Multifamily Code Update – Urban Neighborhoods
Small Group Discussion Notes
May 3, 2006

Questions for small group discussion

Warm-up question: What seems to work in terms of multifamily development that you have seen in your neighborhood or around the city? What does not?

We believe these 4 topics are the key issues. We would like to discuss them with you:

1. Height, bulk and scale.
One goal is to create good multifamily neighborhoods with increased housing supply and appropriate transitions to single family zoned areas.

Would a floor area ratio (FAR) based approach that would allow buildings similar in size and scale as today's standards and potentially allow more housing units be an improvement?

2. Incentives for affordable housing.
Many people have said that allowing more housing units or lowering development costs by reducing regulations might be OK, if there are ways to ensure that the community gets something in return, such as more affordable units.

What do you think about allowing buildings to go higher or more dense in return for providing affordable housing in the project? Are there other public amenities that could be provided in this same way?

3. Design quality
A key objective is to encourage well designed buildings.

What features contribute most to a well designed building? Where transitions in building scale are important, what design features are needed?

4. Parking
Parking requirements have implications for housing affordability, design quality and neighborhood traffic congestion.

What are the most important considerations in setting parking requirements? If the number of parking spaces meant a trade-off for housing affordability, which would you choose?

Discussion Notes

Table 1

What seems to work in terms of multifamily development that you have seen in your neighborhood or around the city? What does not?

- More opportunity for Design Review, i.e. < 4 units, faster process, more discretion.
- Courtyard parking with cluster buildings – bad idea.
- Floor Area Ratio (FAR) – good idea.
- Modulation – bad idea.
- De-emphasize the amount of lot area dedicated to driveways, parking courtyards.
- Reducing Lowrise 4 (L4) to Residential 3 (R3) height, going from 37' to 35' makes it difficult to get 4 stories.
- Parking requirements should be driven by transit/light rail. Some sort of balancing is needed.
- FlexCar (car sharing) spaces should qualify for an incentive.

1. Height, bulk and scale.

- Floor Area Ratio (FAR) can lead to good design flexibility.
- Keep the height bonus for sloped lots.
- Affordable housing should be spread around the city.
- Incorporate the new Residential 1 (R1) zone into single family zones (allow duplexes and triplexes in single family).
- Provide an incentive for going through Design Review.
- Expand Design Review to more zones, Residential 1 and 2 (R1and R2)?

2. Incentives for affordable housing.

- Other public amenities could be part of an incentive system.
- Bond financing for increased affordable housing and for market rate housing.

- Leaders in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED)…green buildings.
- Provide different incentives for Midrise and Highrise zones than in the Residential (R) zones.
- What are communities getting back for increases in density? There should be some payback to communities (i.e. community parks for increased density)
- Density transfers should be allowed in same neighborhood.
- Incentives should be provided for corner courtyards.
- Green buildings should be eligible for incentives.
- Tie any Floor Area Ratio (FAR) incentive to LEED certification.
- For small projects have an alternate to LEED.

3. Design quality.

- What features contribute to good design? Remain flexible.
- How to address transition? Don't dictate design features in code.
- Concerned that the Residential (R1, R2 and R3) designations might be confused with building code designations.

Table 2

1. Height, bulk and scale.

- The Design Review (D.R.) process can be burdensome and adds significant costs. Developers will try to circumvent rather than undergo D.R. again. D.R. is not friendly.
- Having design criteria in the code will help developers with up-front design that fits with neighborhoods. Providing designations in the code can help with D.R. issues.
- Community members think that there is not enough design review to ensure quality projects.
- Floor Area Ratio (FAR) provides greater flexibility.
- Modulation requirement is important to protect against getting boxes developed by builders to maximize profits.
- Would like to keep modulation requirements with the proposed switch to FAR.

- FAR allows for designing projects that fit lots.
- If we get rid of modulation, then design review or design criteria are needed to get good design.
- FAR will create large scale, community-level modulation that inspires creativity.

2. Incentives for affordable housing.

- Good tools are needed to be effective.
- Issue – how much affordable housing will we get for increased density?
- How long will the affordable housing requirements apply? Should be for life of unit/building.
- The amount of floor area granted in return for affordable housing needs to serve as an incentive.
- Affordable housing is essential for a diverse, health community where teachers, etc, can live in the communities where they work.
- Will the incentive work? Provide adequate affordable housing for those in need? May not help in short run.
- May provide for the extra units that can make a project financially feasible.
- Will the change destroy the historic character of the neighborhood?
- Trees are being cut and we're losing habitat – replaced with poor quality townhouses.
- Preserve facades of historic homes. This can be difficult and expensive because of parking, electrical, seismic requirements, may not be feasible.
- Affordable housing should be for life of the building because height/density increase lasts for the life of building.
- Identify percentage of units as affordable and incorporate into the project

3. Design quality.

- Can retaining design quality and character be required?

