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Department of Environmental Protection

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Waterways Program Guidance Document: Water-Dependent Use Zones

Guidance Applicability: Chapter 91 License Applicants and Current Licensees

Date: November 25, 2025

Purpose: the purpose of this guidance is to set forth the Department’s approach to determining the extent of the water-dependent use zone at a project site and to evaluating acceptable uses within the water-dependent use zone.

Introduction to Chapter 91

[The Public Waterfront Act, G.L. Chapter 91](#), and its implementing regulations at [310 CMR 9.00](#) (collectively referred to as “Chapter 91”), require a waterways license or permit for any activity located in, under, or over flowed tidelands, filled tidelands, Great Ponds, and certain non-tidal rivers and streams located throughout the Commonwealth – unless such activity or activities are exempt from license and permit requirements under 310 CMR 9.05(3).

Chapter 91 licenses and permits are necessary to protect and promote the Public Trust Rights and inherent public interest in these water bodies by ensuring that proposed projects and activities: do not unreasonably interfere with navigation and the rights of the public or adjacent waterfront property owners and protect water-dependent uses and serve a proper public purpose.

Background on Water-Dependent Uses and Water-Dependent Use Zones

The Chapter 91 Waterways Regulations are designed to protect and encourage water-dependent uses on the waterfront. In general, water-dependent uses are those that require direct access to or location in tidal or inland waters, such as piers, wharves, marinas, boathouses, shoreline protection, jetties, revetments, and facilities for fishing, swimming, diving, and other water-based recreational activities. A more detailed list of water-dependent uses may be found at 310 CMR 9.12(2). By contrast, nonwater-dependent uses are those which may be located on waterfront property, but do not rely on close proximity to the water to function. Examples of such uses include retail and commercial outlets, hotels, offices, restaurants, gas stations and residences.

A water-dependent use zone is the area running landward of and parallel to the high-water mark, within which certain activities and uses are prohibited in order to protect water-dependent uses in Chapter 91 jurisdiction. The seaward boundary of the water-dependent

use zone is the project shoreline. The landward boundary is a line parallel to the project shoreline, at a distance from the seaward boundary determined pursuant to 310 CMR 9.51(3)(c).

Determining the Width of a Water-Dependent Use Zone

The width of the water-dependent use zone is determined in accordance with 310 CMR 9.51(3)(c) based on the type of tideland (filled or flowed) and the location, size, and configuration of the property as of October 4, 1990. The following table summarizes the requirements of 310 CMR 9.51(3)(c) for determining the width of the water-dependent use zone:

Location	The width is the lesser of:
Filled Tidelands (Not along edges of piers or wharves)	100 feet or 25% of the weighted average distance from project shoreline to rear property line.
At the END of piers/wharves	100 feet or 25% of the distance to base of pier/wharf, but no less than 25 feet
Along the SIDES of piers/wharves	50 feet or 15% of the distance to opposite edge of pier/wharf, but no less than 10 feet
In a Municipal Harbor Plan Planning Area	The width may be modified by an Approved MHP (See 310 CMR 9.57)

Please see Appendix 1 to this document for example diagrams showing how the water-dependent use zone is calculated in various scenarios.

Allowable Uses in Water-Dependent Use Zones

In addition to water dependent uses, some nonwater dependent uses or nonwater dependent use projects may be licensed in a water dependent use zone, provided the fill, structures or uses *“do not unreasonably diminish the capacity of such tidelands to accommodate water-dependent uses.”* The analysis of a proposed nonwater-dependent use in the water-dependent use zone is project specific. Site-specific considerations may include the permanence of proposed structures/uses, proximity to the project shoreline, the relative portion of the water dependent use zone dedicated to nonwater dependent uses, and use-specific conflicts. The Department is required to consider any relevant information concerning the utility or adaptability of the site for *present or future* water-dependent purposes. 310 CMR 9.51.

Certain uses are prohibited in the water-dependent use zone: new or expanded buildings for nonwater-dependent use and parking facilities at or above grade. However, other than those strict prohibitions, nonwater-dependent uses may be allowed in the water-

dependent use zone as long as the capacity to accommodate water-dependent uses is not unreasonably diminished.

For example, outdoor dining may be permitted in a water-dependent use zone, but the extent and locations of seating and tables for the outdoor dining could not unreasonably diminish the present capacity of the site for water-dependent uses.

