

To: Village Board
From: Catherine Friesen (Member, Zoning Code Revision Committee)
Date: October 25, 2008
Re: Zoning Code Draft

I am submitting this memo to suggest that the Board ask its consultant to consider whether the goals identified by the Comprehensive Master Plan of reducing teardowns of historic homes and encouraging development that is in keeping with the scale of the existing homes in the Village (more colloquially referred to as avoiding the “McMansion” problem) could be accomplished in a more user-friendly manner than the floor area ratio (“FAR”) approach adopted in the draft revision to the Zoning Code.

My concern is that the FAR is conceptually difficult for lay people (such as myself) to grasp and involves complicated calculations which will unnecessarily tax homeowners with relatively minor renovations projects. While the Code as drafted contains an exception “[f]or minor alterations and additions to existing dwellings” (stating that “the Building Inspector shall determine whether the calculation of floor area ratio is required and may waive floor area ratio calculation for alterations and additions that, by his estimations, do not appear to result in the building exceeding the maximum FAR and add 300 or less square feet”), this provision increases the burden on the Building Department while giving the Building Inspector a substantial amount of ill-defined discretion, and assumes that the applicant has an understanding of the FAR as applied to his/her home in the first place. I see it creating a lot of confusion in its application.

As an alternative to the FAR, some communities have adopted a sliding percentage of lot coverage in residential areas: that is, the larger the lot, the smaller the maximum permitted lot coverage. For example, as applied here, lots in the SFR-2 district, with a minimum square footage of 5,000 square feet, could be permitted (as they currently are) 28% lot coverage, while lots in the SFR-1 district, with a minimum square footage of 7,500 square feet, could have a maximum lot coverage of 25%. Those percentages translate to a building “footprint” of 1,400 and 1,875 square feet respectively. The sliding scale could be extended to and refined for larger lots as well. This would limit the size of home that could be built on larger lots (and thereby reduce the incentive to “teardown” existing structures and keep them in scale with existing homes) while providing greater flexibility to owners of smaller lots. It may not solve all the problems that the FAR is designed to address, but it is much simpler for the Applicant to understand and for the Building Department to administer and appears more cost-effective.

This proposal was considered, and rejected by the Zoning Code Revision Committee, and the Board may wish its consultant to revisit it.

This memorandum represents my personal views, not those of the Planning Board. On a further personal note, I think the Committee, especially Steve Knowlton and Robin Brown, did an outstanding job of coordinating and synthesizing everyone’s views and I look forward to the Village Board’s consideration of the Draft.