STUDY SESSION

Agenda Item # 10

AGENDA REPORT SUMMARY

Meeting Date: October 9, 2018

Subject: Review of Floor Area Ratios

Prepared by: Jon Biggs, Community Development Director
Approved by: Chris Jordan, City Manager

Attachment(s):
None

Initiated by:
City Council

Previous Council Consideration:
None

Fiscal Impact:
Undetermined

Environmental Review:
Not applicable

Policy Question(s) for Council Consideration:

- Shall new floor area ratios be developed?
- If so, which areas or zone districts in Los Altos should they be created for?
- What is the appropriate floor area ratio for a given area or zone district?
- Are there other development standards complimentary to floor area ratio regulations worth exploring?

Summary:

- A discussion on floor area ratios has been agendized to allow the City Council to determine if it wants to direct staff to develop a set of floor area regulations and begin the public review process of those regulations

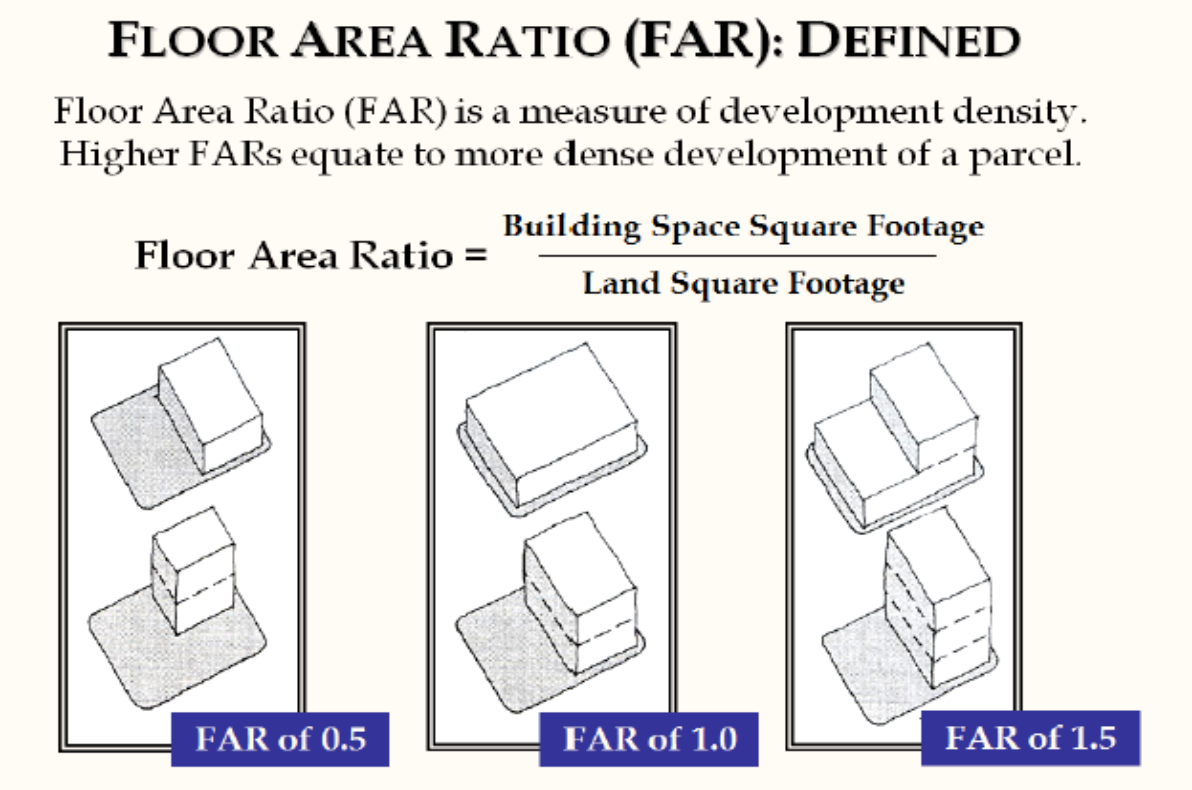
Staff Recommendation:
Discuss and provide direction to staff

Subject: Review of Floor Area Ratios

Purpose
To discuss and collect feedback from City Council on the establishment of floor area ratio regulations.

Background
The City Council has requested that a study session regarding floor area ratios (FAR) be agendized.

