Open Space Discussions with the Planning Commission
Sessions 1 & 2

Park & Recreation Commission
April 25, 2019
Project Overview

Objective for the series:

- Review the origins and outcomes of open space;
- Assess key factors of quality open space on private land in the urban realm; and
- Recommend potential practices and long-range workplans to create policies for private open space.
Projected Outcome

Develop a set of Guiding Principles, including the following:

- The consistency or appropriateness of the quantity requirements of the current zoning ordinance;
- The potential ratio of at-grade to above-grade open space;
- The roles of open space on private land, including how these roles may be defined or measured, and how competing roles may be balanced;
- The context of open space in infill development, and;
- The need for compensation in cases of shortfall.
Session 1
Regulation and Compliance
Continuum & Planning Mechanisms of Open Space

- Types of open space divided along lines of ownership
- Public ➔ Open Space Master Plan and Small Area Plans
- Public-Private ➔ Small Area Plans
- Private ➔ Development Special Use Permit (DSUP)
Private Open Space

- Outside of Public Right-of-Way without a public access easement
- Private use for building residents, guests and authorized users.
- Both passive and active uses.
Zoning Ordinance Definition

• **Open and Usable Space**: That portion of the lot at ground level which is:
  
  a) Eight feet or more in width;
  
  b) Unoccupied by principal or accessory buildings;
  
  c) Unobstructed by other than recreational facilities; and
  
  d) Not used in whole or in part as roads, alleys, emergency vehicle easement areas, driveways, maneuvering aisles or off-street parking or loading berths.

• The purpose of open and usable space is to provide areas of trees, shrubs, lawns, pathways and other natural and man-made amenities which function for the use and enjoyment of residents, visitors and other persons. (Section 2-180)
Zoning Ordinance Requirements

- Zoning Ordinance requires a percentage of a site be open space
- Occasionally dictates location

Zones

- Low-density residential
- Single-family

Open Space

- Guided by F.A.R. and required setbacks

Medium-density residential
- Townhouse and Garden Style

High-density residential
- Mixed use

25-35%

40% +
Density and Open Space

Density & Open Space in the City of Alexandria, by Zone

FAR (Maximum)  Open Space Required (Residential Dev)

Percent Open Space

Density & Open Space in the City of Alexandria, by Zone

FAR (Maximum)  Open Space Required (Residential Dev)
Measuring Private Open Space: Project Compliance

- 84% of all Development projects in the past five years (DSPs and DSUPs) have met their open space requirements:
  - 99% of CDD’s have met or exceeded open space requirements
  - 70% of projects with a 40% open space requirement have met or exceeded open space requirements
  - 64% of projects with a 25-35% open space requirement have met or exceeded open space requirements
Above-Grade Private Open Space

• Majority of zones allow for above-grade open space.

• When considering open space, some zones place limitations on percent of open space permitted above-grade or do not permit above-grade open space to count.
  • RCX/Medium Density Apartment, RC/High Density Apartment, RA/Multi-family, RB/Townhouse

• If these zones were permitted to count above grade open space, the City may achieve a higher percentage of compliance.
Open Space Contributions

Cameron Park
- **Required**: 25% at grade
- **Provided**: 19% at grade
- 8% above grade
- Provided contributions to fund neighborhood improvements and other negotiated community benefits

Harris Teeter (The Kingsley)
- **Required**: 40% at grade
- **Provided**: 25% above grade
- Improvements to nearby Montgomery Park
- Establish park maintenance fund for Montgomery Park

Potomac Yard Park System
- Comprehensive network of open space as part of CDD with a variety of experiences
- Individual sites may have lower open space requirements
Compliance Summary

• Within the City of Alexandria, private open space requirements vary by zone, are not correlated with density, and inconsistently allow above-grade locations.

• A majority of recent development projects have provided their required private open space requirements and contributed towards open space goals.
Session 2
Case Studies
Role of Open Space on Private Land

- Historic: Form Defining
- Historic: Visual Relief
- Evolving: Outdoor Living
- Evolving: Environmental
Private Open Space Characteristics

- Not always green
- Not always public
- Not always visible
- Not always permeable
Case Study: The Clayborne

Quick Facts: Multi-family building; CRMU-L Zone; 43% Open Space
Open Space Observations

• Open Space shapes the **building form** and provides ground-level courtyards

• Open space **engages the neighborhood**

• Open space is visible from the right-of-way with **clear transitions/boundaries** indicating private space

• **Minimal outdoor living** amenities are passive with limited utility
Case Study: The Clayborne

Open Space Takeaways

• Successful use of ground-level open space:
  • **Defines building form**
  • Creates strong engagement with the neighborhood

• **Design and programming**, including the lack of landscape, of above-grade open space greatly **restricts desirability/utility** for residents
Commonalities
Commonalities of “Successful” Open Space

- Better developments have open space that address all four roles: visibility, form defining, outdoor living, environmental.
- Good open space connects the community of the building with the community of the neighborhood.
- Open space is not a residual aspect of the design process but integral to the site functionality and presentation.
- Successful projects typically have a clear delineation between the public and private realm, including where the public realm may simply be the public sidewalk.
- Private open space is important:
  - Well executed open space relieves pressure on the use of public open space.
Commonalities of “Successful” Open Space

• **Visibility**
  • Projects have a mean of 15% or median of 17% non-visible open space (out of 40%), or about 50/50
  • Less successful case studies exhibited a similar range, indicating amount of visible vs. non-visible space may not determine a good vs. a bad open space

• **Above-Grade**
  • Non-visible open space provides a similar function as above-grade open space
  • Balancing flexible percentage with qualitative requirements may provide a mechanism to determine appropriate mix

• Above-grade space can provide environmental roles
  • Canopy can be provided – encouraged in Landscape Guidelines
  • Green infrastructure for stormwater can be provided entirely above structure
Commonalities of “Less Successful” Open Space

- Non-activated rooftop open space with insufficient green
From Commonalities to Guidelines

- Above-grade open space
  - Flexible 40-60% allowed
    - Mix of usable and vegetated space
    - Presence of shade

![Diagram showing the relationship between required open space, above ground open space, at-grade open space, and density.](image)
Feedback from Session One

• Planning Commissioners noted that having same open space requirement (generally 40%) may not be appropriate in all zones

• The character of open space on private land is more important than a flat percentage

• Optimal open space is an appropriate mix of publicly accessible and private; ground-level and above-grade. What is a recommended proportion?
Feedback from Session Two

• Planning Commissioners noted that quantitative requirements are still necessary, but qualitative methods are necessary as well.

• Open space on developments should be intentional with explicit goals to achieve.

• Flexibility in open space to address the context of the development is desirable.

• An appropriate mix of ground level and above-grade open space is desirable.
Session 3 Topics

• **Guiding Principles**
  • The consistency or appropriateness of the quantity requirements of the current zoning ordinance;
  • The potential ratio of at-grade to above-grade open space;
  • The roles of open space on private land, including how these roles may be defined or measured, and how competing roles may be balanced;
  • The context of open space in infill development, and;
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• **Lessons from Other Jurisdictions**

• **Next Steps**
  • Development of policies and procedures
  • Process for regulatory changes