- Look at other housing types like accessory dwelling units (ADUs) and cottage housing.
- These housing types can contribute to and transition into single family zones.

4. Parking.

- Zero parking would be great.
- Establish parking maximums instead of focusing on minimums.
- Increase transit.
- Increase pedestrian resources like retail.
- Real estate agents are telling builders they can't sell houses with 1 parking stall.
- Charge people for driving their car into downtown.
- How can we maintain diversity in our neighborhoods through zoning? Socioeconomic, age, race and family size.

Table 3

What seems to work in terms of multifamily development that you have seen in your neighborhood or around the city? What does not?

- Should this be city-wide effort, or recognize one size does not fit all – neighborhood by neighborhood approach?
- There is uniformity under the existing program. More flexibility – design interest under the proposal.
- More emphasis should be placed on Neighborhood Design Guidelines.
- Need for overarching code – limits – but how to get good design?

1. Height, bulk and scale.

- Concerned about the Floor Area Ratio (FAR) approach?
- Yards – lack of setbacks (front) detracts from neighborhood. FAR approach may be ok – but keep front yard setback.

- Reducing the backyard – allows for better front setback?
- More flexibility – allows project to fit in better?
- Pockets of land that aren't usable – desire to have usable open space, privacy.
- Zero lot line -- create larger common yards by reducing setback from lot lines.
- Lot coverage is a better measure than setbacks.
- FAR – allows bulk to move around to "smarter" place.
- The code should acknowledge sun/shadow impacts of height. Setbacks should be related to solar orientation.
- FAR – may result in a lot of small units with no density limit – this could be an incentive to do more small units. Market determined? Depends on developer and location – helps to provide affordable housing.
- How to get 3 bedroom units for families?
- Lowrise Duplex/Triplex (LDT) difficult to maximize now.
- Allowance for "pitched" roofs = bonus floor with punctuations for gables/dormers.
- Heights don't match floor arrangements. Results in flat roof (in Neighborhood Commercial (NC) Zones).
- Now additional height is allowed for a roof with a minimum pitch of 4:12 – this height should also be allowed for a shed roof, if the solar orientation is correct.

2. Incentives for affordable housing.

- Common open space should be provided for the project.
- The center of project could be shared open space rather than used for auto access. More height could be offered or Floor Area Ratio (FAR)?
- Parking reductions could be offered for affordable housing. There is not necessarily a relationship between low-income and car ownership.
- Common amenities should be considered in Lowrise zones, rather than individual spaces.
- Increases in height and FAR could lead to incompatibility issues.

3. Design quality.

- Design is subjective – variety is positive
- Windows should be looking out on the street – pedestrian quality and public safety are improved with visibility to the street.
- Ground floor should be occupied space, discourage "urban fortress."
- Code should discourage "un-used" ground floor – accommodating parking is a big factor.
- Could provide an incentive to have living on ground floor, more bulk/height?
- In some cases – garages facing the street O.K. Good proportions are key.

4. Parking.

- Can it be eliminated? Would allow for improved design, better relationship to the street. Special circumstances may allow reduction.
- Will putting people near transit reduce cars? Not in Seattle, where people use cars for non-commuting trips.
- Taking away all the parking is the wrong way to go. Private vehicle ownership will remain.
- Changes to zoning to allow driveways in setback areas (side) would help.
- Density in Seattle is low – zoning defined around cars – strips. Density needed to promote walkable areas, reduce car dependency.
- People depend on cars – reality is, many won't live close enough to walk to work. Shopping, daily services are needed nearby.
- Parking – people won't park in spaces provided because they are too small or otherwise un-useable.

- Rules for parking by building or lot, no provisions for neighborhood strategy or plan.
- Push for a neighborhood approach to parking.
- Provide for design review on neighborhood basis regardless of size of lot or number of units.
- Need to allow for quick review.
- Higher density could lead to more design review of projects. There is potential for administrative design review. Should still have public accountability.
- Standards that apply to common problems for small projects – preference for discretion – flexibility.
- Focus on features that contribute most to well designed buildings.
- Connection to the street, windows, transition proportions, – the current uniformity is bad. Design should focus on timelessness – not be faddish.

