

The following comments were collected as part of a workshop with housing developers, builders, and architects on policies and programs for the City of San Mateo's Housing Element on November 15th, 2021 via Zoom Webinar. Seven external participants and ten City of San Mateo Housing Element team members joined the event and results from the discussion are presented below.

Discussion Topic 1: Zoning and Building Regulations

Summary: There was general interest in relaxing height restrictions, particularly as they can conflict with minimum height requirements for ground floor uses. There was support for relaxing parking requirements in general and for excluding above grade parking from FAR calculations. There was also interest in establishing a local density bonus program to complement the State Density Bonus law.

- “The height calculation is too rigid; the City should regulate height by story rather than by feet.”
- “For modular construction, the minimum heights go up within same number of floors, an extra 14-15" per floor. As modular becomes more popular, the City could consider allowing additional height to accommodate modular construction.”
- “To have FAR and density (e.g. FAR of 2) at the same time is at conflict. State Density Bonus language on FAR appears to be mutually exclusive of unit per acre density. I would like greater flexibility here.” (comment supported by multiple participants).
- “For sites with limited frontage, requiring a fire control room on ground floor and frontage can create a conflict with density and height criteria.”
- “We need more ground floor height if we want to allow mechanical parking options or active commercial.”
- “For an all-residential wood frame construction, five stories within 55' is ok, but not for taller ground floor, parking or modular construction, it's difficult or not possible to get five stories within 55'.”
- “Above ground parking shouldn't be counted as FAR area, and below grade parking is very expensive and drives up unit cost.”
- “I support increasing height and density limits”
- “I support creating a local density bonus program. HOME SF is a program that allows for increases in height for increases of affordability. In one recent project I saw an increase in density of 225% (much more than State Density Bonus) with an increase from 21% to 30% affordable units (ended up with same number at low end, but got more middle-income units). An increase in density led to only a slight cost increase moving from type 5A to type 1 with 3A above.”
- “I support the idea that density of 50 du/acre is too low with a 55' height limit.”
- “Open space and lot coverage requirements are also constraints, so the 50 units/acre isn't always the controlling requirement. In South SF at 100 du/acre, the project was aided greatly by reduced parking and open space requirements.”

- “Height limits should have more flexibility. In a recent project a stair bulkhead was counted as an additional floor causing a series of conflicts (including with setbacks). I request additional and broader carve outs or exceptions.”
- “FAR of 1.0 limits density to ~25-30 du/acre, should be addressed. “
- “I request above grade parking not to count as FAR to bring City’s regulations in line with other cities, or include a carve out for housing and mixed-use projects in how FAR is calculated.”
- “Any relaxation for mixed-use projects helps with the cost of housing development.”
- “Density and height limits are inhibiting smaller unit creation and should be relaxed: I had a project with ~700 sf units and bumping against 3.0 FAR and height limits.”
- “State Density Bonus law is sometimes invoked to get the state financing available for affordable housing development. Because state has prioritized cost efficiency, in a high-cost area like San Mateo the only way to demonstrate efficiency is to go for scale with as tall and dense and large as possible. Lowering parking requirements also helps with this. So does lowering other development standards (e.g. small three bedroom units, and 1.5 baths in a 2 or three bedroom unit).”
- “Consider eliminating single-family zoning and/or establishing minimum units per development.”
- “I support all of the tenant supports being considered.”
- “I support the highest heights and densities possible to get more units. “
- “Eliminating parking requirements could get projects to 75+ du/acre within height limit.”

Discussion Topic 2: Development Review and Entitlement Process

Summary: Participants suggested that departmental and review agency expectations for level of detail required during the Planning Application (PA) phase should be further clarified and streamlined. There was also a common sentiment that some development standards (e.g. height limits and guest parking requirements) were increasingly out of step with contemporary trends on the Peninsula.

- “We need to calibrate the expectations of departments, e.g. Public Works expects Design Development-level design during early entitlements phase.”
- “Many development standards are based on more of a suburban community, it takes a lot of effort and work to satisfy those standards that other cities don't have (e.g. guest parking), height limits are too rigid, all of which adds costs to housing development.”
- “The application requirements are concise but followed by more robust list of comments that are hard to accommodate, this bogs down resources on both sides. It would be better to have clarity up front on submittal requirements at both pre-app and application phases to limit total number of reviews e.g. streetlight design doesn't need to be done during PA phase.”
- “Eliminate the early study session with PC.”

- “Develop a clearer submission checklist to clarify the right element of the appropriate code to be satisfied.”
- “Additional fee clarification would be helpful.”
- “We need to confirm the definition of substantial conformance.”
- “Height limits are onerous and inhibit housing development.”

Discussion Topic #3: Affordable Housing Alternatives

Summary: There was general interest in seeing an expansion of available incentive programs to bring additional affordable units online in general, and particular interest in creating a strong local density bonus program to extend incentives beyond those in the State Density Bonus.

