



CINCINNATI HILLSIDE
INITIATIVE

PHASE 1 ENGAGEMENT REPORT

Published August 28, 2025



IN PARTNERSHIP WITH



TABLE OF CONTENTS

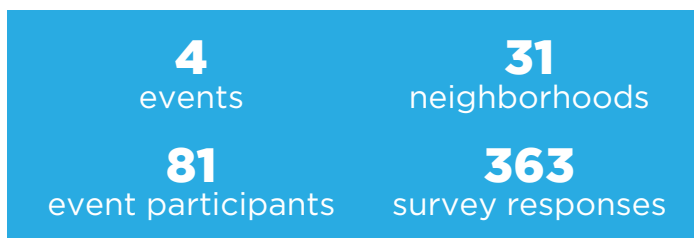
PURPOSE & OVERVIEW.....	3
PHASE 1 PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT	
FINDINGS.....	4
THEMES.....	6
PHASE 1 PROFESSIONAL ENGAGEMENT	
SURVEY RESULTS.....	7
FOCUS GROUP RESULTS.....	9

PURPOSE

The Cincinnati Hillside Initiative is a city-led effort, in partnership with The Hillside Trust, to evaluate, streamline, and improve our hillside building and zoning codes. This initiative will ensure that future projects are developed safely and responsibly with clear, consistent engineering design solutions while keeping community impact and sense of place in mind.

The first phase of the initiative, covered in this report, involved consulting with those who live and work in, or are otherwise impacted by, Cincinnati's hillside districts. Feedback from this phase identified problems with current hillside regulations and will directly inform the policy proposal.

OVERVIEW



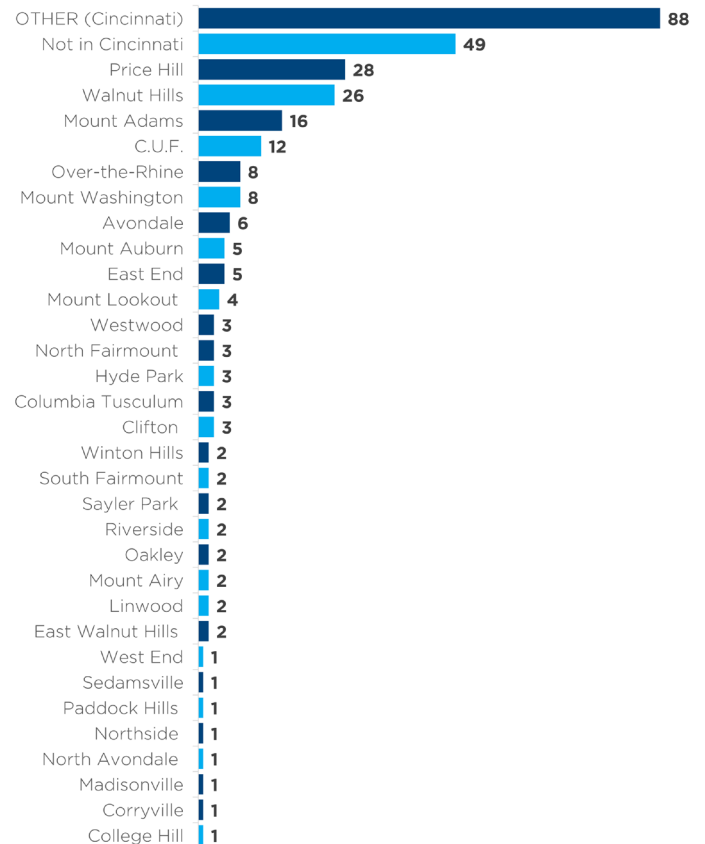
ENGAGEMENT EVENTS 2025



ENGAGEMENT REACH

Neighborhood Representation

for all engagement excluding the Neighborhood Summit.



Participation from the public survey and engagement events covered at least 34 neighborhoods throughout Cincinnati. The most represented neighborhoods were the Price Hills* (28), Walnut Hills (26), Mount Adams (16), and C.U.F. (12). An additional 88 participants indicated that they live or work within Cincinnati, though they did not specify a neighborhood.

