



City and Borough of Sitka

100 Lincoln Street • Sitka, Alaska 99835

Coast Guard City, USA

MEMORANDUM

To: Chair Spivey and Members of the Planning Commission
From: Planning and Community Development Department Staff
Subject: **Proposed revisions to Table 22.20-1 Development Standards, providing for reduced setbacks, decreased minimum lot sizes, and increased building coverage**
Date: March 12, 2019

General description and background

The request is to amend the zoning code to relax development standards in zoning districts which allow residential structures. Providing for higher density use of existing lands, and reducing the number of zoning variances, have been policy goals of the department and the city for some time. These goals have been most recently expressed in the Assembly's action plan on housing, goal 2a, "Zoning code residential lot sizes," and three Comprehensive Plan goals:

H1.1b Minimize prevalence of variances by amending development standards, such as setbacks.

H1.1c Reduce minimum lot sizes.

H 1.1e Encourage higher density development.

The specific proposal is to amend Table 22.20-1, the table in the zoning code which sets out for each zoning district the requirements for minimum sizes and dimensions of lots, minimum setbacks from front, side, and back property lines, and building coverage.¹

Staff analysis

Existing development standards regarding lot size and setbacks have been observed to be out of line with the reality of existing lots and structures. Various staff reviews have shown there are several neighborhoods where a high percentage of lots and structures do not comply with existing regulations. Reductions in development standards have also been recommended by Smart Growth America as a means to reduce development costs and promote affordable housing

¹ Building coverage is the percentage of the area of a lot that can be "covered" by building(s).

and affordable development, by more efficiently utilizing our limited developable land. A substantial portion of the Planning Department's work is processing variances, so a reduction in variances would allow staff to focus on more impactful planning work.

Staff have recognized that due to the diverse, if not sporadic zoning scheme, a major zoning overhaul may be needed. However, that recognition does not preclude taking immediate steps now to improve the existing situation.

A few points for the Commission to consider:

- The table has two new footnotes:

Footnote 16: **Site and building plan must be such that tandem (front to back) parking is not necessary to provide two off-street parking spaces per dwelling unit as required by SGC 22.20.100.**

Footnote 20: **The split side setback is to allow a property developer to select a larger side setback on one side of the property in order to provide for parking on that side. See note 16.**

We believe these footnotes are self-explanatory, but bring them to the Commission's attention as significant changes.

- An analysis of variances granted by the Planning Commission over the last four years finds:
 1. 39 variances were granted for front setback reductions. Under the proposed revisions 12 of those would not have required a variance.
 2. 36 variances were granted for side setback reductions. Under the proposed revisions 14 of those would not have required a variance.
 3. 14 variances were granted for rear setback reductions. Under the proposed revisions 3 of those would not have required a variance.

At first glance, one might conclude that amending the setbacks wouldn't reduce by much the number of variances granted. But, in practice, staff vets applications which come in and generally coaches applicants to amend or withdraw applications which don't have a sound basis to justify a variance being approved by the Commission. Attached is a spreadsheet showing the compilation, and a list of variances granted for other reasons.

- The combination of reduced lot size with reduced setbacks preserves a buildable footprint, on a 6,000 square foot lot, of approximately the same size as an 8,000 square foot lot with current setbacks. (3,000 square foot buildable vs. 2800 square foot buildable, respectively). See attached diagrams.
- The zoning codes of Ketchikan and Juneau have development standards roughly similar to Sitka's current standards. Ketchikan's front setbacks are mostly 15' for residential zones. Juneau's range from 20'-25'. But those communities' definitions of terms and

zoning districts are different enough to preclude a straightforward apples to apples comparison.

- For general visualization purposes, the Lillian Drive subdivision, approved in its day as a Planned Unit Development, consists of many lots which are 50'X 90' - 4,500 sq ft of total area.

Attachments:

Revised Table 22.20-1 Development Standards

Tabulation of variances over last four years.

Diagrams of buildable area

Maps of neighborhoods showing lots out of compliance with current zoning