



CITY OF  
TALLAHASSEE



# Zoning Spotlight

## Lighting

Growth Management Department  
September 2025



## 1. Introduction

There are many sources of light, from the sun, to signs, to streetlights, to the fixtures in our homes. One of the definitions of light offered by Merriam-Webster is, “Electromagnetic radiation of any wavelength that travels in a vacuum with a speed of about 186,000 miles per second.” That gives a technical definition of what light is, but it doesn’t explain what light does and why it’s so important. Too much light causes glare, pollutes the night sky, creates safety concerns, disturbs sleep, and is aesthetically unpleasant. Too little light can encourage crime, create safety problems, discourage pedestrian activity, and discourage the use of public spaces.

That’s where the Zoning Code plays a role. It regulates light at new development projects. It strikes a balance between too much and too little light. The Zoning Code regulates light sources at the building and on the surrounding property. It doesn’t regulate the types of light fixtures on the inside of a new building.

This issue of Zoning Spotlight explores how the Zoning Code regulates light at new development. As you’ll see in the following pages, the Zoning Code takes a holistic approach to lighting. It includes the obvious standards like the height and type of lighting, glare, and light trespass. However, it also provides standards for signs and for transparency (e.g., the minimum area on a building’s façade that must be windows).

Please keep in mind that if a conflict is ever identified between the Tallahassee Land Development Code (TLDC) and an issue of Zoning Spotlight, the Code takes precedence. The Zoning Spotlight reports don’t replace the TLDC.

## 2. Context

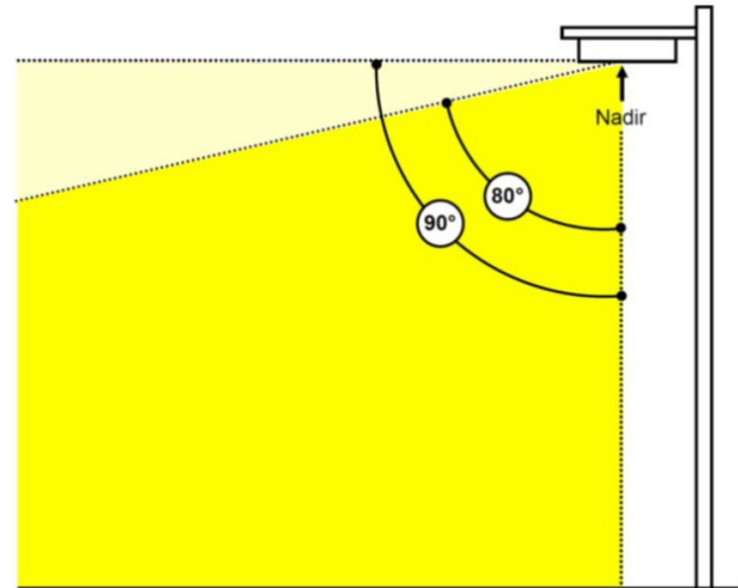
Tallahassee includes over 100 square miles, with a diverse range of neighborhoods and dozens of zoning districts. The type of lighting that is appropriate for one neighborhood versus another can vary widely. Therefore, the City has a core set of lighting standards that apply city-wide, but they’re augmented by a variety of standards that are unique to certain zoning districts. This assures a tailored lighting approach that respects the differences of each neighborhood, instead of a one size fits all requirement.

## 3. Key Terms

- a. *Footcandle (FC)*. A measurement of the amount of light (illumination) falling onto a given point. One footcandle equals one lumen per square foot.

- b. *Full cutoff.* As shown by Figure 1, titled Full Cutoff Lighting Fixture, a full cutoff fixture does not allow any light above a horizontal line at the bottom of the light source (e.g., at or above an angle of  $90^\circ$  above nadir), and limited light at an angle of  $80^\circ$  to  $90^\circ$  above nadir.
- c. *Fully shielded.* A light fixture constructed, installed and maintained so that all light emitted from the fixture, either directly from the lamp or a diffusing element, or indirectly by reflection or refraction from any part of the fixture, is projected below the horizontal plane through the fixture's lowest light emitting part.
- d. *Glare.* The effect produced by a light source within the visual field that is sufficiently brighter than the level to which the eyes are adapted, to cause annoyance, discomfort, or loss of visual performance and ability.
- e. *Light trespass.* Unwanted light spilling onto an adjacent property.
- f. *Lumen.* A measurement of the amount of light emitted by a light source. A lamp is generally rated in lumens.
- g. *Nadir.* The point directly below the luminaire.
- h. *Shield.* A device that is attached onto or inserted into a luminaire to alter the direction of light being emitted. A luminaire that has a shield attached or inserted is considered to be shielded.

