



Dane County Planning & Development

Division of Zoning

Three-Step Test to Qualify for a Variance:

The Dane County Board of Adjustment uses the following “Three Step Test” as standards by which it judges the “legal hardship(s)” presented by the applicant when considering variance appeals. The Board includes Findings of Fact and Conclusions at Law when it takes action on an appeal, using specific language from each of the three requirements.

To qualify for a variance, your property must meet the following requirements:

1. **Unnecessary Hardship**

Strict application of an ordinance requirement (dimensional standard) must result in unnecessary hardship. Wisconsin case law describes hardship as being present where, in the absence of a variance, no reasonable use can be made of the property. In some more extreme cases, open space uses may be the only reasonable use of a property, while in others a scaled down home and some relaxation of a setback requirement may provide a reasonable use. The zoning board will balance public interests in preserving the objectives of the ordinance and private interests in a property in determining which uses are reasonable. If a parcel as a whole (but not necessarily each portion of the parcel) provides some reasonable use for its owner, then this test is not met and a variance cannot be granted. An applicant may not claim hardship because of conditions which are self-imposed or created by a prior owner (for example, excavating a pond on a vacant lot and then arguing that there is no suitable location for a home). Courts have determined that loss of profit or financial hardship do not, by themselves, justify a variance. Decks and similar minor accessory structures are not essential to the reasonable use of property and are not eligible for variances.

2. **Hardship Due to Unique Physical Limitations of the Property**

Hardship must be due to unique physical limitations of the property, i.e. compliance with ordinance requirements is prevented by limitations (steep slopes, wetlands, etc.) that are not generally shared by other properties. The circumstances of an applicant (growing family, need for larger garage, etc.) are not a factor in deciding variances. Nearby ordinance violations, prior variances or lack of objections from neighbors do not provide a basis for granting a variance. Minor property limitations that prevent ordinance compliance and are common to a number of properties should be addressed by amendment of the ordinance.

3. **No Harm to Public Interests**

A variance may not be granted which results in harm to public interests. In applying this test, the board must consider impacts of your proposal and the cumulative impacts of similar projects on the interests of the entire community. These interests are listed as objectives in the purpose statement of an ordinance and may include general public health, safety and welfare as well as more specific issues such as environmental protection, clean drinking water and other concerns.

In addition to passing the 3-step test, you must also demonstrate that no other alternatives that would not require relief from zoning regulations exist. An existing alternative demonstrates that relief is not warranted.

Source: Zoning Board Handbook for Zoning Boards of Adjustment/Appeals by Michael D. Dresen and Lynn Markham, published July 2001 by the Land Use Education Center, The College of Natural Resources and cooperative Education, University of Wisconsin – Stevens Point, pp.42-43