Table 4

What seems to work in terms of multifamily development that you have seen in your neighborhood or around the city? What does not?

- Concern about buffers.
- Floor Area Ratio (FAR) can open up new opportunities.
- There is under-building, due to insurance problems (siding leakage liability).

1. Height, bulk and scale.

- FAR is good
- Parking requirements could be reduced.
- FAR plus design review.
- FAR plus design standards.
- Neighborhood based design review has been successful.
- Cautious about FAR.

2. Incentives for affordable housing.

- Concern with off-site handling of affordable housing for density bonuses.
- Height bonuses should be considered for public open space.
- Parking requirements limit maximum density and thus affordability.
- Concern about a blanket approach.

3. Design quality.

- Should incorporate Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) principles.
- Parking garage entrances are a concern.
- Strong and enforceable design standards are needed at the neighborhood level.
- An image book would be helpful.
- Design guidelines should apply from the Residential 2 (R2) zone and up.

4. Parking.

- Parking requirements must be realistic.
- Structured parking is under-utilized.
- Proximity to transit does not necessarily reduce parking demand.
- Enforcement issues.
- Affordable housing over parking spaces.

Table 5

What seems to work in terms of multifamily development that you have seen in your neighborhood or around the city? What does not?

- Maintain design review instead of codifying design standards.
- Need to incorporate flexibility.

- Allow/promote design review on a voluntary basis.

1. Height, bulk and scale.

- Floor Area Ratio (FAR) doesn't relate to the size of building review though has flexibility.
- One preference expressed for lot coverage limits over FAR.
- FAR more difficult to grasp for allowable square feet.
- Will FAR result in buildings with very large depth?
- Preference expressed to use Design Review (D.R.) for modifying standards and use of lot coverage.
- Need to be cautious of the effect of FAR with setbacks creating larger footprints.
- Need to have more specific comparative numbers for FAR vs. current standards.

2. Incentives for affordable housing.

- There is a rumor that this will be for non-profits only?
- Let affordable housing go anywhere.
- Affordable housing should include medium income as well as low income.
- Excess supply produces more affordable housing.

3. Design quality.

- Is it possible to codify?
- D.R. contributes to good design.
- The timing of D.R. process is an issue, a quicker process is needed for more projects.
- D.R. – too many projects for staff, this results in more time.
- More clarity in code to reduce D.R. clutter?
- Improve process of D.R.
- Standardize some D.R. issues, perhaps using a checklist.

- Promote good small projects.

4. Parking.

- Baseline should reflect statistics.
- Code doesn't address small units or transit routes.
- Underground cost separated by number of units?
- Eliminate code required parking and let the market dictate.

Table 6

1. Height, bulk and scale.

- The Design Review threshold – if still expressed as number of units, may defeat bonus system.

2. Incentives for affordable housing.

- Discussion of whether the multi-family zoning proposal is an "up-zone" under definition of HB 2294 (affordable housing bill in Washington State Legislature).
- Other things to provide incentives for are open space and green building, or a "green area factor".
- Create an incentive for ground – related housing that is accessible to the increasing older population.

3. Design quality.

- Townhomes – Craftsman Style – gables, etc. Faux is not authentic.
- Hard to identify specific features that should be required.
- Require design standards that help create "eyes on the street," and welcoming entrances for people, not cars.
- Design standards should help create cohesion and variety within an overall architectural theme.

- Adding statements of principle to clarify standards can help communicate larger purposes of design standards.

- Maximum setbacks should be based on adjacent properties, and address the location of and access to parking.

- To integrate multi-family developments with adjacent single-family neighborhoods, step down heights or massing away from single-family side.

- Good materials are key to good design, and LEED standards could yield ideas for materials.

- Create incentive for opting into Design Review,,understanding that design review allows departures)

- Encourage better landscaping, and higher design standards.

4. Parking.

- No minimum parking requirement (but then you can't use a reduction in parking to incentivize behavior)

- In managing on-street parking supply, consider peak hour restrictions as a traffic-calming measure.

- Off-street parking requirements for new units is needed; in dense urban areas, new units park on the street during off hours.

- Charge more for on-street parking.

- Consider proximity to amenities and users of those amenities in setting parking requirements.

- Housing choice doesn't depend only on parking price, e.g., reducing parking requirements will not necessarily affect housing prices..

- Lower parking ratio to meet actual demand.

- Efficiently use expensive on-site parking.