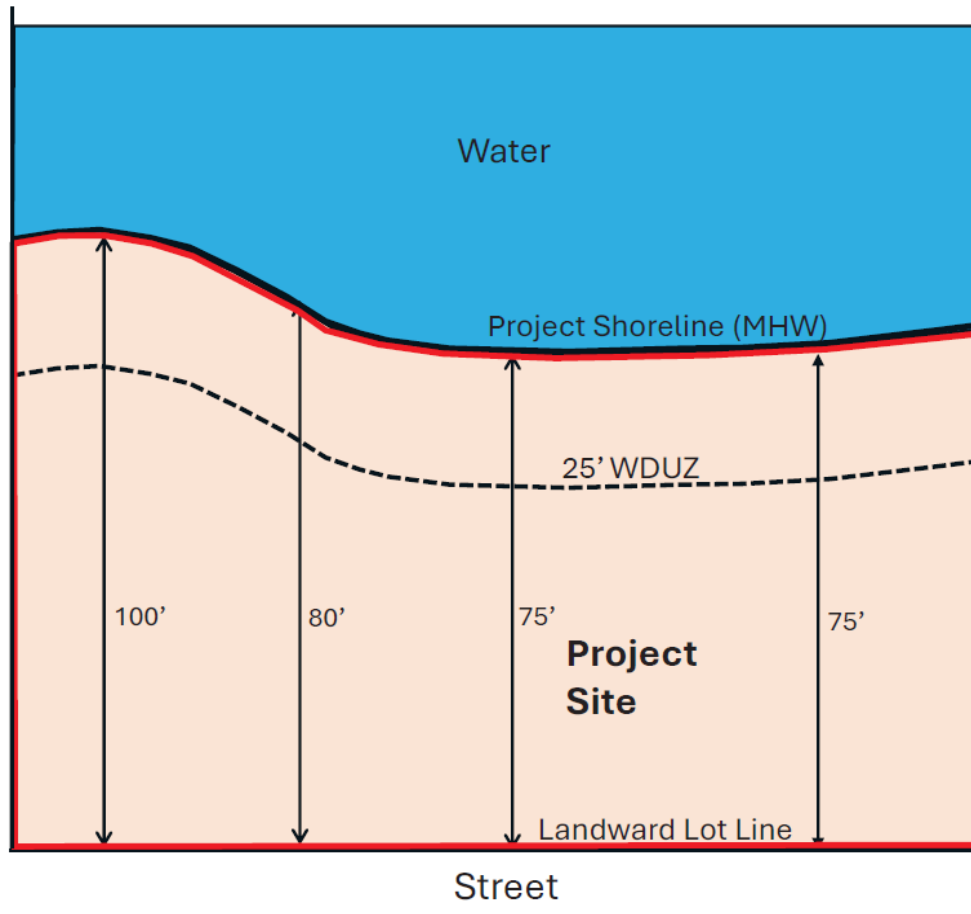
Chapter 91 Water Dependent Use Zone (WDUZ)**310 CMR 9.02**

Water-dependent Use Zone means an area within the geographic jurisdiction of the Department and running landward of and parallel to the project shoreline, the width of which is determined in accordance with 310 CMR 9.51(3)(c). For purposes of such determination, the landward lot line of a property shall mean that in existence as of the effective date of 310 CMR 9.00, unless subsequent reconfiguration thereof results in a more landward location at the time of license application; and all baselines and distances shall be specified according to accepted land regulation and survey practices.

310 CMR 9.51(3)(c)1

The width (of the WDUZ) shall be determined as follows:

1. Along portions of a project shoreline other than the edges of piers and wharves, the zone extends for the lesser of 100 feet or 25% of the weighted average distance from the present high water mark to the landward lot line of the property, but no less than 25 feet; and
2. Along the ends of piers and wharves, the zone extends for the lesser of 100 feet or 25% of the distance from the edges in question to the base of the pier or wharf, but no less than 25 feet; and
3. Along all sides of piers and wharves, the zone extends for the lesser of 50 feet or 15% of the distance from the edges in question to the edges immediately opposite, but no less than ten feet



Notes:

Water-dependent Use Zone is defined at 310 CMR 9.02.

The WDUZ is limited to the area within Chapter 91 jurisdiction.