**Many respondents indicated they live or work in "Price Hill" without specifying which one. For the purposes of this analysis, the Price Hill neighborhoods will be counted together.*

PHASE 1 PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT FINDINGS

The feedback from the first phase of public engagement was collected from the 2025 Neighborhood Summit, one in-person engagement session, one virtual engagement session, and an online survey, all of which were free and open to the public. These sessions were meant to inform the public about the Cincinnati Hillside Initiative and consult with the community about concerns and opportunities regarding Cincinnati's hillsides, particularly within the Building and Zoning Codes.

Public engagement in Phase 1 centered around residents of hillside districts. Around 80% of participants indicated that they are a resident living in a hillside area. A separate survey specifically for industry professionals was also circulated during this phase and a professional focus group was conducted. Those results are analyzed in a later section.

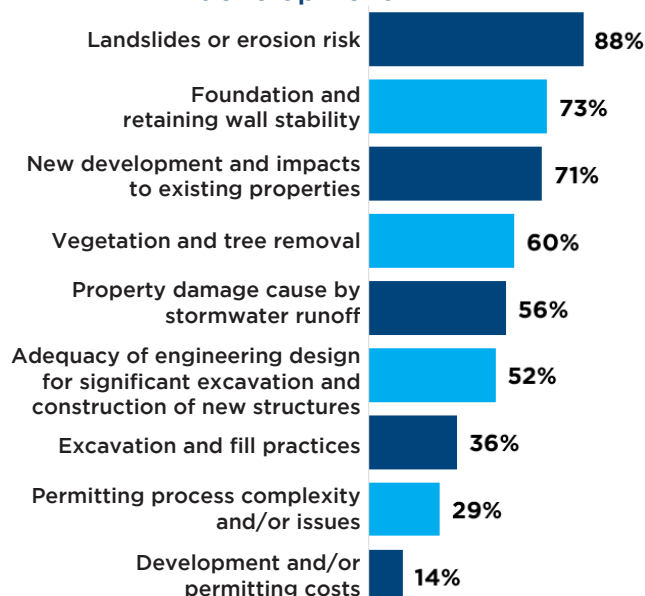
SURVEY RESULTS

The public survey received 256 responses. When asked about the adequacy of current hillside regulations, 49% of respondents indicated that they were unsure while 44% said that current hillside regulations were not adequate.

Though uncertainty exists around the efficacy of Cincinnati's current hillside regulations, the consensus is that regulations need to be reexamined to address existing concerns. Just over half (53%) of survey respondents answered that they have personally experienced issues with hillside development. When asked to expand, many shared stories about property slippage, landslides, and concerns about long-term stability.

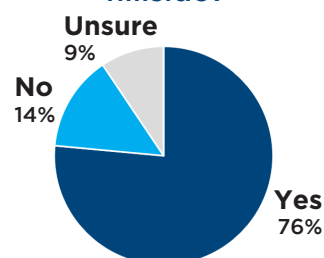
Hillside stability emerged as a primary concern among survey respondents. 88% of survey respondents were concerned about landslide or erosion risk. New developments and their impact on existing properties were a concern of 71% of participants. Conversely, development and permitting costs were only a concern of 14% of participants.

What concerns you most about hillside development?

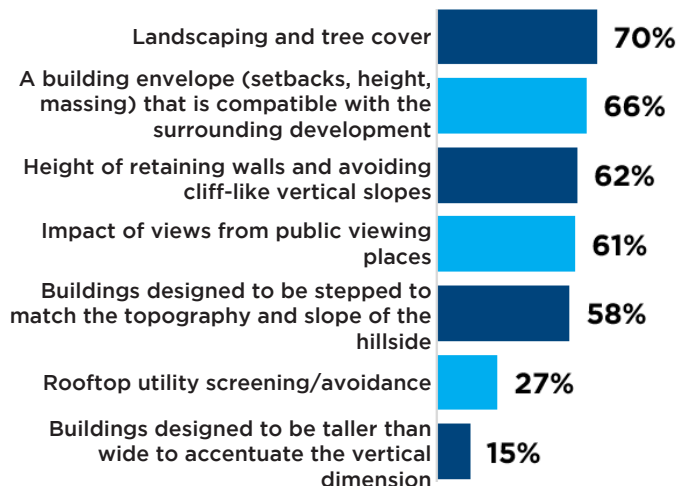


The aesthetic and visual appearance of development in the hillside also emerged as an important factor to consider in updating the hillside regulations. 76% of survey respondents indicated that they are concerned about how hillside development looks.