Figure 1 - Full Cutoff Lighting Fixture



- i. *Lighting plan.* A lighting plan includes the following: (a) site plan showing the area to be illuminated; (b) the number, type, location, and mounting heights of all pole mounted and building mounted fixtures; and (c) specifications and manufacturer cut sheets for all fixtures including full cutoff classification and shielding information. Lighting plans shall contain the signature and seal of a registered architect, engineer, or lighting professional and shall certify that the illumination on the plan is in accordance with the standards in the Tallahassee Land Development Code.
- j. *Transparency.* Transparency means elements of building facades—windows or doors—that are capable of transmitting light so that objects on either side of a surface are easily visible.

#### 4. Lighting Standards

Table 1 summarizes lighting standards that apply to multiple zoning districts. For ease of reference, please note that the rows in Table 1 are labeled as row A to row O. Each row identifies a specific area or zoning district that is governed by lighting standards unique to that area. Likewise, the columns in Table 1 are labeled as column 1 to 32. The columns correspond to different types of lighting standards. For example, columns 1-13 are prohibited forms of lighting. Columns 14-15 provide standards for the minimum and maximum number of footcandles that a light fixture can produce. Columns 16-25 describe standards that apply to the lighting fixture itself, such as whether it is full cutoff or shielded. Finally, columns 26-32 provide a variety of miscellaneous lighting standards.

##### a. Standards that Apply to Multiple Zoning Districts

Rows A to C provide lighting standards that apply to multiple zoning districts. That includes the Downtown Overlay of the Multi-Modal Transportation District (MMTD) in row A, transects 3, 4, and 5 of the MMTD in row B, and the neighborhood compatibility standards in row C.

##### (1) MMTD Standards

A map of the MMTD is provided at Figure 2. Generally speaking, the MMTD is bordered by Tharpe St. on the north, by Orange Ave. on the south, and by Magnolia Dr. on the east. The western boundary is about 0.5–1 mile to the east of Capital Circle SW. This is not an exact description but is intended to provide a general boundary. The goal of the MMTD is to promote a land use pattern in downtown Tallahassee and its surrounding neighborhoods that supports walking, cycling, and transit, as well as

cars. New development in the MMTD is intended to be compact, pedestrian-oriented, and offer a mixture of uses. The MMTD lighting standards at rows A and B of Table 1 are intended to support this desired pattern of development. Key characteristics of these standards include full cut off light fixtures and shielded lighting.

The goal of the MMTD lighting standards is to support the desired development pattern. That pattern is characterized by development that is compact, dense, pedestrian-oriented, and mixed use. The MMTD lighting standards support that goal by focusing on pedestrians. That means providing enough light to ensure safety but also containing the lighting to a human scale. That's achieved through the height of the fixtures and minimizing glare through full cut off fixtures that are shielded.

##### (2) Neighborhood Compatibility Standards

All residential neighborhoods have an edge where the residential uses stop and the non-residential uses begin. The lighting standards for neighborhood compatibility only apply to the non-residential side of that edge. They ensure that new non-residential development is compatible with the existing context of the residential uses. The neighborhood compatibility lighting standards vary based on whether a project is adjacent to or across the street from a Protected Residential use. The Tallahassee Land Development Code defines Protected Residential as, "Any property developed with a single-family residence, duplex, or triplex to a density of less than or equal to eight units per acre, and any vacant property that is zoned either RP-1, RP-2, RP-MH, RP-R, RP-UF, R-1, R-2, R-3, R-5, UF, LP, MH, or RA."

The following standards only apply to projects that are adjacent to Protected Residential: 1.) Demonstrate that light trespass doesn't exceed 0.5 footcandles (as measured 6 feet above ground level at the property line); 2.) Demonstrate that lights within 10 feet of a Protected Residential use are aimed away from the boundary and shielded on the side closest to the boundary; and 3.) Provide a photometric plan that documents that the light trespass standard is met.

