

November 30, 2006
Decatur Infill Task Force Minority Report
Architectural Concerns Subcommittee

Sheila Hunt

Steve Provost

Eric Sundquist

Bruce Fabrick

This Infill Task Force (ITF) draft infill zoning minority recommendation is the result the Architectural Concerns subcommittee. It consists of the draft report of the Architectural Concerns subcommittee developed as amended by discussion November 29, 2006. The recommendations regard Ordinance O-05-Z-09 amending the text of the Decatur Zoning Ordinance, which is intended to remain in place unless specifically noted. Ordinance changes are posted with discussion immediately following.

Given the diverse nature of Decatur's housing stock it is thought important to suggest solutions of a universal nature rather than subdivide into a variety of zoning solutions dealing with specific housing styles. R-60 category zoning covers some 80 percent of Decatur's housing and is the focus of this report. R-60 zoning provides for a target density of seven or less families per acre, while RM-60 target is 18 families; our recommendations for accessory dwellings tend to move R-60 to a slightly higher density without expanding lot size to provide 1) greater economic diversity and 2) homeowners with more options and flexibility to improve their property. There are a significant number of R-60 lots that are well below 60 feet in street frontage, and there are measures regarding this hardship that should head off excessive variance requests. We have concentrated on the "interior" lot and are aware that corner, wedge, through- and vacant lots may require further consideration.

This draft contains short discussions of the issues we identified as significant parts of the residential infill problem through community input sessions, research and individual experiences. We found issues providing disruption of neighborhood character to be:

- excessive bulk in new and remodeled houses, respecting front and side as determined by height, width and façade articulation
- detail-oriented esthetic concerns (these are best left to historic district designation)
- placement of structure on lot
- placement of garage and porch elements
- floor-to-area (FAR) restrictions

Some issues are of primarily environmental concern:

- tree canopy loss (this is best managed through the tree ordinance)
- landscaping (this is best managed by adopting a landscape ordinance)
- stormwater runoff
- lot coverage

Another category of issues relate to accessory dwellings:

- area allowed
- building setbacks
- occupant relationship to homeowner

Additional issues are of primarily “street” concern:

- sidewalks
- on-street parking
- curbs

Decatur R-60 zoning house infill discussion

Perceptions of Bulk – height, width and façade articulation

The concept underlying this draft approach to controlling perceptions of bulk in R-60 districts is that guidelines should manage growth relative to specific “context” to allow for changes in economic and aesthetic preferences of property owners over time; therefore guidelines are sought to express control in terms of neighboring structures rather than strict, arbitrary numeric values whose simplicity masks the complexity of the task. The approach we have chosen is intended to serve universally for houses regardless of housing style, allowing the “context” of the surrounding houses to provide guidance in height and width management. The concept of “incremental growth” provides for change in house size as standards and individual needs evolve while avoiding the shock of out-of-scale redevelopment that led to the creation of this task force.

The character of a street, and thus a neighborhood, defines the public face of our community and is a major focus of our work that provides “context” for each house. The character of a street comprises street/sidewalk/planting, front yard and landscaping, and the buildings that make up the "walls" of this public corridor. The distance between the "walls" varies with each street, and is primarily a function of existing building setback and landscaping choices by the property owner. These street "walls" are composed of a rhythm of solid/void that varies across different streets reflecting their origins, and is a beneficial aspect of neighborhood character that must be allowed to grow incrementally without radical change. Sloping streets add complexity to height definitions since adjacent finish floors may vary significantly, but main floor elevation remains an important benchmark defining character.

The management of building bulk through the secondary limitation of FAR seems unnecessary since we can give greater autonomy to the homeowner inside the house with less intrusive management of its more public aspects through height, width, and setback definitions of building envelope. Lot coverage restrictions managing stormwater runoff provide the remaining “back yard” control of envelope (assuming that “overlapping” ordinances controlling the same aspect of development such as lot coverage and stormwater calculation are made suitably distinct to streamline the homeowner permitting process), and so we think it reasonable to

Height.

