The City of Los Altos Building Square Footage Calculations Used for Determining Parking Requirements

Background

- A number of city approved projects have used different building square footages than what has been filed with the city in determining the amount of parking required for a specific project.

- The city currently uses FAR to determine the maximum building size, parking requirements, and traffic fees paid.

$$\text{F.A.R.} = \frac{\text{GROSS FLOOR AREA OF A BUILDING}}{\text{TOTAL AREA OF THE LOT}}$$

(Floor Area Ratio)

- Currently a net building square footage is used that includes some exempted building components, in determining the number of parking spaces required and traffic impact fees to be paid to the city.

Discussion

- Floor Area Ratio has been an acceptable formula for determining maximum building square footage and other design components for many years.
- FAR is an accepted method used to determine community impact and parking requirements in addition to building height and mass.
- These current rules have not been applied evenly when it comes to calculating the required parking spaces for a building or use and traffic impact fees required leaving the surrounding community to “pay the price” for under parked projects.
- By creating a better FAR definition we believe we can apply these rules with better consistency when it comes to:
  - Determining parking requirements
  - Traffic impact fees
  - Encouraging beneficial architectural features
  - Outdoor dining
  - Other uses

Discussion Continued

- We recommend that the city modify what is counted in the FAR when determining parking requirements.
- We've found in surrounding communities that the more exemptions there are in FAR calculations, there is a higher car count per thousand required.
- A building whose FAR car count is lower includes:
  - Stairwells
  - Elevators
  - Mechanical/Electrical Rooms
  - Restrooms
  - Etc.
- However, if we were to remove all of these elements from the calculation it would result in a higher parking requirement.

Discussion Continued

- Could we use the parking square footage calculations as incentive for developers to, for example, create bigger lobbies or other architectural features to enhance the building without increasing the parking requirement?
- Additionally we could exempt architectural features and wall thickness greater than 8” from the FAR calculation.
- Further consideration is needed on how outside dining is included in the parking requirements for restaurants or outside sales.
- A simple approach may be to have FAR calculations that city staff use for building FAR match the FAR used for parking requirements by providing a very clear list of building area types (stairs, lobbies, elevators, etc.) that are exempt for the calculation.
- This approach would eliminate confusion for both planning staff, the general public, and developers.

Recommendation #1

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

Recommendation #2

- Start by using gross FAR calculations
- Do not include the following in the FAR calculations for the purposes of determining the number of car spaces required:
  - Stairwells
  - Elevators
  - Mechanical/electrical rooms
  - Trash enclosures
  - Restrooms
  - Ground floor entries/lobbies (up to 200 sq.ft.)
  - Architectural features
  - Wall thickness in excess of 8”

Recommendation #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.

Recommendation #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.

Recommendation #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. This includes private property and public right of way. This approach would allow city review of individual projects in order to better understand potential parking impacts.