

Meeting Notes
Infill Task Force
Thursday, December 6, 2007
City Hall Room 2000
7:00 p.m.

Members Present

Stew Dunn (Chair)
Mary Konsoulis
Gaver Nichols
Ken Billingsley
Stephen Koenig

City Staff Present

Peter Leiberg
Valerie Peterson
Hal Phipps (Consultant)

Welcome

Stew Dunn, Chair, opened the meeting welcoming Task Force members and the public. Stew mentioned that at its December 4 meeting, the Planning Commission recommended approval of the interim infill regulations on threshold height and subdivision, supporting the Infill Task Force's position.

Review and Discuss Summary and Themes from Community Forum on Infill

Before reviewing the summary, Hal Phipps discussed where the Task Force is in its process. He identified three phases of the task force process:

- Define the problem
- Review existing and potential tools
- Create recommendations

He said that the last several meetings have been about identifying the problem in the city. Tonight's meeting was the first of three meetings to review tools to address the problem. The Forum was very helpful to provide the public perspective on identifying the problem, which he then followed by reviewing the forum summary.

Hal began his summary of the forum by explaining the group exercise, which provided the opportunity for community members to share thoughts, impressions and suggestions on 10 examples of infill around the city. Themes emerged from their comments, including a number of design specific comments, such as window arrangement being important, blank walls are unattractive, third stories and complex rooflines are not

compatible in Alexandria single family neighborhoods, and that garage doors on the front of houses is unattractive. There were also a number of comments related to bulk, including that size and volume are an issue, and that some projects would have been improved had the interim threshold ordinance been in place. Stephen Koenig commented that he thought the negative community comments about complex rooflines were not very strong, and that different rooflines can be used to creatively address bulk and massing issues.

Hal compared the public discussion with the summary of the task force comments from the September tour, which also included a number of bulk and design concerns.

Review Height, Setback and Angle of Bulk Plane

Hal proceeded to discuss the evening's topics, which included setback, height and angle of bulk plane. He reviewed the regulations in residential zones, discussed how each was calculated, and how they contribute to the design of infill projects. He discussed the requirement for an addition setback on corner lots for vision clearance related to traffic safety. He discussed in detail how the setback to height ratio that is standard in the residential zones creates a direct relationship between the distance a structure is setback from the property line and its height (the taller the structure, the greater distance it must be setback from the property line). The regulation allowing infill projects to conform to an established front setback versus the zone required setback was also discussed. Some concern was expressed requiring conformance to an established setback as some variety in setbacks along a street may be desirable in some circumstances.

Hal then reviewed the definition of height and how it applies to different roof types. He pointed out that the zoning ordinance currently does not specify a way to calculate height for all roof types. He also discussed how height is measured from the "average finished grade," which staff found that some applicants use to increase the grade on infill projects, resulting in a much taller house. The interim threshold height regulation is measured from the existing grade, which may help prevent significant grade changes. Hal then reviewed a potential tool for addressing height concerns on infill projects, and that is to require infill projects to conform to an average height of the blockface. Some members were concerned that this may prevent homeowners from adding a second story, and it was suggested that a minimum height be allowed so as not to prohibit second stories.

Hal reviewed the angle of bulk plane, which was proposed in the City of Fairfax, and is used in Fairfax County for accessory buildings. An angle of bulk plane establishes a line drawn from the property line at an established angle to which buildings cannot encroach. Hal pointed out that the existing setback ratio in the ordinance acts in the same way, but that there is currently not such a ratio or angle established for the front setback.

Review and Discuss Preliminary Concepts and Items for Consideration

Following the discussion of height, setback and angle of bulk plan, Hal reviewed several items for the Task Force to consider as potential candidates for regulation changes. Included in the discussion was a prohibition of major grade changes, a limit on building height, a revised definition for building height to incorporate regulations for all roof

types, study the impact of requiring infill projects to comply with an established front setback, study alternatives to increasing side setback requirements, consider revising the vision clearance requirements, and consider allowing accessory garages of a maximum size in required setback areas in the rear yard.

Public Comments

Members of the public had the following comments:

- Major grade changes may benefit the neighborhood if the existing grade of the property were lower than the street. What are some specific examples where this has been an issue?
- A steep slope ordinance may help
- Need to better anticipate potential issues during the application process (perhaps require photos of neighboring properties as part of the application)
- Tree loss on infill projects is an issue
- Construction on infill developments is disruptive
- What is considered a major grade change?
- What can help a building not loom over neighbors?
 - Mitigate with elements to reduce bulk, like a front porch (example at 7 E. Del Ray)
- How much space does a person actually need? Need to consider minimum livability requirements, and how much is excess bulk.
- Would adopting the threshold ordinance prevent mounding the grade?

Task Force Member Comments

The Task Force had the following comments on the direction of the concepts and items of consideration:

- Study the average building height tool for two stories or more. This could be a valuable tool for an infill project to fit in to an established pattern.
- Pursue studying garage setback requirements.
- Measuring height from the existing grade is favorable because it helps maintain the existing character.
 - Consider requiring a SUP if you don't/can't comply with measuring from existing grade.
 - Grade changes impact infill projects—worth further study.
- Average existing setback valuable. The height average requirement may have similar value.
 - However, averaging heights may be difficult (how to handle gables, porches, two-stories, one-story, complex rooflines), and difficult for homeowners to calculate.
- Establishing definitions for all roof types would be helpful.
- Changing minimum setbacks may be difficult—need to keep the minimum.
- The current vision clearance requirement is difficult to comply with, and providing some flexibility would be helpful.