

Memorandum

To: Councilor Deb Crossley, Chair, Zoning and Planning Committee
From: Councilor Lisle Baker
Subject: #88-20, #30-20, #38-20, and #148-20: Proposed residential zoning ordinance revisions to be discussed on Monday, April 27 at the Committee – clarifying aspects of the proposed changes
Date: April 24, 2020
Cc: City Council, Barney Heath, Zachery LeMel, Planning Board, John Lojek, Alissa O. Giuliani, and Jonathan Yeo

The following questions relate to clarifying aspects of past presentations about the residential components of the proposed new zoning ordinance as well as elements to be presented on Monday evening, such as building components, garage and driveway standards, building footprint, height and massing.

1. Aside from increased neighborhood density, what are some of the implications of proposed changes to facilitate more development on larger lots, as the Planning Department showed in its case study at the last Zoning and Planning Committee meeting? For example, will those parcels now become more valuable to the owners if they can be effectively divided for new building? If so, will they be taxed more than they are today?

2. In its memorandum of April 3, the Planning Department prepared a helpful table comparing some features of the current and proposed ordinance. I would ask that it prepare a similar table comparing the current and proposed building components, garage and driveway standards, building footprint, height and massing. Also, how do such elements relate to overall building mass and paving? (I recall Mr. Freas mentioning in the past that the basic house is a “Mr. Potato Head” which these accessory elements can make bigger.) Also, while the new ordinance is considered, can the Planning Department offer some interim adjustments in our current ordinance to help control “snout houses” – those with garages as the streetscape – such as requiring garage setbacks from the front of the house itself and requiring that the garage front be less than the house front width?

3. Floor area ratio (FAR) as a means of controlling building mass was developed and implemented with the encouragement of the then leadership in the Planning Department to help control teardowns and oversized houses. Why is the current Planning Department recommending this tool – which I recall was hard won -- now be abandoned? For example, limiting the floor total floor area to be built to a percentage of the lot size allows larger houses on larger lots and smaller homes on smaller lots. On the other hand, as I understand the proposed new zoning, a 7,000 or a 21,000 square foot lot in an R2 district could have the same maximum house size. Also, if there is a concern that some elements of a lot count for purposes of the Floor Area Ratio which are really not part of the building envelope created by front, side and rear setbacks, might we simply amend the FAR limits to exclude that portion of the lot not within the allowable building setbacks on four sides?

4. Much of the rationale for the proposed changes is to reduce nonconformity – the fact that many existing lots and structures do not conform to current zoning requirements. How many homeowners annually seek relief from such rules through Special Permits from the Council? Is such nonconformity relief focused on one or more elements in particular, like FAR?

5. In drafting the proposed residential changes, what communities did the Planning Department rely on as models? Based on the prior presentations, it looks like Somerville was relied upon significantly? If so, why? Can we learn from other municipalities more nearby? They may have zoning more similar to our own with elements we could emulate, such as a “large house” ordinance I recall adopted in a neighboring community.

Thank you.