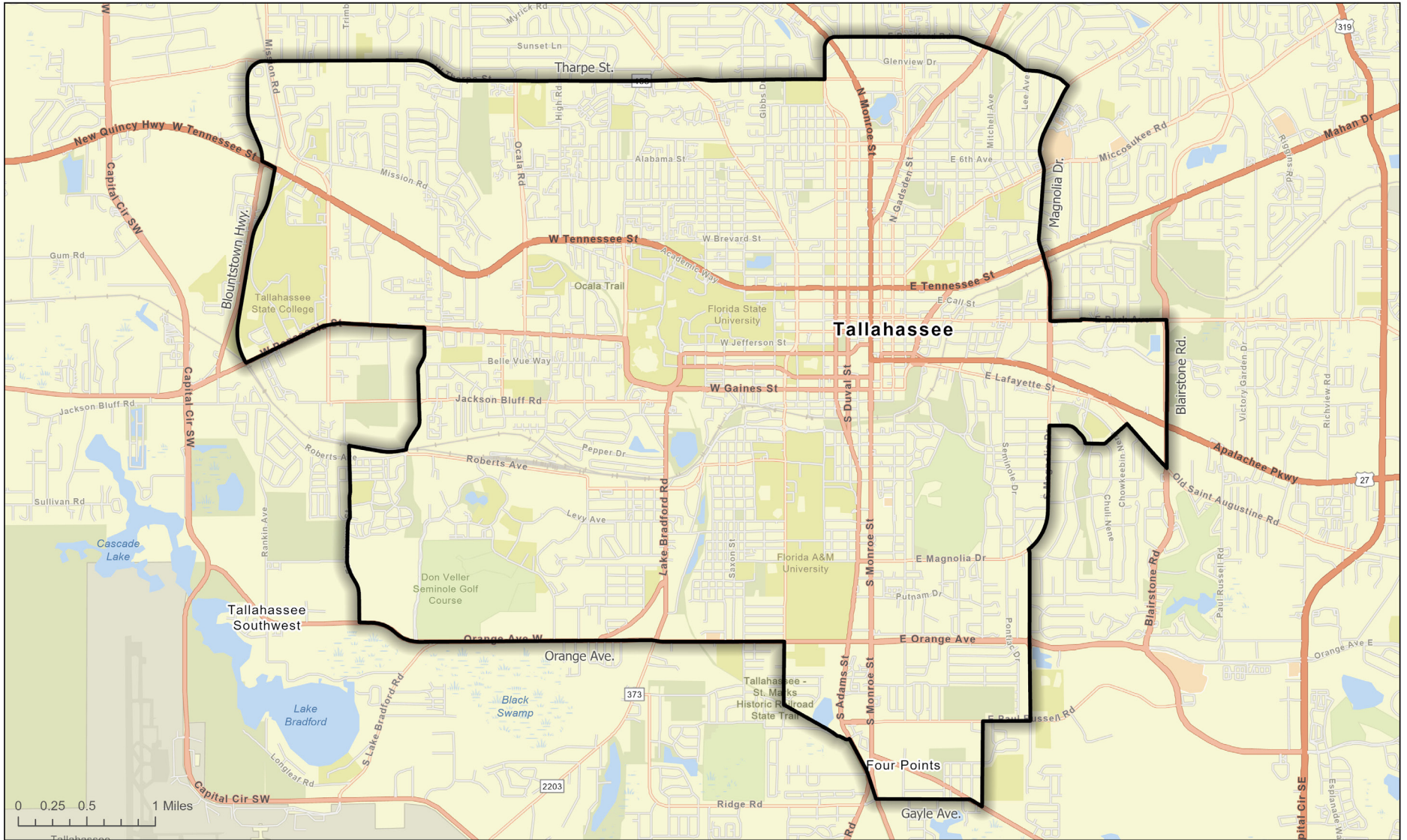
In contrast, the following standards apply to both projects that are adjacent to Protected Residential and to projects that are across a public roadway from property which is Protected Res-