- “Deed restricting is a significant way to address this, greater clarity on what the requirements and thresholds are would be helpful.”
- “Acquisition and upgrading of existing housing units is a worthy concept.”
- “All of these programs (inclusionary requirements, including units onsite and offsite, in lieu fees, deed restrictions, land dedication) are good. They should be mutually available.”
- “The more options: a bigger toolkit will give developers more opportunities to bring projects online.”
- “Be very cautious when setting the relative cost of participation in one program vs another (e.g. if you make offsite 3x more expensive present a clear rationale for the policy that is furthering).”
- “Make community benefits a clear formula anyone could calculate.”
- “With a base density of 50du/acre, it’s hard to get much of value.”
- “Create a local density program: its ok if State doesn't cross match local 1:1, as long as local is extending the tool.”

Discussion Topic #4: Housing in Mixed-Use Developments

Summary: The City should set a minimum density if it wants a higher percentage of housing in mixed-use projects, height limit, FAR and parking a constraint on developing mixed-use, be sensitive to economic thresholds and constraints; consider adopting codes that are more form based.

- “The 55’ height limit makes it difficult to have an active ground floor. State Density Bonus is almost always needed to achieve optimal heights. Consider an overlay zone to make this easier to achieve without using State Density Bonus.”
- “For mixed-use with a 15’ ground floor ceiling, and 12’-13’ on 2nd/3rd floors, then five stories cannot be achieved within 55’ height limit and constraints created for installing mechanical and HVAC. Allow for greater ground floor flexibility.”

- “Consider more flexible ways to achieve an active ground floor without a traditionally leased commercial space. E.g. amenities for housing, a coffee cart vendor in the lobby, etc.”
- “Consider defining number of floors instead of linear feet for height limit.”
- “Use Redwood City’s Form Based Code downtown as a model, the city can dictate the form for the sites you want to develop, that can be the roadmap and the applicant can come in and take pieces out of it.”
- “Building systems are more expensive in mixed-use, so a critical mass (minimum size) is necessary to make investment worthwhile; otherwise, mixed-use can be cost prohibitive.”
- “I suggest eliminating above ground parking from FAR.”
- “We should consider ways to count the inverted parking demand inherent in much mixed-use to lower the total required parking; have shared parking allowed under the code and offer clarity around how shared parking is counted.”

Discussion Topic #5: Parking

Summary: There was significant interest in relaxing parking requirements, particularly in walkable areas close to transit, but there was also an understanding that the market demand supports providing a certain amount of secure on-site parking for residents. There was general agreement that guest parking was unnecessary, but that electric vehicle charging requires more area than traditional parking, and on-site bike parking requirements are high.

- “I would prefer to build to a parking ratio of 1.15 spaces/unit in general but less in more challenging sites and in very-walkable sites. Or we can consider lower ratios.”
- “Access to secure parking is a big deal. We put garages into a multi-family because didn't have enough parking.”
- “There are mixed views on mechanical lifts, some developers avoid them while others have had success using them. We have concerns over user error, reliability and unknown maintenance costs. “
- “Mechanical parking allows you to better future proof the floor for other uses going forward if paradigm changes. They can also be cost-efficient (parking can be 1/3 or more of overall budget).”
- “Guest parking is less market driven than resident parking.”
- “Electric vehicle charging equipment can be challenging to squeeze into a typical 30’ column grid.”
- “For affordable housing projects, I would prefer a parking ratio around 0.7, or even lower in TOD areas. Demand can be lowered effectively through transit passes, car share packages, and that guest parking isn’t well utilized or needed.”
- “I suggest eliminating the covered parking requirement for lower density residential projects.”
- “Given Reach code and EV demands, larger transformers are needed. Also, PG&E doesn't want transformers underground, and transformers occupy a lot of ground floor space.”

- “City’s on-site bike parking requirement is very high.”
- “Projects should be given more latitude on parking requirements, and that parking studies should be a method to support alternative solutions to parking/mobility requirements on a site-specific basis.”
- “We need to make clear and have more grades of flexibility in parking requirements: one set of requirements for greater than ½ mile to transit, one for ¼ to ½, yet more flexibility for less than ¼ mile to transit.”
- “Policy driver should be walkability and proximity to transit, not bike use or size of bike room.”
- “Locating housing near schools and strengthening safe routes to schools will eliminate the need for many cars from the origin point.”

Discussion Topic #6: Amenities

Summary: There was agreement that open space and roof decks are attractive amenities supported by market demand, however, physical location and climate can reduce usability, being located in a walkable downtown is an amenity in itself and can lessen the need for onsite open space.

- “Because densities are so low compared to rest of Peninsula, open space requirements are relatively easy to meet.”
- “When located near high-sound areas (freeway and train) and near very walkable areas (e.g. downtown) open space isn’t as well utilized and shouldn’t be required as strongly as it might be elsewhere.”
- “Roof decks are an attractive amenity, and the market supports their existence, however privacy conflicts should be managed sensitively and can be done by guardrails being strategically set back from edge to manage sightline privacy, etc.”
- “Climate conditions of a site can impact usability of a roof deck (e.g. windy location).”
- “Many projects require every inch of roof for solar, for common area electricity load, so there can be tension there if roof decks are effectively required by open space minimums.”
- “We need to allow for flexibility in code re: elevator override, what can be counted as a shade structure in roof (what counts as temporary vs permanent, ability to bolt down objects, etc.”
- “Downtown is an amenity in and of itself, so other amenity requirements can be flexible in the downtown.”