Week, we’ll present a summary of what we heard and show some initial ideas. These might illustrate solutions to problems or highlight exciting concepts that emerged from the community.

And while this may not look like writing zoning rules, it’s the foundation for them. Charrette Week sets the framework and the policy direction that ultimately shape how the zoning code is written.

What happens after Charrette Week?

At the wrap-up presentation at the end of the charrette, we summarize what we believe we’ve heard. This is also another opportunity for participants to provide feedback. Sometimes people point out something we misunderstood, or they share a new idea that came up late in the process. We treat this as an additional input session.

After that, we return to our offices with all the collected information. Working closely with staff, we begin preparing the first draft of the recommended code changes. Some recommendations will be straightforward, while others may be more complex.

This drafting process usually takes about six weeks after the charrette. Once the draft is complete, we'll make it publicly available. All of this happens before the formal zoning hearing.

The regular zoning change process will still occur. The charrette and the draft recommendations simply provide extra groundwork to ensure the proposed code is in good shape before it goes to the commissioners.

What is the process to change the code?

1. Internal consolidation phase (short-term)

You take the recommended code changes and merge them into one unified ordinance. Because the ideas have already been vetted through charrettes, public sessions, and iterative back-and-forth, this phase is more about packaging everything coherently than starting from scratch.

2. Draft revisions (medium-term)

It's absolutely normal for the first draft not to be the final one.

Typically:

- Draft 1 → Commissioners and public give feedback.
- Draft 2 → Potentially very significant changes (you mentioned up to 50%).
- Draft 3 → Fine-tuning, clarifications, fixing diagrams or language issues.

This part can take several rounds depending on commissioner preference and public engagement.

3. Agenda scheduling (variable)

Once commissioners feel comfortable, they choose when to place the ordinance on an agenda for a vote. This step depends entirely on their discretion, so the timeline can shift based on their workload or priorities.

4. Public posting and transparency phase (ongoing)

Staff posts the code online so residents can read it easily.

The goal: a typical resident should be able to understand

- what they can do with their property

- what their neighbors can do

This clarity helps prevent misunderstandings like “my neighbor is adding a whole extra floor” when that may not be true.

5. Formal adoption (final step)

Once the hearing process is complete and commissioners are satisfied with the final draft, they vote on the single consolidated ordinance — instead of dealing with a dozen separate ones.

Overall, how long the cycle typically takes depends on how quickly revisions are made and how much the commissioners or public request refinements. But with the groundwork that will already have been done, the main variable now is how many revision cycles the commissioners want before scheduling the vote.

How is this different than the strategic plan than some of the other consultants that the City has hired before?

The Comprehensive Development Plan (CDP) is a guiding document that outlines the city’s vision. It includes the community’s vision statement and, in many cases, the specific improvements the city hopes to make. The CDP provides the high-level, 10,000-foot view of how the city wants to grow and look in the future.

The Strategic Plan builds on that vision by defining short-, medium-, and long-term goals, and assigning responsibility for those goals to staff. It breaks the CDP’s broad vision into actionable steps. Dover, Kohl & Partners is helping the city translate those strategies into actions: the comprehensive plan sets the direction, the strategic plan assigns the tasks, and the code changes put those tasks into practice.

The zoning code is the tool that actually implements the plan. While it still requires applicants to come forward with projects, the code ensures that anyone who follows its rules will automatically align with the goals and objectives established in the comprehensive plan. In that sense, the zoning code is a key mechanism for turning the comprehensive plan’s vision into on-the-ground results.

The RFI has gone out for what we have been temporarily calling “Reimagine Rehoboth.” How does this relate?

I would say this is the beginning of laying the groundwork for that effort, because we know the Comprehensive Plan will cover a wide range of topics — and zoning will be one of the most complex. Getting an early start and opening the conversation now will help streamline the process once the full effort begins. You can’t take on a project of this scale

without initiating those discussions, and while some ideas may change along the way, starting the dialogue now puts us in a much better position.

As the community becomes more informed, the discussions naturally become more productive and focused — rather than centered on frustrations about a permit from five years ago. The more people who participate, the better the final product will be.

And one thing that becomes clear, even to someone coming from the outside and talking with residents and visitors, is that a lot of people truly love Rehoboth Beach and genuinely care about its future.

Our goal is simple: let's shape the town into the place everyone wants it to be, and ensure it stays that way. Everyone is welcome, and all ideas are welcome.