

**Meeting Notes**  
**Infill Task Force**  
Thursday, February 21, 2008  
City Hall Room 2000  
7:00 p.m.

***Members Present***

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

***City Staff Present***

Stephen Milone (Planning and Zoning)  
Peter Leiberg (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. Valerie Peterson introduced the topic of the evening—design controls.

***Design Approaches to Regulating Infill***

Design in the Infill Context

Hal Phipps presented information on design. He discussed how an owner's/architect's/builder's sensitivity to the neighborhood context is the single most important ingredient in ensuring that additions and new construction are compatible with the character of the existing neighborhood. He reviewed observations on design made by Task Force members on the field trip, including that compatibility of design as being a major factor to good design. He also reviewed design comments from the community forum, which included concepts of character, keeping with the neighborhood and fitting the neighborhood.

Hal discussed the importance of detail when looking at design, including neighborhood character and architectural context, architectural styles, street setbacks and spacing from adjacent homes, building footprint and massing, roof slope and design, door and window

openings, decorative details, materials selection and paint, and outbuildings and landscaping.

### Design vs. Bulk Approaches

Regarding design versus a bulk approach, Hal discussed how a design approach can be subjective or interpretive, mandatory or voluntary, may be decided administratively, and may have a review body. Bulk approaches are usually objective and more regulatory, mandatory, administrative and involve appeals to the BZA. Both design and bulk approaches can be used together to achieve a beneficial result.

### Design Incentives Using Bulk Tools

Design incentives for good design can be used. Incentives for good design can be achieved through the adjustment of height, setback, and FAR requirements. Other examples discussed with the Task Force include: encouraging detached garages in the rear yard by exempting them from the FAR calculations and allowing driveways accessing detached garages in the side yard, reducing the visual impact of car parking by permitting tandem parking, and reducing the prominence of front garages by requiring garages facing the street to be set back and requiring attached garages to be side-loaded. To encourage open front porches they can be exempt from the FAR calculation, and to encourage front entrances be close to street level, the threshold height regulations require the first floor be consistent with the average of the blockface and the FAR exemption for basements can be reduced to those that measure 3 feet above grade instead of 4 feet.

Advantages of design incentives using bulk tools include that they are objective and targeted to solve a specific design problem. Disadvantages include that there may be unintended results if not carefully crafted.

### Historic/Conservation/Design Districts

Hal then covered historic, conservation and design districts. All involve identifying a specific geographic area: to provide protection for historic or precious resources, to conserve valuable neighborhood residences and to control design of additions or new construction. Staff analyzed where building permits for single family additions were being approved for from 2003 to 2007, and found them to be more highly concentrated on the eastern half of the city, including in the Town of Potomac and Rosemont National Register Districts.

### ***Presentation and Discussion of Case Study: Eastport Neighborhood Conservation District, Annapolis, MD—Dirk Geratz, Urban Planner, P&Z***

Dirk began by discussing how Annapolis is similar to Alexandria with numerous neighborhoods, some in local historic districts, and many older neighborhoods not protected. Concern about protecting those areas started the process for establishing conservation districts. The first conservation district was created in Eastport, with 3600 households. Prior zoning in the neighborhood allowed deep setbacks, and incompatible dwellings were starting to be developed. In 1990 the city created an overlay district for neighborhood—base zone did not change, but overlay district added the design review

provision with basic criteria on height and design criteria that applied to the front façade. Over the years the district expanded to twice the original size, and worked with a group of residents to strengthen the design review criteria. There is no board, only staff review of compliance with design criteria. All four sides are now reviewed. More recently, the overlay zone became a separate zoning district, and other neighborhoods adopted their own districts, and there are now five neighborhoods with their own zone in a conservation district. Some review only facades, other review all four sides, and some have different use requirements, such as allowing bed and breakfasts or not.

Regarding height requirements, the neighborhood was originally allowed up to 35 feet. However, the existing height developed in the neighborhood was only 24 to 28 feet. The height requirement eventually adopted was the average of a particular block. The original approach to regulating height included allowing up to 35 feet behind the existing ridge line, which resulted in the “hump whale” look in houses with tall massing in the back dwarfing the original front portion.

Regarding setbacks, many existing setbacks were not conforming. The district allowed variation if original setback of homes maintained.

Dirk showed many examples of new construction compared with existing in the district, revealing how the various bulk regulations influenced design.

Regarding averaging heights, the work of calculating became tedious for applicants and staff, so instead the height requirement was established as the average height in the neighborhood. Instead, they established a minimum height to build to (26 feet), and the averaging was only triggered for projects proposed to be taller than 26 feet.

Dirk noted that through good design, you can do a large house without having it look large. He showed a number of examples showing houses of similar sizes, but very different designs.

On garages, one garage is permitted to face the street. A detached garage is the best solution if there is room. Garages are allowed to be placed closer to the property line. Regulations govern the maximum size—8 foot eave height, and maximum 16 feet to the peak. For attached garages, it must be setback five feet from the front building face.

On demolition, the Planning Director may ask for a structural analysis to determine if a demolition is warranted. Before a demolition is approved, the design to replace the structure has to be approved.

Determining the appropriate bulk and size to include was challenging. They looked at FAR, but it did not work well because it penalized small lots and large lots got large houses. The staff recommended a square foot ratio based on lot sizes—everyone is entitled to 1,500 square feet, and an additional 250 square feet could be added for every 1,000 square feet of property size. What got adopted was a maximum cap on square footage, regardless of lot size. The neighbors researched the average sizes of houses, and

came up with 3,250. To build larger than the 3,250 cap, an applicant has to go before the Planning Commission. Open porches and detached garages do not count in the total square footage cap.

The process has worked well, with five conservation districts currently adopted.