**Table 1 – Development Standards for Lighting**

Zoning District	Citation	Prohibits													Footcandles		Light Fixtures										Miscellaneous											
		1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.	12.	13.	14.	15.	16.	17.	18.	19.	20.	21.	22.	23.	24.	25.	26.	27.	28.	29.	30.	31.	32.					
		Fluorescent lights / luminous tube	Reflective glass	Tinted glass	Flood lights	Spot lights	Search lights	Laser lights	Lights that pulse/flash	Internally lighted awnings	Up lighting	Internally illuminated wall panel	Lighting of angled building surface	Sodium vapor lights	Max. at boundary, 6 ft. above grade	Min./Max. at parking lots	Requires full cutoff lighting	Requires shielded lighting	Shield lights if at elevation change	Direct away from adjacent lots	Recessed bulbs and filters	Maximum light pole height	LED, metal halide, or incandescent	Full spectrum to prevent distortion	Motion det. lights turn off at 5 min.	Parallel to ground, without angle	Photometric plan and cut sheets	Must provide a lighting plan	Lighted bollards on ped. routes	Shield parking garage lights	Transparency standard	Building lights focus on facade	Strive for dark sky principles					
A.	MMTD – Downtown Overlay	10-427(c)(1)						X	X	X					0.5	0.4-1	X	X		X														X				
B.	MMTD – T3, T4, and T5	10-427(c)(1)				X	X	X	X	X	X	X <sup>1</sup>			0.5 <sup>2</sup>		X	X			X	15-25 ft.										X			X		X	
C.	Neighborhood Compatibility	10-427(c)(3)	X			X		X	X	X		X	X	X	0.5		X	X <sup>5</sup>	X			12-18 ft.						X	X	X					X	X		
D.	Mahan Corridor Ring (MCR)	10-268, 10-427(c)(2)				X	X	X	X	X					0.5		X	X		X	X	10 ft.	X	X	X													
E.	Mahan Corridor Node (MCN)	10-269, 10-427(c)(2)				X	X	X	X	X					0.5		X	X		X	X	10-20 ft.	X	X	X <sup>1</sup>								X		X			
F.	Neigh. Boundary Office (NBO)	10-266				X	X								0.5						X	10 ft.																
G.	Neigh. Boundary District (NB-1)	10-272				X	X	X	X	X	X	X <sup>1</sup>			0.5 <sup>3</sup>	0.4-1	X	X			X	12-18 ft.	X	X	X			X										
H.	Urban Planned Unit Dev. (U-PUD)	10-200	X																																			
I.	Urban Residential (R-4)	10-247		X																X														X				
J.	Office Residential (OR-1)	10-251				X	X								0.5						X	12 ft.																
K.	Commercial (C-1)	10-255																		X																		
L.	Commercial Parkway (CP)	10-258				X	X								0.5 <sup>4</sup>						X	20 ft.																
M.	All Saints Neighborhood (ASN)	10-282.2, 10-282.4		X	X								X				X			X		12-18 ft.	X										X	X				
N.	University Transition (UT)	10-282.2		X	X								X				X			X				X									X	X				
O.	University Village (UV)	10-282.2		X	X								X				X			X				X									X	X				

<sup>1</sup> Except when used to accent landscaping.  
<sup>2</sup> Applies only if abutting R-1, R-2, RP-1, or RP-2 zoning districts.  
<sup>3</sup> Also applies to walkways, bike paths, and parks.  
<sup>4</sup> Applies only if abutting a residential property.  
<sup>5</sup> Applies if light is within 10 feet of the boundary of the property which is Protected Residential.

Figure 2 - Map of the Multi-Modal Transportation District



idental: 1.) Provide a lighting plan; 2.) All outdoor fixtures must be full cutoff; 3.) Lighting fixtures must be installed and maintained parallel to the ground, without a tilted angle; 4.) The mounting height of outdoor lighting may not exceed 18 feet in parking lots and 12 feet along pedestrian walkways, except for select areas that have lower mounting height standards; 5.) If a project is at a higher elevation than a Protected Residential property, then lighting fixtures must be shielded, aimed, located, and mounted to minimize the impact caused by the change in elevation; and 6.) All ornamental and building lighting mounted on a structure must be located, aimed, and shielded so that direct illumination is focused exclusively on the building facade or the ground immediately below the fixture.