Are you concerned about the aesthetics and visual appearance of development in the hillside?



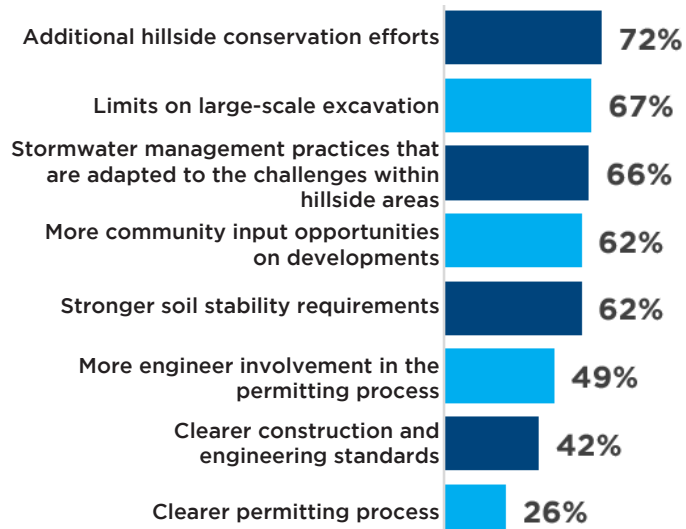
What aesthetic/appearance characteristics do you think are important for hillside development?



The theme of landscaping and greenery arose as an aesthetic and environmental priority in multiple instances.

When asked what aesthetic characteristics are important for hillside development, 70% of survey respondents selected landscaping and tree cover. Similarly, 60% of respondents indicated concern about vegetation and tree removal associated with hillside development, and 72% of respondents selected additional hillside conservation efforts as a preferred hillside regulation improvement.

What improvements would you like to see in hillside regulations?



Other improvements that survey respondents would like to see in the hillside regulations revolved around development practices.

67% of respondents want limits on large-scale excavation and 66% want to see stormwater management practices that are adapted to hillside challenges. Stronger soil stability requirements were also identified as a priority (62%). Respondents also wanted to be more involved in the development process, with 62% wanting more community input opportunities.

"Our hills are an important asset to the city and sets us apart from other cities. Development should follow the contour of the hills (San Francisco, Italy) and highlight their beauty."

Phase 1 Public Survey Response, Cincinnati

"Structural standards should take precedent over any aesthetic standards."

Phase 1 Public Survey Response, Cincinnati

"Anything to make developments safer for future residents so they don't have landslides."

Phase 1 Public Survey Response, Mount Lookout

"More education to the public generally about hillslides, what they are, what causes them, how to remediate them"

Phase 1 Public Survey Response, East Price Hill

"We need to protect hillsides with vegetation, not structures."

Phase 1 Public Survey Response, Cincinnati

"I believe Hillsides in our areas have been overdeveloped and there have been waterflow issues, stormwater issues, and erosion issues."

Phase 1 Public Survey Response, Cincinnati

"If people WANT to build why make it harder and harder? There are hilly towns all over the US that get their charm and character from hillside homes."

Phase 1 Public Survey Response, Cincinnati

PHASE 1 PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT THEMES

Hundreds of comments recorded throughout engagement were sorted and distilled into a number of common “themes,” listed below. Themes do not necessarily represent the opinions of all members of the community, staff, or elected officials. Rather, they provide an overview of what was expressed during the first phase of public engagement.

Cincinnati’s hillsides are an important part of the City’s history and an integral part of its identity. The preservation of this resource is important, and people fear that new development jeopardizes this.

