

POTENTIAL ZONING TOOLS TO ADDRESS HIGH DENSITY RESIDENTIAL PROJECTS

The following describes several planning tools that can be used to address this issue:

Density: Units per Acre

Dwelling units per acre is the most traditional tool for multi-family residential projects to determine how much development is allowed on a piece of property. The Sunnyvale Land Use and Transportation Element (LUTE) of the General Plan uses density to describe various types and intensities of residential land use. The State of California has laws regarding required Housing Elements and affordable housing density bonus; both use dwelling units per acre. Most models for evaluating environmental impacts are based on density (traffic, air quality) with no distinction for size of the dwellings.

Units per Acre Pros:

- Widely established general plan and zoning tool for setting the planned housing density for various areas of the community.
- Effective when used in conjunction with other zoning tools, such as zoning standards and design guidelines.

Units per Acre Cons:

- Does not provide guidance on the size of development.

Although density has its limitations, it is effective for land use planning when combined with other methods of review. Staff recommends retaining units per acre to describe allowable residential development. Given the limitation of density in determining the size, bulk and scale of a project, other methods of review can be considered to address the issue.

Floor Area Ratio:

Floor area ratio (FAR) is a zoning tool currently used in industrial and single-family residential districts in Sunnyvale. It is not, however, currently applied to multi-family residential districts in Sunnyvale. FAR was established for Sunnyvale industrial zoning districts in the 1980s to estimate the number of jobs associated with development in this zoning district. FAR was established for single-family zoning districts in the 1990s to address the size of homes in a neighborhood. Though less common, FAR is sometimes used in other communities for multi-family residential projects as well.

Building intensity is measured in FAR, which is the ratio of building floor area to land area. For example, a 50,000 square foot building on a 100,000 square foot parcel has an FAR of 0.50 (or 50 percent), regardless of the number of stories. Given those parameters, the building could be two-stories with 25,000 square foot floors or five-stories with 10,000 square foot floors. The building height regulations help to control that standard.

In researching past multi-family residential projects in Sunnyvale (Attachment 4), a wide

variety of FARs are seen. For example, in the R-3 zoning district, projects range from 35 percent to over 100 percent FAR, even though each project's density met the R-3 zoning requirements of 24 units per acre. A visual comparison of different projects can be seen in Attachment 5. Ultimately, the key factor in determining the FAR of a multi-family residential project is the unit size and number of units. Two projects with the same number of units, but with different bedroom types (one, two or three bedroom units), could have a wide variation in FAR.

While FAR aids in addressing the bulk and scale of a project, it should not be relied upon as the sole factor for assessing or regulating building mass. FAR is most effective when used in conjunction with other zoning standards such as setbacks, height and lot coverage. Two structures with the same FAR and similar architectural styles could appear different if the floor to ceiling heights are greater on one project, or the size or shape of the lot are different, or if setbacks are applied differently.

Mixed-use projects present a unique situation because a building's bulk and scale could be larger, given a commercial presence as part of the project. Given the wide variety of mixed-use projects (the project design and percentage of commercial and residential uses on a property), FAR standards would likely apply only to the residential portion of the project. Additionally, a new planning document is being prepared to provide information in the design and consideration of mixed-use projects; the Toolkit for Mixed Use Projects is expected to be heard by the Council in spring 2015.

FAR Pros:

- Established zoning tool used in other zoning districts to review the amount of development a property may have.
- Effective when used in conjunction with density, lot coverage, setbacks, height, parking, and open space requirements.

FAR Cons:

- Difficult to determine a proper maximum FAR since the size of each unit in a multi-family project affects the ultimate FAR number.
- Different residential type has different FAR possibilities. For instance, townhouses may have a higher FAR than stacked condominiums because the units are typically larger and include integrated parking spaces in the building.

Design Guidelines:

All projects in Sunnyvale are reviewed for consistency with design guidelines, such as the City-wide Design Guidelines and Single-family Home Design Techniques. Guidelines work in tandem with zoning requirements, such as setbacks, height, parking and open space requirements to determine a project's conformity to city standards. This option would expand the existing Guidelines by developing more specific guidelines for higher density housing to address the size, bulk and scale of a project.

Design Guidelines Pros:

- Provide flexibility in reviewing projects to meet size, bulk and scale concerns.

- Guidelines exist today and do not need to be extensively amended to be effective.
- When used in conjunction with zoning regulations, Guidelines can more effectively address neighborhood context and land use compatibility.

Design Guidelines Cons:

- Do not provide the same regulatory controls as zoning criteria, and may not provide as clear direction to those using the information (developers, architects, decision-makers, the community, or staff).
- Do not provide specific guidance about the size and bulk of a project since each zoning district has unique height and setback requirements.

Form-based zoning code:

A form-based code uses physical form (rather than separation of uses) as the organizing principle for the development regulations. A form-based code is a regulation, not a guideline, and addresses the relationship between building facades and the public realm, the form and mass of buildings in relation to one another, and the scale and types of streets and blocks. The regulations focus on appropriate form and scale of development, rather than only distinctions in land-use types. They are not only design guidelines or advisory statements of policy, but are regulatory criteria.

Form-based Code Pros:

- Provides a set of rules that can effectively straddle precise zoning code regulations and design guidelines.

Form-based Code Cons:

- Rewriting the zoning code to a form-based code is a staff intensive effort and could be complicated to administer; having effective zoning standards combined with clear design criteria can provide the majority of the value of a form-based code.
- Form-based codes are most appropriate in areas where a specific architectural character or pattern is sought, such as the downtown or historic district, and are difficult to administer City-wide.
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Bedrooms per acre:

This unique approach could replace or augment the density calculation of units per acre with bedrooms per acre. This measurement could provide an effective alternative to measuring the impact a project would have because it changes the focus from dwelling units (typically defined by the number of kitchens) to total bedrooms. This approach would require changing the current General Plan method of units per acre. Making the change would require a determination of the number of bedrooms in a typical unit within the current General Plan and zoning density ranges. The number of bedrooms could be an additional standard for the zoning district or could replace the number of units with specific number of bedrooms.

Bedroom per Acre Pros:

- Regulating a specific number of bedrooms can provide a more precise indication of a building's size because there would not be the variation based on unit size (e.g., one to four bedroom ranges).
- Adding bedroom per acre to the zoning standards would require minimal change to existing zoning tools, such as parking calculations
- Number of bedrooms is currently used to calculate required parking for a multi-family project.

Bedroom per Acre Cons:

- Most of the planning in Sunnyvale and most state regulations and environmental measurements are based on units per acre. Changing to a bedroom per acre standard would require correlating the General Plan land use categories (or amending the General Plan itself) and reconciling how state housing element and density bonus laws would be applied, which are based on units per acre.
- The size of a dwelling unit can vary depending on the size of the bedrooms or the amount of space devoted to other living areas.