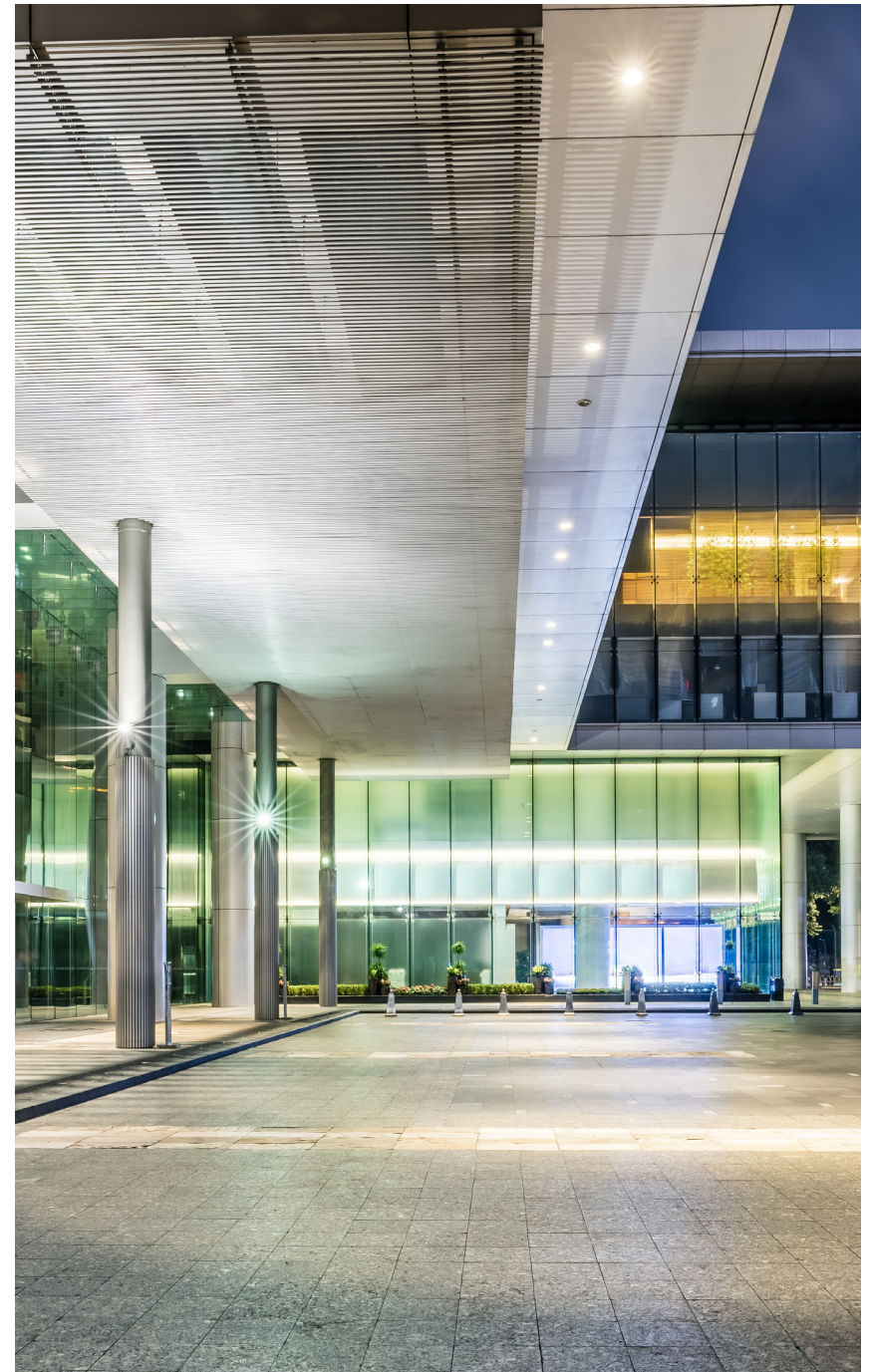
b. Standards that Apply to Individual Zoning Districts

Rows D to O in Table 1 provide lighting standards that are unique to specific zoning districts. The standards vary considerably based on the context of the zoning district. For example, the Commercial Parkway zoning district is characterized by large commercial developments on busy arterial roads. Accordingly, the lighting standards are more flexible, with generally taller light poles. In contrast, the Neighborhood Boundary zoning districts are generally in quieter neighborhoods near residences. As a result, the standards are more stringent, with shorter light poles and more prohibited types of lighting.