### ***Design Approaches to Regulating Infill***

#### Historic/Conservation/Design Districts Cont'd

Hal Phipps continued the discussion of the district approach. He discussed whether teardowns can be prevented or discouraged through a district, saying that: a review board could deny a demolition, the decision could be appealed to the City Council and then to Circuit Court, and if the appeals are denied, the owner can accept this as a final decision and the residence cannot be demolished. However, if the appeals are denied and the owner still wants to pursue the demolition, the provisions of Virginia Code Section 15.2-2306 apply, which state: the residence cannot be demolished for one year, the owner must make a bona fide offer to sell the property for the year at fair market value, a purchaser can buy the property at the offering price, if willing to preserve the residence, but if no purchaser steps forward, the residence can be demolished.

To establish a district, Hal discussed that a specific area or neighborhood that warrants additional protection needs to be identified (such as Rosemont or Town of Potomac). Then a community outreach process occurs, followed by a determination of design standards to be applied, with administrative procedures developed, a review body for appeals identified, staff resource requirements determined, and finally the district is adopted by Planning Commission and City Council. Hal pointed out how design standards and administrative procedures for districts can be complex and detailed or can be short and cover only specific concerns. For example, the historic districts in Alexandria have detailed guidelines and required review by the Board of Architectural Review. On the other hand, the Roanoke Neighborhood Design District has more general guidelines and is subject only to staff review. A design review board could be established, similar to the review board that is established in Carlyle/Eisenhower East. That board consists of five members, reviews concept and final design proposals requiring a SUP, and meets every other month.

Hal identified the advantages of a district as: a good way to protect threatened residential neighborhoods, that demolition can be denied or delayed, there are clear design standards, review can be handled administratively, and a review body can review appeals. The disadvantage is that a strong community effort is necessary, which can take considerable time and effort by staff, it is administratively time consuming to provide advice and handle cases, and finally the approach may not be readily accepted by all homeowners.

#### Design Pattern Books

Hal then reviewed design pattern books as a potential tool. He discussed both the Ashton Heights Style Guide, from Arlington, and A Pattern Book for Norfolk Neighborhoods.

The Ashton Style Guides was prepared by a local consulting firm, with community volunteers. The style guide is a voluntary tool for a neighborhood in Arlington that is on the National Register. The Norfolk pattern book includes patterns for styles 50 years and older city-wide.

Pattern books provide useful information on the styles of houses in the neighborhood, shows how additions to existing homes in the neighborhood can provide additional space for the occupants while staying with the context of the original style of the home, and shows how new homes can be built to be compatible with the neighborhood. They can be useful guide to homeowners, new residents, architects and builders, and can include information about neighborhood character, architectural styles and details, guidelines for additions and new construction, and site and landscaping guidelines. Valerie Peterson discussed the process to develop a pattern book as described by Urban Design Associates, who developed the Norfolk Pattern Book. Their process includes: understanding the context—past and present, developing the palette—documenting neighborhood characteristics, defining the patterns and community—architecture and landscape, and finally production of the pattern book. Valerie discussed her conversation with staff at the Norfolk Design Center, who uses the pattern book to assist homeowners in designing renovation, addition and new construction projects for single family homes. The design center consists of six staff who meet with an applicant, visit the subject site, and prepare a conceptual design free of charge. The applicant is required to submit a plat and photos. The Norfolk Pattern Book cost Norfolk \$250,000 to develop. The Ashton Style Guide cost significantly less.

Hal discussed the advantages of a pattern book, which include that it is a voluntary and not regulatory approach, and provides a vision for the neighborhood. It can help to unify the neighborhood. The disadvantages are that without the regulatory tools behind it, there is no guarantee that it will be followed, and cannot prevent a demolition.

### ***Review Existing and Proposed Regulations***

Valerie Peterson reviewed a handout that included an inventory of existing and potential regulatory tools discussed so far. She continued that each tool would be discussed in more detail at the March meeting, when the Task Force will be asked to make decisions on each. The Task Force suggested that each member study the list over the month, and bring comments, questions and concerns to the next meeting.

### ***Public Comment***

- Areas below 7'6" in existing homes should be treated differently so as not to encourage teardowns.
- Are there more visionary approaches to preservation? Alexandria should be a leader in preservation. Isn't there something better than Norfolk and Arlington?
- Need to include how infill affects the environment.
- The consequences of a restrictive height limitation may be the loss of green space.

- Need to have feedback from civic associations on the potential/interest for creating a district of any kind. Distinct areas are larger than what is currently designated as the National Register District.
- Consider Transfer of Development Rights, tax credits and easements to supplement regulations.

***Task Force Comments***

- Demolition should not be allowed until a replacement plan is approved.
- Need to think about choosing several small strategies, or one or two big strategies to get adopted.
- The more visionary the proposed changes, the more unpredictable and difficult to implement. Pattern books are a good tool, as is a design center. The Norfolk pattern book is good because it applies city wide and does not try to micromanage. There is a need for more regulatory tools for a small percentage of cases that do not fit in with the existing character. Need to limit mandatory mechanisms so as not to impress unintended consequences on neighbors trying to do the right thing.
- Need to incorporate multiple tools. A pattern book would be helpful for people not used to working in the neighborhoods. May not need a design center to implement it.
- What tools will really affect the worst cases, while allowing modest additions that meet demand? What is Norfolk's workload?
- Need to be judicious about being prescriptive in the neighborhoods without neighborhood input.
- Conclusions should follow the nature of the problem.
- Additional meetings may be necessary to finalize recommendations.

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 (**NOTE: worksession time changed to 5:00 pm**). All Task Force members are expected to be present. The next meeting of the Infill Task Force is schedule on Tuesday, March 18 at 7:00 pm in the Council Workroom at City Hall.