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Barney Heath
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MEMORANDUM

DATE: November 8th, 2024

TO: Councilor R. Lisle Baker, Chair, Zoning & Planning Committee
Members of the Zoning & Planning Committee

FROM: Barney Heath, Director, Department of Planning and Development
Jennifer Caira, Deputy Director, Department of Planning and Development
Zachery LeMel, Chief of Long-Range Planning
Nora Masler, Planning Associate

RE: **#311-24 Requesting discussion and possible amendments to dormer regulations in Chapter 30 Zoning**
HER HONOR THE MAYOR requesting a discussion and possible amendments to dormer regulations for Residential Buildings in Chapter 30 Zoning Section 1.5.4.G to clarify language regarding overall dormer length calculations.

Meeting: November 14th, 2024

CC: City Council
Planning Board
Anthony Ciccariello, Commissioner of Inspectional Services
Jonathan Yeo, Chief Operating Officer
Alissa O. Giuliani, City Solicitor

Overview

Dormers (Fig. 1), a window that projects vertically from a sloping roof, are regulated within Newton's Zoning Ordinance to ensure that they are not utilized to construct essentially a third story (Fig. 2). Newton's single and two-family residential buildings allow a maximum of two-and-a-half stories by-right.

Fig. 1: Sketch of a typical dormer

Fig. 2: Building elevation with shed dormer (red), not allowed by-right

Dormers are an important architectural feature that both helps to articulate the building and allows for habitable space on the upper floors while reducing the visual impression of the mass of the building. Dormers should be encouraged. Without dormers, many projects would opt for a flat roof, which is typically less expensive than a pitched roof. This is particularly true for the Multi-Residence Transit (MRT) district where that upper story must be habitable for the required third unit.

Issue

Sec. 1.5.4.G.2.b.
A dormer may be no wider than 50 percent of the length of the exterior wall of the story next below. Where more than one dormer is located on the same side of the roof, the width of all dormers combined may not exceed 50 percent of the length of the exterior wall next below.

The current ordinance language above limits the overall length of a dormer to half of the length of wall of the floor below. This 50% maximum limits the overall bulk of the dormer and prevents a dormer from visually creating the appearance of a third story. Dormers are also limited by Section 1.5.4.C, which defines a half story as "a story directly under a sloping roof where the area with a ceiling height of 7 feet or greater is less than 2/3 of the area of the next story below." This prevents using dormers to by-pass the 2.5 story height limit and create a full third story. There is no recommendation to change the length of dormer allowed or the half story definition, but instead update how the length is calculated.

It was recently brought to the attention of the Planning Department that the dormer language, see above, is interpreted by the Inspectional Services Department (ISD) that any "jog" or change in wall plane on the story below the roof is considered a break or change and is calculated as a separate wall. The allowed dormer width is therefore calculated based on each wall segment, rather than based on the entire exterior wall, or roof plane, see Fig. 3. Therefore, the zoning as currently written disincentives architects and builders from adding articulations, such as bays, to avoid requirements for disproportionately small dormers. Similar to the way dormers provide roof articulation, bays or jogs along the walls help articulate the building and break up the overall mass, which should be encouraged. Thus, the proposal before the Zoning and Planning Committee (ZAP) aligns the zoning language with the intent of the section, to encourage appropriately sized dormers without discouraging other aesthetically enhancing building articulation.