5. Signs

Signs are illuminated internally or externally. Sign lighting can create glare if it is too bright or if it isn't properly shielded. For example, Sec. 7-61 of the Tallahassee Land Development Code recognizes that residential properties must be protected from glare and reflection of light. It notes that signs can't produce more than one footcandle of illumination four feet from the sign. Furthermore, Sec. 7-81, TLDC, notes that unshielded lights that produce glare or are a hazard or a nuisance to motorists or occupants of adjacent properties are prohibited.

The Tallahassee Land Development Code primarily regulates signs by their size, number, and height. However, the lighting of a sign is addressed in five ways by Chapter 7 of the TLDC. First, some signs may not be illuminated, like temporary signs (Sec. 7-63, TLDC) and off-site direction signs (Sec. 7-65, TLDC). Second, other signs may only be illuminated internally, which is a requirement in the Mahan Corridor Ring and the Mahan Corridor Node (Sec. 7-69, TLDC). Third, some signs may be illuminated from an external source. For example, externally illuminated signs in the MMTD must be lighted from the top of the signs, with light directed down by a fully shielded fixture (Sec. 7-71, TLDC). Likewise, signs facing a local street that are adjacent or across the street from a



	Off-site Advertising Signs (Sec. 7-64) and Electronic Reader Boards (Sec. 7-70)	Signs in All Saints and University Village District (Sec. 7-68)
Flashing lights	X	X
Traveling messages	X	
Animation	X	X
Other movement	X	
Searchlights		X
Laser lights		X
Revolving or rotating beams of light		X
Internally illuminated awnings		X

protected residential use must be externally illuminated with shielded fixtures (Sec. 7-72, TLDC). Fourth, the lighting for some signs is limited to a specified maximum brightness measured as candelas per square feet. That includes off-site advertising signs (Sec. 7-64, TLDC) and electronic reader board signs (Sec. 7-70, TLDC). Fifth, some types of sign lighting are prohibited. Several examples are listed in Table 2. Please note that several of these features are prohibited throughout several zoning districts (see Table 1), regardless of whether they're part of a sign. For example, searchlights and laser lights are prohibited in several districts.

## 6. Transparency

Transparency is the degree to which a building has windows. This feature is important to both sides of the window. For a building's occupants, transparency means that they'll enjoy more natural light and be better connected to nature through views of the outside. For pedestrians on the street, transparency means greater security because the building's occupants will provide "eyes on the street". It also means that pedestrians will have a far more interesting experience while walking down the street because what would otherwise be a blank wall will instead be an array of restaurant, retail, and office windows. Table 3 summarizes the City's transparency standards by zoning district.

## 7. Conclusion

The number, placement, and type of lighting fixtures requires a delicate balancing act. Too much light creates glare and a safety hazard. Too little light promotes crime and makes pedestrians feel unsafe. The lighting requirements of a neighborhood commercial zoning district aren't the same as an industrial zoning district. The City's Zoning Code tailors lighting standards to the needs of each zoning district. We work to protect neighborhoods from unwanted light, while also ensuring an adequate level of lighting to discourage crime and promote walking. Do you have questions about lighting in the City of Tallahassee? Please let us know by emailing us at [zoning@talgov.com](mailto:zoning@talgov.com).

Zoning District	Land Use	Citation	Ground Floor Transparency 3-8 Feet Above Finished Grade	
			Primary Frontage	Corner Frontage
R-4	Non-Residential	10-247	50%	50%
UP-1	Non-Residential	10-259	70%	70%
UP-2	Non-Residential	10-259.1	70%	70%
MCN	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Non-Residential &amp; Mixed Use</li> <li>Residential</li> </ul>	10-269	50% 25%	50% 25%
MMTD: ASN, UT, UV	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Non-Residential &amp; Mixed Use</li> <li>Residential (SFR exempt)</li> </ul>	10-282.2	70% 50%	70% 50%
MMTD: UV	Retail & Office	10-282.3	75%	75%
MMTD: Other	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Non-Residential &amp; Mixed Use</li> <li>Residential (SFR exempt)</li> </ul>	10-284.2	60% 30%	30% 15%
All districts if next to Protected Residential	Dense Residential: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Single Use</li> <li>Mixed Use</li> </ul>	10-429	30% 60%	30% 60%