

Meeting Notes
Infill Task Force
Thursday, January 30, 2008
City Hall Room 2000
7:00 p.m.

Members Present

Stew Dunn (Chair)
Mary Konsoulis
Gaver Nichols
Stephen Koenig
Lee Weber
David Brown
Lisa Vierse May
Maria Wasowski
Ken Billingsley

City Staff Present

Richard Josephson (Planning and Zoning)
Jill Schaub (City Attorney's Office)
Stephen Milone (Planning and Zoning)
Valerie Peterson (Planning and Zoning)
Mary Christesen (Planning and Zoning)
Hal Phipps (Consultant)

Welcome

Stew Dunn welcomed everyone to the Infill Task Force meeting. He introduced the topic of the evening—floor area ratio and bulk controls. He reminded everyone that there would be an opportunity for public comment toward the end of the agenda.

Follow-up and Discussion on Floor Area Ratio

Valerie Peterson identified the topic of discussion as bulk controls, reviewing the floor area ratio discussion from the January 17 meeting, and introducing the evening's continued discussion of floor area ratio as well as the alternate tools of cubic volume, lot coverage and open space. Hal Phipps began the presentation with an overview of the definition of floor area—sum of gross horizontal areas, measured from exterior faces of walls, includes space with a headroom of 7'6" or more, and excluded are elevators, stairs, HVAC equipment areas, and other areas not susceptible to storage or occupancy, and basements if no more than four feet above finished grade. He reviewed the two ways that FAR can be viewed—from the interior viewpoint as a measure of habitable and useable space that is permitted on the property, or from an exterior viewpoint as a measure of

bulk or volume of a building allowed on the property. As discussed at the previous meeting, there are issues with how to interpret the reference to 7'6" in the ordinance, and as a result it has been applied differently over time, is susceptible to varying interpretations by home owners, architects and neighbors, and is time consuming for all.

Hal and Valerie then reviewed approved building plans at two properties, identifying the areas that were allowed for deductions. The plans revealed areas that add bulk, but are not susceptible to occupancy that were deducted, and in one plan areas that were susceptible to occupancy, but measured less than 7'6" and were deducted. The plans illustrated the difficulty with interpreting the ordinance language in a real life context, and how FAR regulations while currently based mostly on a measure of habitable interior space, directly influences the exterior bulk of the house.

Hal then reviewed the analysis of deductions conducted by staff since the previous meeting on the 115 infill projects processed in 2007. Staff found that the majority of cases, both standard and substandard lot cases, are not maximizing the allowable FAR and take few deductions: 76% of projects in 2007 did not need to take deductions to meet the FAR requirement; 63% of projects took deductions of 5% or less; and the 89 cases with up to 9% deductions averaged 3-4%. Of the 115 projects, 28 of them needed deductions in order to meet the FAR requirement, and applicants rely heavily on the 7'6" language to achieve the needed deductions. Hal then reviewed the options staff has identified to clarify the floor area language in the ordinance:

- 1A. Take no deductions—use a gross measure
 - 1B. Deduct only specified unoccupiable areas—count all floor space, except basements and those areas specifically identified in definition (elevators, stairs, HVAC equipment areas, and basements); remove reference to 7'6"
 - 1C. Deduct only specified unoccupiable areas (1B) and areas below certain height in attic—count all floor space except those deductions specifically identified, and establish a ceiling height for deductible areas in the attic
2. Reduce exposure of deductible basements

Hal identified floor area as a common way to measure space, by professionals and non-professionals alike, and that it can be used to measure bulk. However, with exclusions it is not a true bulk measure, there are problems with addressing attic and basement areas, the current definition is not easy to calculate and does not address floor to ceiling heights.

Presentation and Discussion of Regulations on: Cubic Volume

Hal discussed that a cubic volume measure is another potential way to measure bulk on a property. It is a literal measure of the volume of a structure in cubic feet. A cubic volume ratio can be used to regulate bulk by requiring a cubic volume ratio, which is the building volume divided by the lot area. A bulk volume ratio regulation would account for all bulk visible from the exterior of the residence, handles attics, complex roof lines and higher floor to ceiling heights, and permits flexible design. On the other hand, it may

require computer aided design software, may be a difficult concept for the homeowner, and generally not tested in other jurisdictions. It would also require that homeowners with additions on existing homes would need to have a plan prepared to calculate the volume for an existing house even for an addition.

Presentation and Discussion of Regulations on: Lot Coverage

Hal identified lot coverage as the ratio of occupied area, including buildings and driveways, to the total lot area. A lot coverage ratio limits the size of a building footprint and impermeable areas. After a five year process, Arlington County adopted a lot coverage requirement, and requires a smaller ratio for large lot zones and a larger ratio for smaller lot zones. Arlington already had a 56% coverage requirement for all residential zones, but only recently adopted the sliding scale. Bonuses are provided for detached garages and front porches. The requirement limits impervious surfaces, bulk and accessory buildings in the horizontal direction, and can provide incentives. On the other hand a lot coverage ratio does not address the height of residences, location or placement in relation to the street or adjacent properties, and extensive research is needed to determine lot coverage patterns.