Discussion/Analysis
Floor area ratios (FAR) are defined in the Los Altos Municipal Code as "the maximum ratio of gross floor area on a site to the total site area". In short, it is a ratio that relates all the square footage of a building to the size of the lot it occupies. They are typically represented as a percentage of the lot size, but sometimes are listed in table form where a corresponding "floor area" maximum is listed for various lot sizes or range of lot sizes. When the percentage method is used (reflected in decimal point form – 35% = .35), the listed floor area multiplied by the square footage of the lot gives the maximum "floor area" that can be developed on a site. For example, if a floor area maximum of a given zone is 50% (.50), this is multiplied by the square footage of a lot, say a 10,000 square foot lot. The maximum floor area of a building in this instance would be .50 x 10,000 = 5,000 square feet of total floor area in the building. This square footage is the total floor area of all floor levels in a building. The following image provides a depiction of how FARs work:



Subject: Review of Floor Area Ratios

In Los Altos, FAR limits are found in the CN, OA-1, R1-10, R1-H, R1-20, and R1-40 zone districts. The FARs in these districts are reflected as a percentage and begin at 35% (.35) with incremental increases for larger lots in the single-family residential zone districts. There are no FARs in the zone districts of the Downtown triangle, which include the R3-1, CD-R#, CRS, CRS/OAD, an CD districts.

What's the difference between floor area and lot coverage?
A FAR accounts for the entire floor area of a building, not simply the building's footprint, and is the space enclosed by four walls on each floor of a building. It is measured to the outside edge of the exterior walls and can include halls, stairways, service and mechanical equipment rooms, interior courts, garages, carports and enclosed accessory structures. They typically do not include basements.

Buildings with varying numbers of stories may have the same FAR value. For example, the FAR of a 1,000-square-foot building with one story situated on a 4,000-square-foot lot would be 0.25. A two-story building on the same lot, where each floor was 500 square feet, would have the same FAR value.

Lot coverage is the area of a site that is covered by the footprint of all structures on a site. A building footprint is measured to the outside edge of exterior walls and/or supports and can include covered porches, gazebos and trellises.

Appropriate Floor Area Limits
In developing FAR regulations, consideration needs to be given to the appropriate FAR for the given district in which it will be applied. In general floor area ratios range from .25 for low density residential development to between 2.25 – 2.5 for commercial development in small downtowns. The Los Altos Downtown Vision provides the following guidance on FARs in the Downtown:

FLOOR AREA RATIO

In areas of Downtown, such as the First Street or San Antonio Road Districts, use of a Floor Area Ratio (FAR) in conjunction with height limitations, setbacks/ massing, and articulation, may be an additional tool to ensure Downtown appropriate new development. Requiring a certain FAR in these Districts would limit the ultimate square footage of any new development. However, the City could allow for additional FAR coverage as an incentive if the development provided certain public benefits. Examples of public benefits could include publicly accessible open space or off-site public realm improvements, among others.

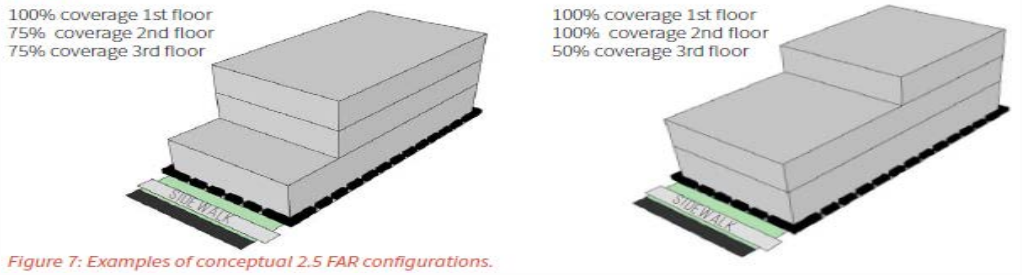


Figure 7: Examples of conceptual 2.5 FAR configurations.

To gain more experience in evaluating FARs, the City Council may want to visit the following website, which provides some interactive diagrams allowing manipulation of FARs in different scenarios: http://whatisfar.org/.

Other Development Standards

In addition to FARs, some cities have adopted other site development standards, which are complimentary to FARs. These have been adopted to help achieve a desired level of development or overall design concept for specific areas in their community. Some of these complementary standards include:

- Variable FARs, that adjust in line with the height of buildings
- Upper plate height limits
- Wall height limits – especially on upper floors
- Allowances for dormers or roof projections
- Roof pitch standards
- Setbacks for upper floors

These standards fall within the realm of form-based codes and their applicability to development in Los Altos may be worth evaluating further.

Council Direction

Staff is seeking the following direction from the City Council on next steps in this process:

- Shall new floor area ratios be developed?
- If so, which areas or zone districts in Los Altos should they be created for?
- What is the appropriate floor area ratio for a given area or zone district?
- Are there other development standards complimentary to floor area ratio regulations worth exploring?

Staff will enlist the guidance and input of the Planning Commission in the development of standards, should that be the direction of the City Council.

Options

1) Direct staff to return with draft ordinances that amend existing or introduce new floor area ratio site development standards

Advantages: Provides a tool that can help regulate the mass and scale of projects

Disadvantages: May limit diversity in the design and structures and impede redevelopment

2) Do not proceed with development of draft ordinances that amend existing or introduce new floor area ratio site development standards

Advantages: Retains current site development standards

Disadvantages: City will lack a productive tool that will help it achieve its desired level of development

Recommendation
The staff recommends Option 1.