



Backyard Cottages & Basement Units



Councilmember Mike O'Brien

Floor Area Ratio Requirements

This handout describes the proposal to introduce a Floor Area Ratio limit in single-family zones.

Floor area ratio (FAR) is the ratio of a building's total square footage (floor area) to the size of the piece of land on which it is constructed. For example, if a building is subject to an FAR limit of 0.5, then the total square footage of the constructed building must be no more than

half the area of the parcel itself. In other words, if the lot is 5,000 square feet, then the square footage of the building cannot exceed 2,500 square feet. The illustration below provides examples of FAR limits.

Current Regulations

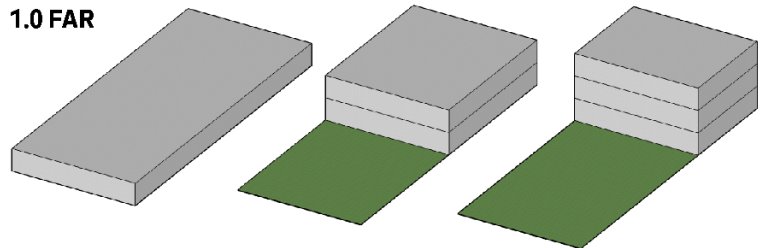
Under current regulations, there is not a maximum floor area ratio (FAR) limit in single-family zones. The maximum size of a principal structure (i.e., the main house) is effectively set by the yard requirements, height limit, and lot coverage limit.

Proposal

Under the Preferred Alternative, a maximum FAR limit would govern the size and scale of development of new homes in single-family zones, along with maximum height limit, maximum lot coverage limit, and yard requirements. Lots in single-family zones would be subject to a maximum floor area limit of 0.5 FAR or 2,500 square feet, whichever is greater. Floor area below grade (i.e. a basement) or in an ADU (whether attached or detached) would be exempt from the floor area calculations.

Illustrations of FAR Limits

1.0 FAR

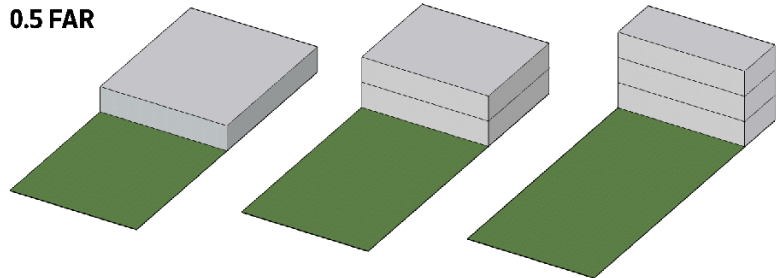


1 story
(100% lot coverage)

2 stories
(50% lot coverage)

3 stories
(33% lot coverage)

0.5 FAR



1 story
(50% lot coverage)

2 stories
(25% lot coverage)

3 stories
(17% lot coverage)

Source: Accessory Dwelling Unit Final EIS, City of Seattle, 2018

Why Add an FAR Limit in Single-Family Zones?

Scale of Houses

On a typical 5,000-square-foot lot, a new house can be 5,250 square feet in size, plus a basement. Many community members have expressed frustration with this pattern of redevelopment. Despite their size, these houses accommodate only one household.¹ Because of their size, they are very expensive – frequently more than \$1.5 million. Under the Preferred Alternative, new homes would be smaller and more similar in scale to many existing homes.



Typical Existing House in Seattle



Recently Constructed House in Seattle that Maximizes the Allowed Zoning Envelope

Increased ADU Production

Floor area in an ADU would not count towards the FAR limit, incentivizing builders of new homes to include ADUs in their projects and creating an option for owners to add living space to their existing homes.

Flexibility for Homeowners

Exempting any floor area that is in an ADU allows a homeowner to add living space to occupy themselves or to rent out.

What the EIS Tells Us

The analysis in the EIS found that the FAR limit is one of the factors that would reduce the number of teardowns of single-family zones. We estimate that under the Preferred Alternative 1,580 homes would be torn down between 2018 and 2027, compared to 2,030 teardowns under current rules. In addition, we found that most

single-family lots already meet the proposed maximum FAR standard, indicating that this will primarily impact new construction. Our analysis in the Final EIS finds that only 10 percent of existing houses exceed the FAR limit contemplated in the Preferred Alternative.

Next Steps

I look forward to getting feedback and having more discussions as we work toward introducing legislation mid-2019.

¹ The total population in many single-family areas has in fact decreased over the last several decades, even as the citywide population has soared. One-third of Seattle census tracts had more people in 1970 than in 2010, and nearly all of them consist primarily of single-family zoning. See Exhibit 3-9 in the ADU Final EIS for a map and discussion of this trend.