Hillsides are part of the community. **The community needs a voice in what happens on the hillsides,** both through the Cincinnati Hillside Initiative and through the development process. There is a strong desire for more developer transparency, engagement, and communication with the community when developing in a hillside district.

Hillside development guidelines from the 1975 *Cincinnati Hillsides Development Guidelines* are still relevant today and should be incorporated into any regulation update. For example, **hillside development should follow the contour of the hillside,** building with the hill.

There is a lack of trust in city government to enforce current or future hillside regulations through the building and zoning codes.

There is a cost to stricter regulations that make it more difficult to build, especially for individual homeowners and small-scale developers. **Resources should be made available to help with costly maintenance for those who need it.** That cost also needs to be contextualized as ensuring safe, stable development.

More education is needed, for both potential and legacy property owners, about the risks and regulations associated with being on a hillside. There is also a need for more education about language used to describe hillside development.

The primary focus of updating regulations should be on **ensuring long-term slope stability.** The appearance of development, while important, is secondary.

Views from the hillside should be protected. New development needs to be stepped down or otherwise built in a way that will not negatively impact existing viewsheds.

The hillsides are crucial habitats for a variety of wildlife. These wildlife corridors need to be maintained or rehabilitated. Any new development should play a part in **rebuilding the ecology of the hills.**

Part of what makes Cincinnati’s hills unique is the “green wall” effect. Care needs to be given to maintain or plant trees and other natural features. **New development should incorporate landscaping that reinforces the green appearance of the hills.**

Retaining walls should reflect the scale of the built environment and the natural slope of the hill. Large retaining walls are unwelcoming and there are concerns about their structural stability.

There is uncertainty around **who is liable for hillside development and potential impacts to surrounding properties.** The nonexistence of landslide insurance is a major concern.

PHASE 1 PROFESSIONAL ENGAGEMENT FINDINGS

In addition to public engagement, industry professionals were consulted about their experiences with the current hillside regulations. Feedback was collected from an online survey and a focus group. Professional engagement centered around technical aspects of the hillside regulations. This portion of engagement was conducted in partnership with Civil Solutions and ETC, Inc.

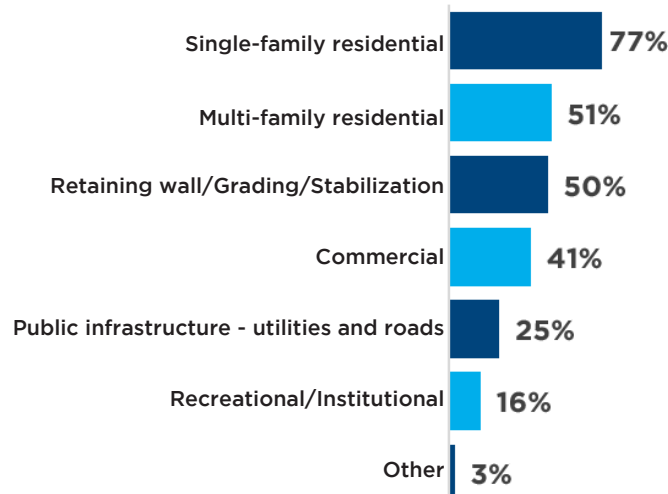


SURVEY RESULTS

The technical survey received 107 responses. Professionals taking this survey came from a broad range of primary roles, with the majority of participants having over a decade of experience. The most indicated profession was architect (32%), followed by geotechnical engineer (21%) and home builder (11%). Other professions represented include civil and structural engineers (9%), real estate and development professionals (7%), and attorneys and/or legal representatives (2%). 11% of respondents categorized themselves as “other.”

