

City of Los Altos Citywide Parking Committee Memorandum – 10/20/15

To: City Council and Planning Transportation Commission

From: Citywide Parking Committee; Sub- Committee Members William Maston and Mike McTighe

Subject: Building Square Foot Calculations Used for Determining Parking Requirements

Background

Recently it has been noted that a number of city approved projects have used different building square footages than what has been posted with the city in determining the amount of parking that is required for a specific project. Currently, the city uses the floor area ratio (FAR) to determine the maximum building size and manage building forms and architectural elements. The city uses a net square footage that includes some exempted building components in determining the number of parking spaces required and determination of traffic impact fees paid to the city. The subcommittee has identified the need to define how building square footages are determined for purposes of calculating parking requirements and traffic fees paid to the city that is consistent in its application and easily calculated for the purposes of determining the fees to be paid to the city.

Discussion

The city's use of floor area ratios (FAR) to determine maximum building size has been an acceptable practice for many years. It is a convenient way for the city to manage potential impacts to individual building designs, parking requirements, and impacts on the community. However, since these rules have not been evenly applied in determining parking impacts and parking fees, its felt that some development projects receive benefits while existing surrounding land owners pay the price of potential parking impacts for new developments. It's assumed that by better defining floor area ratios for the purposes of determining parking requirements and traffic impact fees that the rules will be more evenly applied, more easily enforced, and will encourage better architectural solutions.

For example, it was noted that one way to encourage nicer entries and a portion of lobbies to commercial buildings would be to exempt the entries and lobbies from the FAR calculations for parking purposes. Since FAR is many times used to regulate massing and bulk of buildings, defining how FAR is applied to parking requirements is appropriate. One of the interesting questions that could be raised would be whether or not we could use the parking square footages calculations as an incentive for developers to, for example, create bigger lobbies or other architectural features that might enhance the building without increasing the parking requirement.

Another area that we discussed, is whether further consideration is needed on how outside dining is included in the parking requirements for restaurants. The answer might be more related to public policy that encourages downtown vibrancy rather than strictly meeting the square footage requirement for the dining area.

A simple approach might be to have the FAR calculations that planning staff uses for calculating building FAR match the FAR used for parking requirements by providing a very clear list of building area types (ie. stairs, lobbies, elevators, etc.) that are exempt from the calculation. This would eliminate confusion for both planning staff the general public, and the developer.

Recommendation(s)

#1:

Modify what square footage is counted as floor area ratio (FAR) for purposes of determining the amount of parking that is required for a specific use or project.

#2:

Start the process by using the gross FAR calculations as the baseline. Do not include stairwells, elevators, mechanical/electrical rooms, restrooms, and ground floor entries/lobbies (up to 300 sq.ft.) in the FAR calculations for the purposes of determining the number of car spaces required. Do not include wall widths greater than 10 inches if the extra wall thickness is used for purposes of creating architectural features.

#3:

Allow a review mechanism as an incentive for developers to create larger lobbies or other architectural features that enhance the building without increasing parking requirements. This incentive could be part of the design review application process.

#4:

Create an inspection process whereby planning staff inspects the building at completion of construction to ensure that architectural features that were considered exempt from the FAR parking requirements are not then converted to useable office/retail space, etc.

#5:

Allow a partial exemption (50% of the total required) of outdoor dining square footage requirements in calculations of parking required through a use permit process for the outdoor dining square footage on private property. Those areas approved for outdoor dining within the public right of way, will be assessed at 25% of the square footage in calculating the required parking. This approach would allow city review of individual projects in order to better understand potential parking impacts.

Presentation

See PowerPoint presentation.