Presentation and Discussion of Regulations on: Open Space

Hal introduced the open space requirement concept, discussing its purpose as a way to provide areas of trees, shrubs, lawns, pathways and other amenities, counting only that portion of a lot that is open and usable. Open space is already required in townhouse and multi-family zones, but not in single-family zones. An open space requirement is the inverse of lot coverage, and its advantages and disadvantages are similar.

Conclusion

Hal concluded that Alexandria has a strong array of bulk control tools currently available, but there is a need to clarify the floor area definition or move to a better measure of bulk. Bulk controls need to be considered in the context of design controls.

Public Comments

- Attic space can be habitable
- Usable versus not usable space depends on the occupants
- Need more control on how volume relates to the neighbors
- Using a volume control could create an incentive to build flat roofs
- Attics are usable, trusses or not, and are still visible bulk from the outside, but they should not be counted in the FAR if below a certain height
- Need to determine for cases that have maximized the FAR how they related to their neighbors
- Consider making FARs dynamic—relative to existing developed area

Infill Task Force Discussion and Comments

- Keeping houses in context is important—height and threshold should relate to neighbors, and FAR and bulk should relate to neighbors.
- Inside measures are less important than the outside; context is important—how it fits in the neighborhood.
- Neighbors are concerned about the appearance, not what the inside is used for; the goal is to accomplish the goals of the homeowner while making neighbors happy—don't want to penalize the homeowner.
- Scale, mass and volume should be in context of the neighborhood with flexibility for interior use; need regime of limits to control infill, not any one single tool will address the issue by itself. Bulk plane may not be effective on its own. FAR is a useful tool, but needs to be clarified. The 7'6" deductions add volume. FAR is simpler to calculate than volume.
- FAR is a good tool. Deductions allow for creativity for varying roof lines. A pattern book would be a good starting tool for context. Applications for infill projects should require photos of the neighbors to consider the context. If deductions are removed and FAR is measured in gross, could existing FAR limits be increased? Lot coverage is not a good tool as it does not control height and bulk.
- If a volume measure is used, what is the right measure? No one else has used or tested the tool, so it is difficult to gauge its advantages and disadvantages. A lot coverage requirement may make several existing properties nonconforming.
- Dealing with three-dimensional space, no one tool can work—it's height, setbacks and FAR. Should consider tweaking the existing FAR regulations instead of attempting volume measure which has not been tested in other places. Lot coverage does not seem to work. Alexandria has good existing tools, but need tweaking. Next month's design discussion will be important.
- Recommendations of Task Force should be able to be implemented. Montgomery County was not able to adopt drastic changes proposed to address the infill issue. Unless there is a strong argument to change the existing tools, the existing tools should be worked with, including tweaking the floor area definition. The 7'6" issue seems to be the most problematic of deductions. Would favor the option 1C (count all floor space, except basements and those areas specifically identified in definition—elevators, stairs, HVAC equipment areas, and basements—remove reference to 7'6", and deduct areas below certain attic height).
- If the Task Force is going to be useful to Council, the recommendations of the Task Force need to be feasible to implement. Need multiple tools to address compatibility issues. There are limited cases with deduction issues, but those that have issues are related to the 7'6" language. Should start with existing FAR, deal with the 7'6" and flat roof issues, and consider option 1C as the direction.
- 1C is a good option, but in conjunction with other tools. Hard and fast numbers for regulations are difficult because there is such a variety in the neighborhood context.
- 1C is a good start to eliminating the loophole.
- Consider 1C, with deductions for porches or other features.

- The existing FAR requirements greatly exceed what is currently built on properties; consider a sliding scale for FAR and height (ie allow an X% of height or FAR increase based on existing FAR and height in area)—although this approach may be less feasible to implement.
- Need to find anecdotally the existing FARs in the city.
- Need to add criteria to FAR regulations to count 2-story and atrium rooms.
- Need to see how all the potential tools can work together.

Valerie Peterson reminded everyone to mark their calendars for the worksession with the Planning Commission and City Council on April 8 at 5:30 pm. All Task Force members are expected to be present. The next meeting of the Infill Task Force is schedule on Thursday, February 21 at 7:00 pm in Room 2000 at City Hall. Amy Slack also announced that the next meeting of the Del Ray Land Use Committee would be a discussion of infill, and will be held on Wednesday, February 13 at 7:00 pm at the Mt. Vernon Recreation Center.