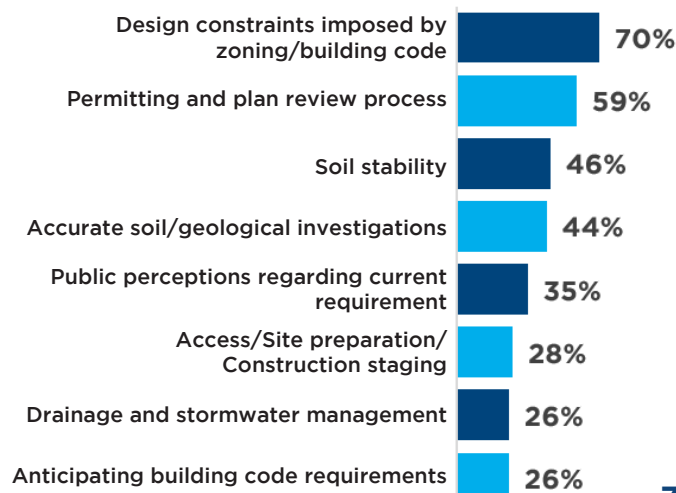
Participants stated they have worked on a broad range of hillside projects, which shows a diverse perspective in their collective expertise. 75% of survey respondents indicated that they reference the Hillside Overlay District chapter of the zoning code (Chapter 1433) either sometimes or frequently.

What types of hillside projects have you worked on?



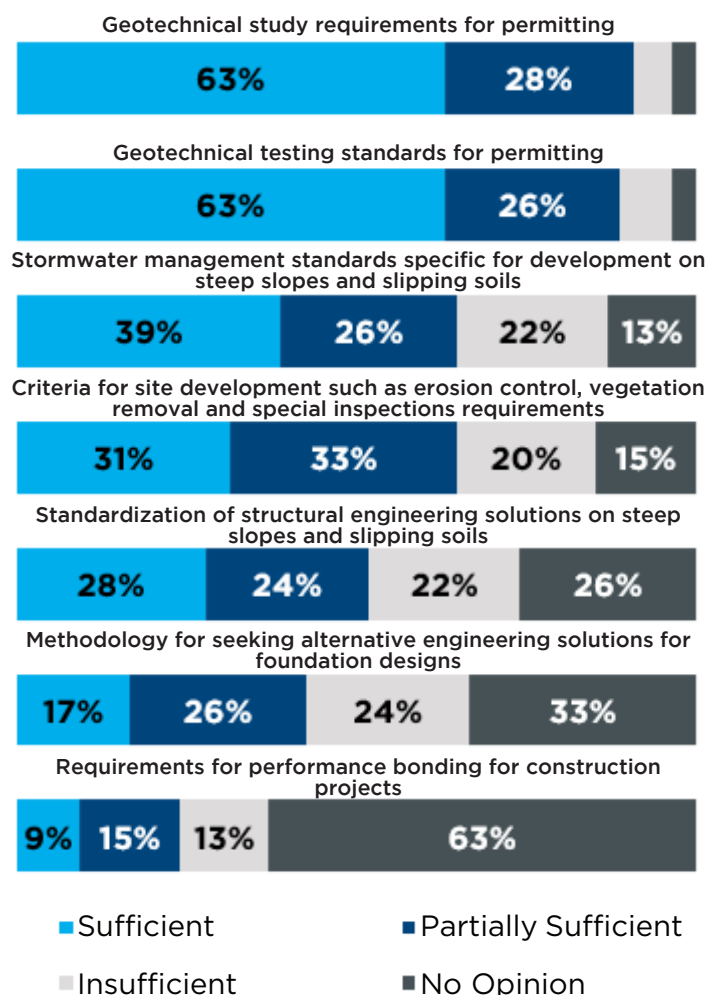
The rigidity of the current hillside regulations emerged as one of the most significant challenges facing professionals designing or building on hillsides in Cincinnati. 70% of respondents identified the design restraints imposed by the building and zoning codes as a challenge, particularly the maximum building envelope, which can vary from site to site. A majority (59%) of respondents also noted the permitting and plan review process as a major barrier to hillside development.

What are the most significant challenges you face when designing or building any development on hillsides in Cincinnati?



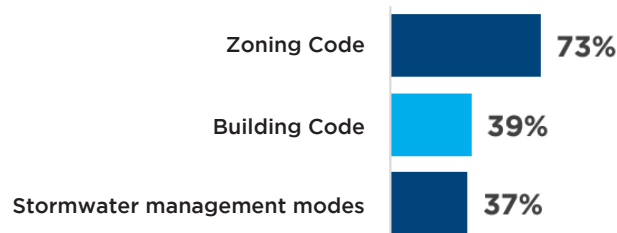
When asked about the sufficiency of various hillside-related requirements, 24% indicated that the methodology for seeking alternative engineering solutions for foundation designs was inadequate, with an additional 26% saying that the methodology was only partially sufficient. Geotechnical requirements and standards were generally viewed as either sufficient or partially sufficient. The majority of respondents (63%) had no opinion regarding the sufficiency of performance bonding requirements.