1. delete Section 4.1.5 Floor-area ratio (FAR) and Section 7.2.3.11 “Maximum floor area ratio”
2. amend Section 4.1.64 deleting the last sentence “A half-story containing independent apartment or living quarters shall be counted as a full story.”
3. delete Section 7.2.3.9 “Maximum building height” and amend Section 4.1.8 “Building height definition” to measure height from front door elevation (see Section 10.3.4) and to reflect:

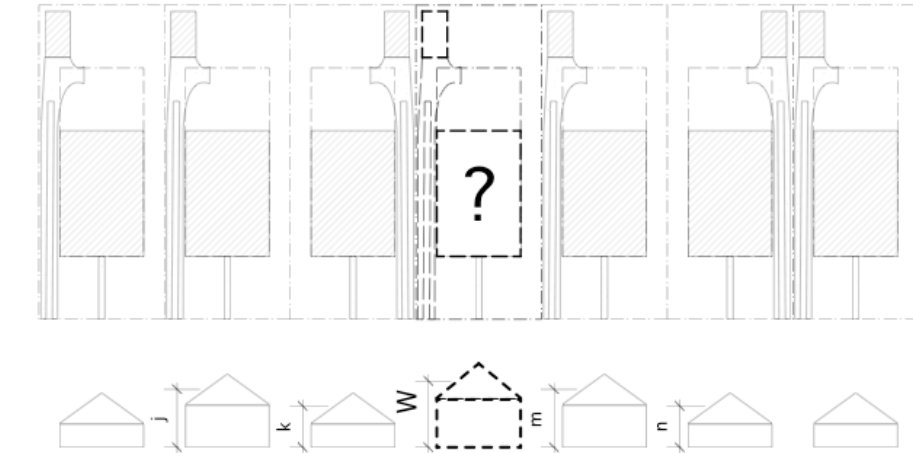
General principles: Houses should be able to rise the equivalent of five feet above the average of the neighboring houses as determined by Figure I if they mitigate perception of bulk with façade articulation (relieving the vertical front plane of the building envelope with a stepped-forward portion, a projecting bay, an inset portion, etc.) The measuring point should not encourage flat roofs as the current one tends to do, so return to the previous concept of measurement to average roof height as measured from front door elevation (Section 10.3.4.). The maximum building height to be determined by the length of the ladder the fire department uses. Delete Sec 7.2.3.9 “Maximum Building Height and amend Sec 4.1.8 “Building height definition”.

Figure I – House Height Average

HOUSE HEIGHT* "W" BY AVERAGE CALCULATION

IF FRONT FACADE IS UNBROKEN: $W \leq (j+k+m+n)/4$

IF FRONT FACADE HAS BULK MITIGATION** : $W \leq (j+k+m+n)/4 + 1/2$ STORY



* front facade measured from front door elevation to midpoint of average roof height (old definition), maximum determined by fire department ladder

**half or more of width of structure is broken by 12" minimum step forward, projecting bay, inset porch

9/28/06
ITF solid-void - Fabrick Architects.mcd

Exemption: for lots of substandard width and single story structure, a full second story or ten feet height above average is allowed if façade bulk mitigation is employed.

Width.

1. amend Section 7.2.3.7 to reflect:

General principles: The city should not require wider voids than already exist in older neighborhoods, and it should encourage building toward the front of lots where possible to reduce need for impervious cover.

As alternatives to the existing 10' sideyard setback we recommend a minimum of ten feet between structures, reducing minimum sideyard setback to 3' for maintenance access with the following calculations for either solid or void as determined by Figure II:

Figure II – house width or void average

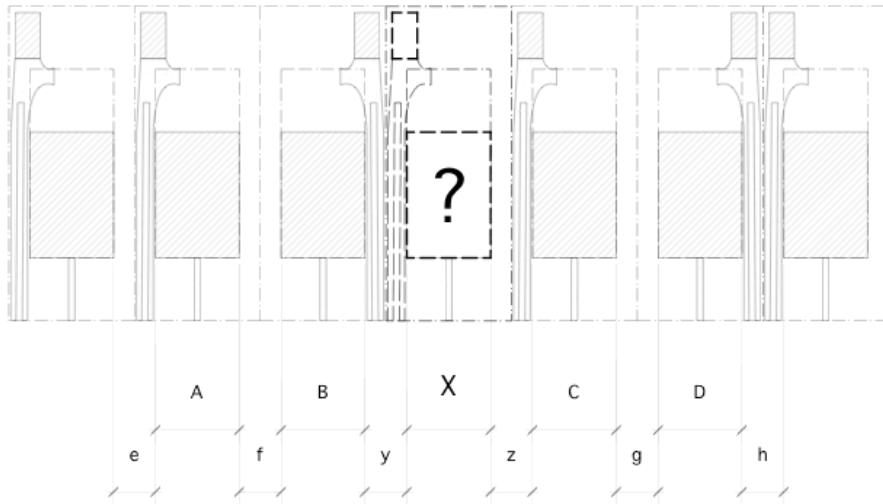
- 1) house width "X" or
- 2) average void (space between houses) $(y+z)/2$ greater than or equal to 10'