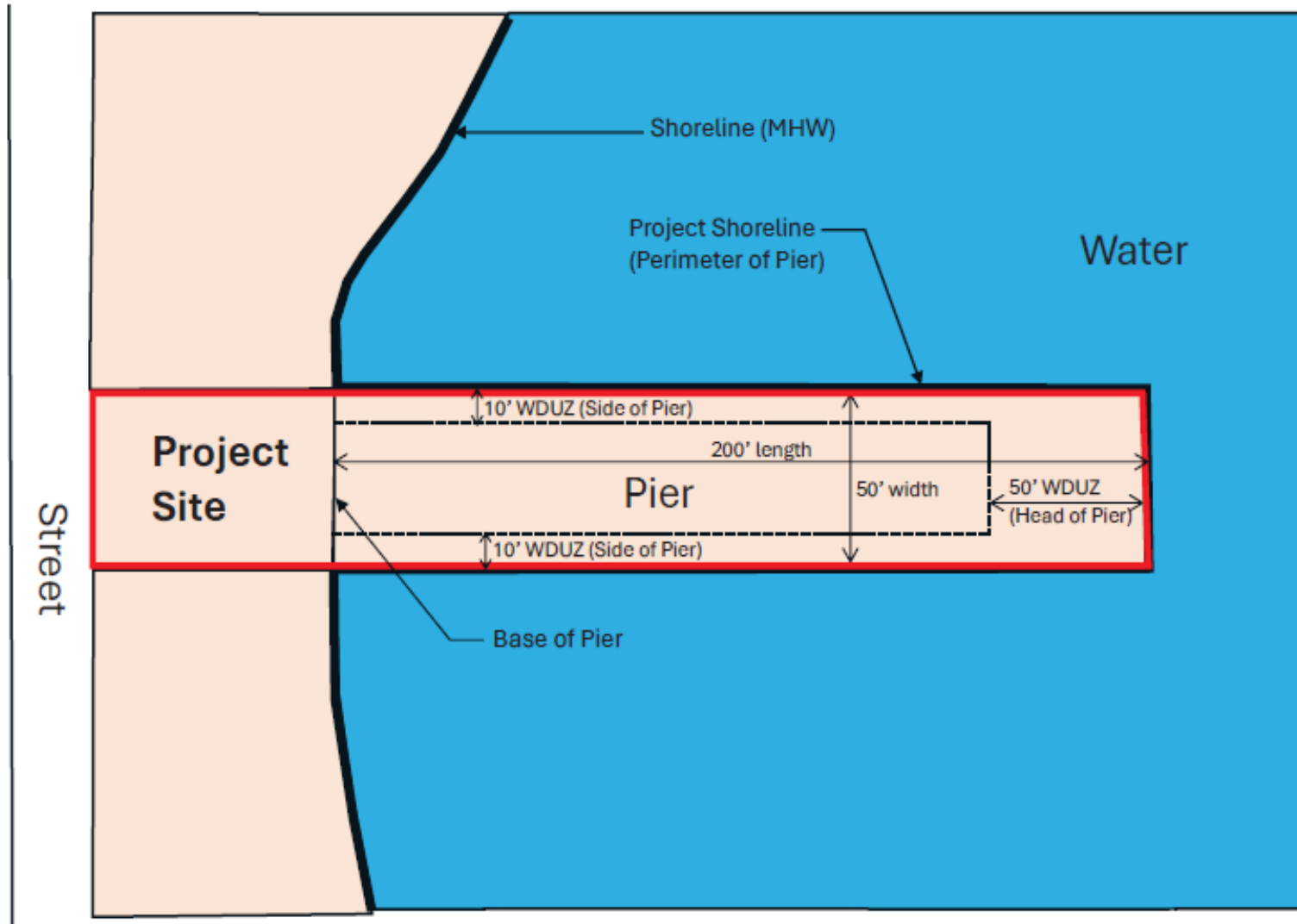
The width of the WDUZ is determined in accordance with 310 CMR 9.51(3)(c).

The landward lot line of a property as referenced in the definition shall mean that in existence as of October 4, 1990, unless subsequent reconfiguration thereof results in a more landward location at the time of license application.

All baselines and distances shall be specified according to accepted land regulation and survey practices.