Please describe your perception of the sufficiency of each of the following geotechnical, structural and development requirements.



According to the professionals, the current hillside regulations in the zoning code sometimes seem to be at odds with the building code and technical expertise. 55% of survey participants indicated they have experienced conflicts or inconsistencies between the zoning code, the building code, and hillside guidelines during project design or design approval. When asked which design standards should be updated, 73% of respondents felt that zoning code standards need to be updated or better defined. The creation of a consolidated hillside development manual or checklist was overwhelmingly supported (92%).

Which design standards should be updated or better defined?



"Seeking alignment with zoning officials and building permit officials is essential in making the whole process flow smoothly."

Phase 1 Professional Survey Response

"The city should provide more flexibility for licensed engineers and geotechnical professionals to propose alternative design solutions when appropriate. Currently, some site-specific solutions that meet or exceed safety standards are dismissed in favor of blanket requirements."

Phase 1 Professional Survey Response

"The maximum building envelope isn't intuitive and sometimes results in awkwardly shaped buildings."

Phase 1 Professional Survey Response

FOCUS GROUP RESULTS

Slope Thresholds and Review Criteria

Participants generally agreed that the 20% slope threshold is a good benchmark but suggested it should not be the only trigger for hillside development review. Other site-specific features, such as complex soil types, limited access, or high visibility, could also warrant review. There was concern over the blanket designation of parcels based on a small, steep portion. Suggestions included updating the threshold criteria or adding alternative ‘triggers’ to better reflect risk.

Geotechnical Reports: Timing and Triggers

Participants agreed it is preferable to obtain zoning approval before requiring a full geotechnical report. A geotechnical declaration or preliminary summary was supported for the zoning stage, with a final report submitted later. This would reduce upfront costs and risk for developers. Some questioned the practice of projects proceeding with only a preliminary report and noted the importance of defining report expectations.

Geotechnical Reports: Scope and Standards

The consensus was that the scope should be project-specific and determined by the geotechnical engineer. Soil borings may not be feasible at initial stages due to access issues. Allowing partial work (e.g., demolition) before full borings was suggested. Some asked whether wall/foundation design should be confirmed at permitting. There was strong support for letting engineers define the scope while building officials confirmed conformance during permit review.

Topographic Mapping Accuracy

CAGIS tools are widely used in early planning, but limitations were noted. The maps are not suitable for final design. More accurate topographic surveys should be required as needed. Soil types could be a trigger for requiring more information. Some participants emphasized that this should apply on a case-by-case basis.

Grading and Retaining Wall Regulation

Participants found current grading limits, especially the 8-foot cumulative excavation, overly restrictive. Nearly all hillside projects require variances, which create delays and can deter development. Suggestions included separating single and cumulative excavation and giving more weight to geotechnical feasibility. There was strong support for reducing required public hearings and making the process more predictable.

Code Coordination Across Departments

Inconsistencies between hillside, zoning, and building code enforcement were a major concern. Participants cited frequent conflicts and confusion, even among similar sites. Several urged eliminating subjectivity from the code and providing a clearer, standardized framework, which would reduce appeals and hearing requirements.

Review Process Efficiency

The zoning review process was considered the most confusing and time-consuming. Averaging setbacks from neighbors, unclear building envelopes, and discretionary approvals were all cited as needing simplification. More streamlined and objective criteria were suggested.

**For more information about the Cincinnati
Hillside Initiative and to stay up-to-date
about upcoming meetings, visit our
website:**

[www.cincinnati-oh.gov/planning/projects/
active/cincinnati-hillside-initiative](http://www.cincinnati-oh.gov/planning/projects/active/cincinnati-hillside-initiative)