HOUSE WIDTH "X" BY SOLID/VOID CALCULATION

EITHER:

$$X \leq (A+B+C+D)/4 \quad \text{OR}$$

$$y+z/2 \leq (e+f+g+h)/4 \quad \text{WHERE } y = z \pm 5\% \quad \text{AND } (e+f)/2 = (g+h)/2 \pm 10\%$$



standard R-60 lot area 60'x120'=9000 SF
lot coverage @ 0.40= 3600 SF

9/28/06
ITF solid-void - Fabrick Architects.mcd

Porches.

1. amend Section 10.6 “Front yard modifications” to reflect a ten foot bonus to front-yard setback for porches.
2. A porch is defined as a covered, open-walled structure (which may have a railing and/or screening, but no solid exterior walls, windows or doors) that provides access to the front door of a house and has at least 60 square feet (with minimum dimension of 4 feet) under the roof.
3. A porch that has neither enclosed living space nor an upper-story balcony above it may reduce Section 7.2.3.6 ten feet to a 20’ front-yard setback or increase average setback Section 10.6.1 by five feet.
4. A porch that has no enclosed living space but does have an upper-story balcony above it may reduce Section 7.2.3.6 five feet to a 25’ front-yard or increase average setback Section 10.6.1 by three feet.
5. A porch that has enclosed living space above it must be situated within standard setbacks (see Section 7.2.3.6 and Section 10.6.1).

General principles: The City should encourage porches, because they reduce the effect of massing and because they potentially provide eyes on the street and incite neighborly interaction, a public good.

Garages and Accessory Dwelling Units.

1. amend Section 4.1.1 increasing R-60 accessory buildings from 800 square feet to maximum 1,000 square feet total floor area and Section 4.1.1.1 to increase accessory dwelling units from 600 to maximum 800 square feet.
2. amend Section 7.2.2.2 “Accessory dwellings” side and rear setbacks to five feet.
3. allow accessory dwellings on any size lot subject to lot coverage constraints
4. amend Section 7.2.3 to delete mention of accessory dwellings (numbers 1,2 & 3)
5. A front-facing attached garage must be 1) completely below the front door, or 2) set back 5 feet from the front door.
6. Accessory dwellings must be under the same ownership as main houses, but may be occupied by a separate household including renters.

General principles: A front-facing garage at the same level as the front door is undesirable, and the effect of the garage door should be mitigated. The ability of residents to maintain accessory dwelling units, or “granny flats,” is desirable, and detached garages present opportunities for such uses. (A good discussion of granny flats, including some language from model ordinances, can be found at <http://www.mrsc.org/Publications/textadu.aspx#benefits>.) Some of their public benefits include a wider range of affordable housing with its attendant increase of population diversity from retirees to students to healthcare professionals, and potential income to balance increasing property tax burdens on those with fixed incomes.

Lot Coverage.

1. amend Section 7.2.3.5 to reflect:

Stormwater infiltration is a public good to be encouraged, since it decreases the amount of erosion and supplements the groundwater level. Lot coverage is a shorthand approach to controlling impervious surface. If stormwater infiltration Best Management Practices (BMPs) approved by the Engineering Department are employed (this entails re-defining “impervious cover”) that will increase infiltration rate by 110 percent across a bonus coverage area (to be calculated by a simple worksheet producing a volume of water to be infiltrated), the existing allowable lot coverage of 40 percent is recommended to be modified for added homeowner flexibility up to 50 percent. (Stormwater ordinance would have to change reflect this. It is recommended that “overlapping” ordinances controlling the same aspect of development should be eliminated to streamline the permitting process.)