



February 13, 2020

## Review: Changes to Blue Hill Massing and Permeability

Reviewed by: Brian Peterson, AIA, Urban Designer, Town of Chapel Hill

This memorandum serves as a review of the proposed changes to Section 3.11 of the Land Use Management Ordinance regarding massing and permeability in the Blue Hill District. The review is based upon the Staff Technical Report prepared for the Council Regular Meeting on 02-19-20.

### **Objectives**

The stated objectives of the new massing standards include increasing pedestrian connections, increasing visual permeability, and reducing the visual impact of taller buildings. These concerns will form the basis for the following comments. Based upon my review, I feel that the proposed changes will indeed improve the Form-Based Code in achieving these objectives.

### **A-1 Building Mass**

1. Building Width and Depth: the proposed dimensions allow for the accommodation of typical planning and layout modules for residential, office, and parking configurations, allowing for flexibility in potential uses that can be accommodated in the footprints. The limitations in the size of building footprints will have the effect of making it more difficult to design large monolithic singular buildings especially for residential uses. Allowance for the secondary wings will encourage building massing units to project out from the main form which can help reduce the scale of larger buildings.
2. 330'x200' with wrapped parking-when this building is shown for visual impact on page 6 of the report it is noted that the parking deck must be wrapped on at least 2 sides. Suggest language to clarify that for a building at a street corner, the two street fronting sides must be wrapped.

**Planning Staff Response:** Agree. This suggestion is consistent with other elements of the Text Amendment. Staff will update the ordinance to specify this requirement.

3. 275'x210' without wrapped parking-this footprint has considerable depth at 210'. The plan dimensions would adequately accommodate larger office, hotel or courtyard apartment buildings, but consideration should be given as to whether the additional wing should be allowed here.

**Planning Staff Response:** One purpose of the wings is to allow multifamily buildings to yield a sufficient number of units for development viability, as determined by the economic analysis. Staff would therefore recommend that the secondary wing still be allowed for each configuration. However, we can add a stipulation that the wing must have public realm

frontage (ie adjoining a street, greenway, or amenity space). This would expand the opportunity for buildings in the District to frame and shape public space.

4. Secondary Wings- the building wings as proposed have a number of advantages. They allow extensions to the floor plan without adding depth to the entire floor plate. They also create an “L” shaped building mass, which begins to define an outdoor space, and paired with other similar “L”s and “U” shaped buildings, create a series of outdoor courtyards positively defining outdoor rooms.

5. The wings appear to be a natural way to expand buildings in the future. Is future expansion considered as part of the code?

**Planning Staff Response:** While we have not previously contemplated this, the proposed framework should be able to accommodate opportunities for future building expansion. The secondary wing standard would lead to building additions / adjoining buildings having smaller footprints than the main building, providing a variation in mass and scale.

6. Corner Lots-text states the ability to use the larger dimension along *both* streets. Suggest revising to say *either* for clarification.

**Planning Staff Response:** Agree. The intent of this provision is for the larger dimension to be measured along only one street, the primary frontage. Staff will update the ordinance to provide this clarification.

## A-2 Building Separation

7. The building separation standard is a substantial improvement on the current pass-through requirements, which can result in a tunnel like space with minimal value in building separation. Under these proposed standards, the maximum dimension of a building separation, in terms of height of the space to width, would be a space 30’ wide and about 90’ tall: that is a 3:1 proportioned space and while at the upper end, is considered within an acceptable range in terms of best practices of urban design.

8. Pedestrian Connection-suggest adding a note that the 8’ sidewalk required within the separation area be directly connected to the sidewalk along the street frontage and to pedestrian paths/sidewalks to the interior of the block.

**Planning Staff Response:** Agree. Staff will update the ordinance to ensure that connectivity with other sidewalks is clearly specified.

9. Building Articulation: within the building separation area, the ground floor is most important in creating a welcoming pedestrian experience. Should the word “allowed” be revised to “encouraged” or “required”?

**Planning Staff Response:** Agree that balconies, awnings, and other articulation methods should be encouraged. As a way to encourage these elements, the proposed ordinance allows them to extend into the required building separation area (with the separation distance still being measured between the main facades). The ordinance would also update

the CDC's review charge to include evaluating the design quality of the spaces between buildings.

10. Vehicular Functions-suggest that any drives within the separation areas, be designed as "Woonerfs" or plaza-like spaces where pedestrians, bikes, and vehicles share the space. The alley or street dimension would still not count as part of the minimum separation width.

**Planning Staff Response:** Agree that 'woonerf's and shared spaces would contribute to the walkability of the District. Staff recommends that at this time, conventional vehicular-oriented drives still be allowed (with a separate 8' sidewalk) for service and emergency access purposes. Shared streets could be a topic for further study and potential future revision, upon determining roadway design criteria that function effectively for both pedestrians and emergency vehicle access.

## **B-2 Townhouses**

11. The revised requirements for townhouses can potentially enhance the opportunity for "missing middle" units in the district. For townhouse projects that exceed conditions (I) & (ii), should live/work be considered an acceptable non-residential use?

**Planning Staff Response:** Live/work units would be permitted in the WX-5 and WX-7 Subdistricts (where both residential and commercial uses are allowed). Staff's interpretation is that the commercial/office component of the unit would be a non-residential use that could count towards the required minimum in a residential project.

## **B-4 Structured Parking Setback**

12. For corner sites where a Type A frontage is on one side and a differing frontage type is along the other it is suggested that any exposed parking structure along the Type B or C frontage should be located a minimum distance (30') away from the corner.

**Planning Staff Response:** Current standards require a Type A frontage treatment to continue for 75 feet around a street corner when the intersecting street has a less restrictive frontage. This would prevent an exposed parking structure in proximity a Type A street.