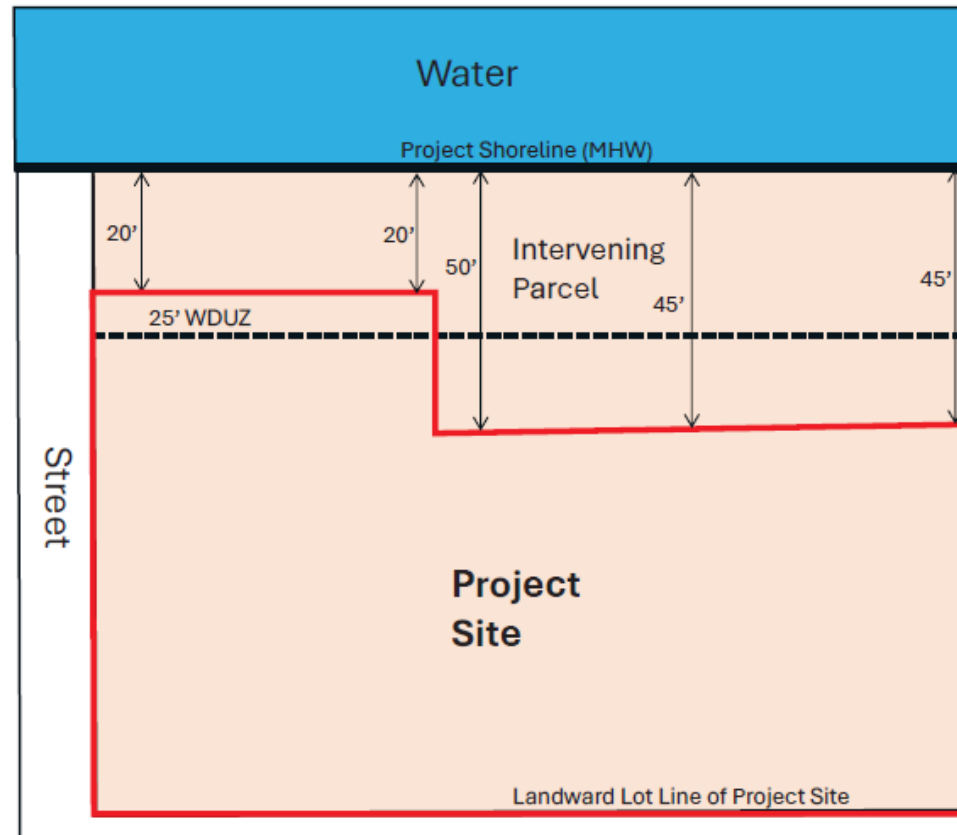
Chapter 91 WDUZ Diagrams

Straight Shoreline



Chapter 91 WDUZ Diagrams

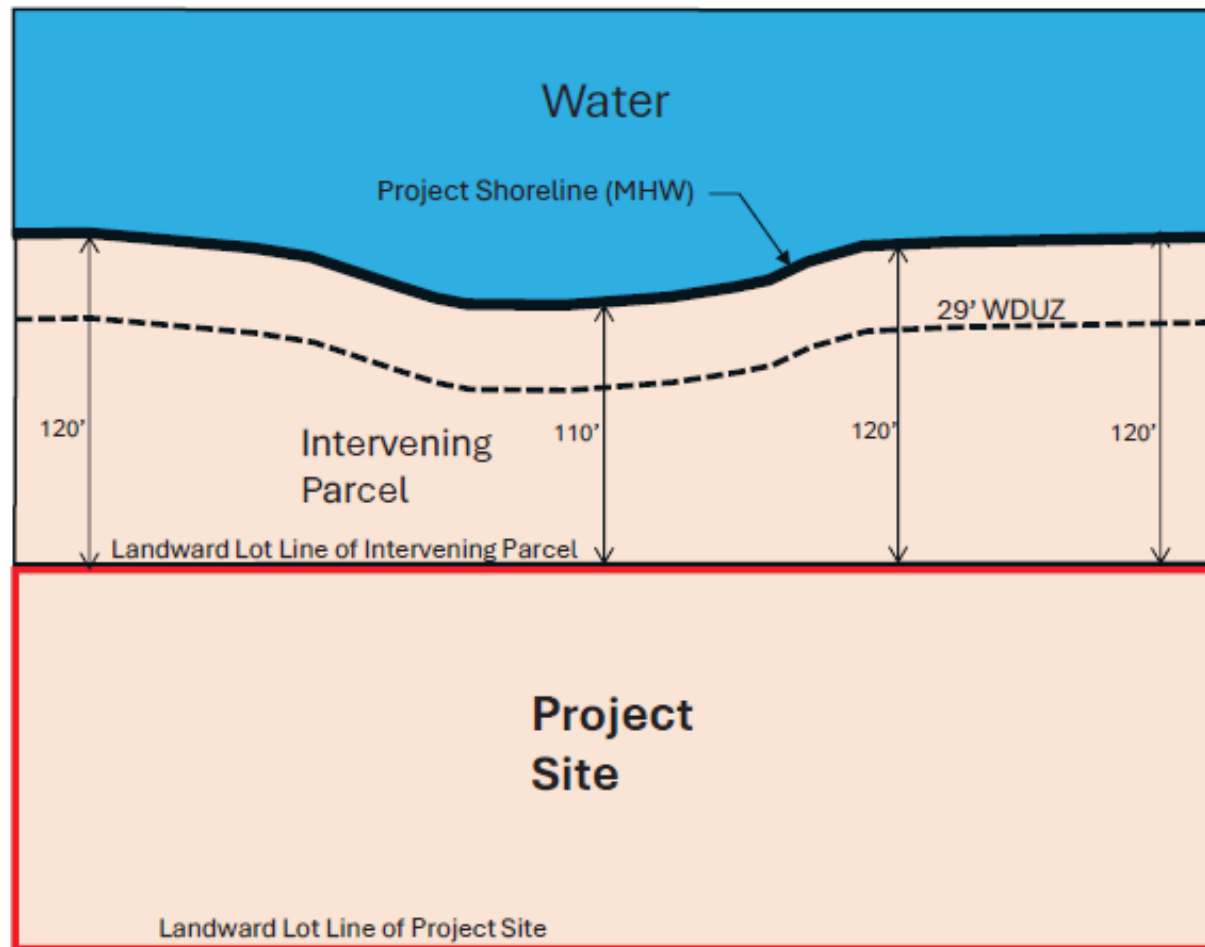
Site with Pier/Wharf



All projects have a Project Shoreline, but the Project Shoreline may be located off of the Project Site on a different parcel. The WDUZ is measured from the Project Shoreline and could