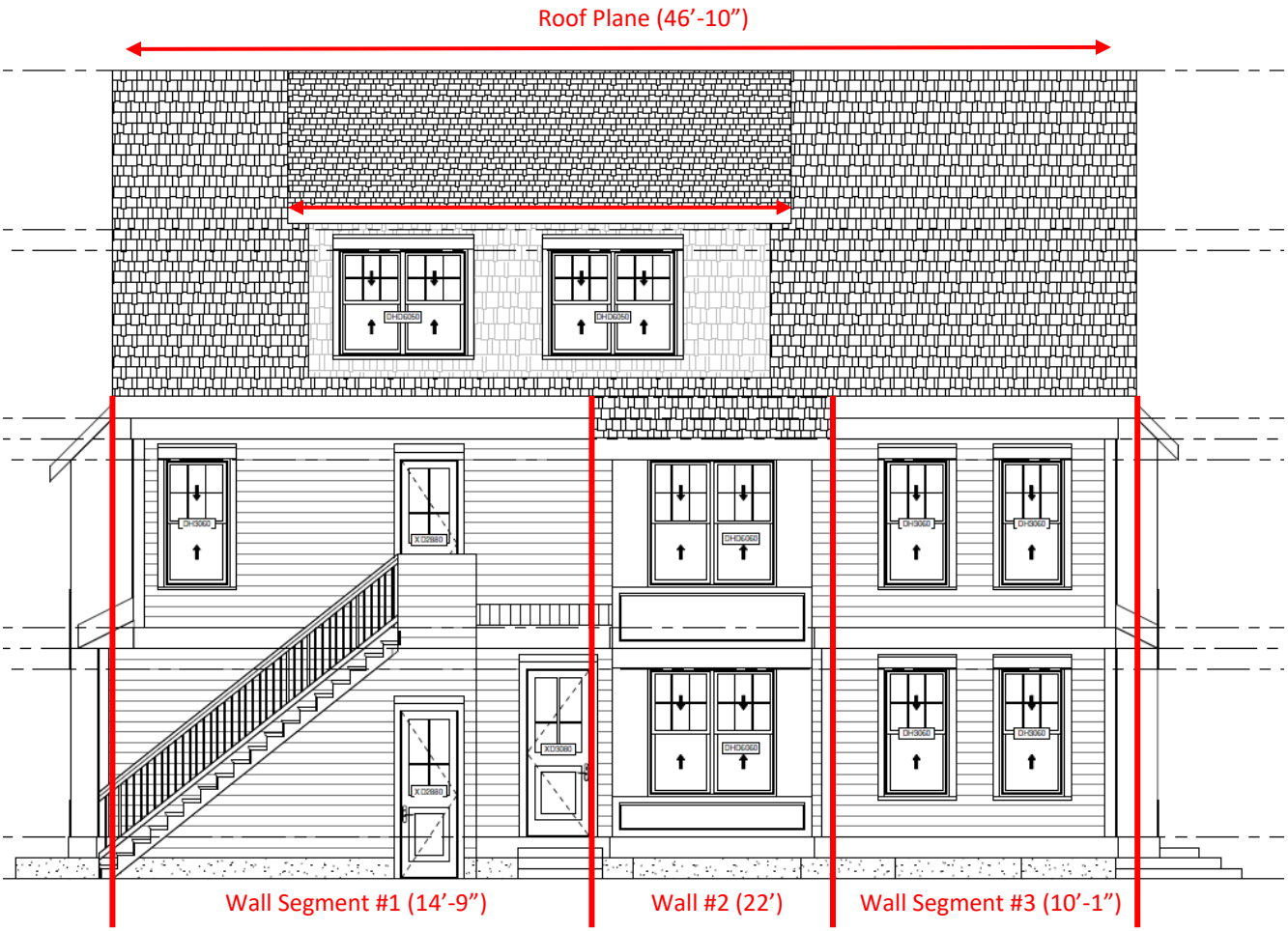

Fig. 3: A proposed building elevation with a dormer that exceeds 50% of the length of the exterior walls of the story beneath, which is calculated as 3 individual segments , based on ISD's current interpretation

Recommendation

Staff recommend a simple update in language to determine the maximum length of a dormer be calculated based on the "the widest length of the uninterrupted roof plane excluding overhangs", not the "exterior wall of the story next below" (see Fig. 4 below). There is no proposed change to the maximum dormer length allowance of 50% currently. There is also no proposed change to the requirement that dormers be located at least three feet from the end wall below. For reference, this would permit the drawing in Fig. 3 by-right, whereas the drawing in Fig. 2 would still either not be allowed or require a special permit.

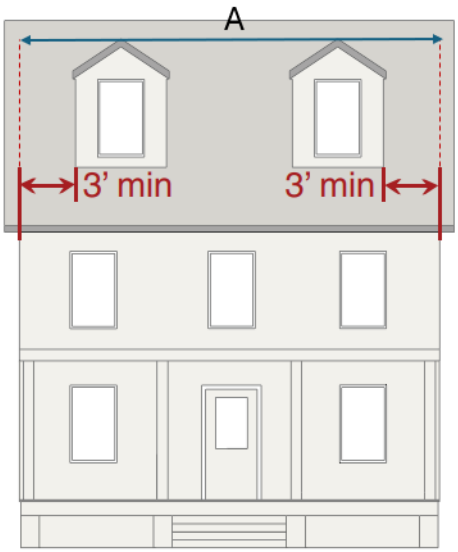

Fig. 4: A diagram showing how dormers would be measured under the proposal. Dormers could not exceed 50% of 'A'.

Next Steps

Discussion and possible vote by the Zoning and Planning Committee and the Planning and Development Board during the public hearing.

Attachment A: Proposed Section 1.5.G Amendment

1.5 Rules of Measurement

G. Dormers.

1. Defined. A projection built out from a sloping roof, usually containing a window or vent.
2. Except as may be allowed by special permit in accordance with Sec. 7.3, the following restrictions apply to dormers above the second story in single- and two-family dwellings and to dormers in accessory structures.
   a. A roof line overhang shall be continued between the dormer and the story next below so as to avoid the appearance of an uninterrupted wall plane extending beyond two stories.
   b. A dormer may be no wider than 50 percent of the ~~length of the exterior wall of the story next below~~ the widest length of the uninterrupted roof plane excluding overhangs. Where more than one dormer is located on the same side of the roof, the width of all dormers combined may not exceed 50 percent of the length of the exterior wall next below.
   c. The vertical plane of the side wall of any dormer shall not be closer than 3 feet from the vertical plane of the intersection of the roof and the main building end wall nearest the dormer.
   d. No dormer may project above the main ridgeline of the single- or two-family dwelling or the accessory structure.