extend across an intervening parcel and onto the Project Site, depending on the depth of the intervening parcel and the width of the WDUZ.

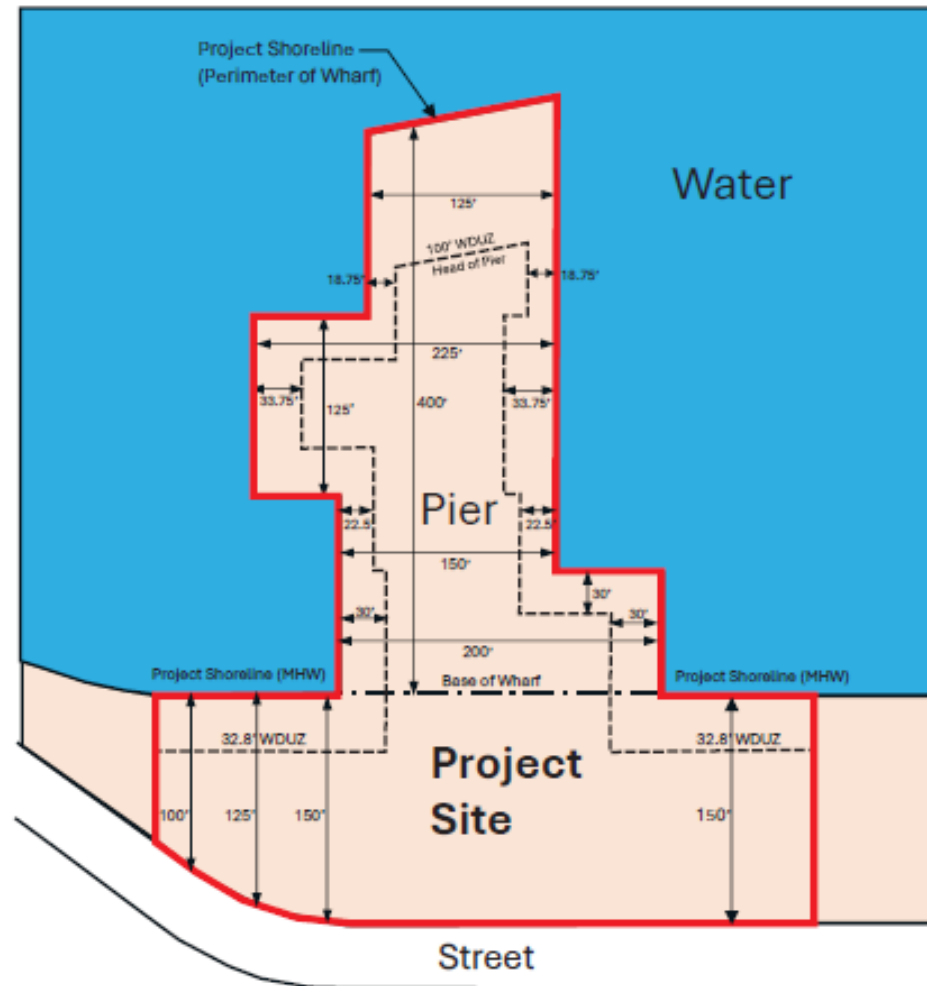
Chapter 91 WDUZ Diagrams

Intervening Parcel – Scenario 1



Chapter 91 WDUZ Diagrams

Intervening Parcel – Scenario 2



Chapter 91 WDUZ Diagrams

Complex Regular Shoreline and Wharf / Pier