



# COUNTY EXECUTIVE OFFICE

## OFFICE OF LONG RANGE PLANNING

### COMPREHENSIVE PLANNING DIVISION

**DATE:** April 16, 2007  
**TO:** Mission Canyon Planning Advisory Committee  
**FROM:** Derek Johnson, Project Manager  
**SUBJECT:** Floor Area Ratio Discussion

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#### ABSTRACT

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This memo describes the advantages and disadvantages of using Floor Area Ratio (FAR) as a method for limiting a structure's size based on lot size in Mission Canyon. It discusses other jurisdiction's experiences in using FAR regulations and briefly outlines FAR options and alternatives. The purpose is to initiate further discussion of the issue by the Mission Canyon Planning Advisory Committee (MCPAC) in order for the MCPAC to provide staff with their recommendation on this topic relative to the Mission Canyon Residential Design Guidelines.

$$\text{FAR} = \frac{\text{Net Floor Area of all Site Buildings}}{\text{Lot Area}}$$

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#### INTRODUCTION

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The Mission Canyon Planning Advisory Committee (MCPAC) has been considering whether or not to develop Floor Area Ratios in Mission Canyon. As was expressed in the February 24, 2007 Design Guidelines Public Workshop, some community members are concerned about the mass of a structure as it appears in the community, particularly in relation to the surrounding structures and open space in the neighborhood.

In preparation for the February 24 Workshop, County staff completed a survey of existing FARs in Mission Canyon. The data was collected from County Tax Assessor records (for properties sold since 1997) and permit file research. From a total of 1139 parcels, FAR data was collected for 639, a total of 56% percent (the remainder were either vacant or no data was available).

Calculations were made from the FAR data to determine if existing FARs in Mission Canyon are higher or lower than recommended FARs for other jurisdictions. The average and median FAR in Mission Canyon is 0.14 and 0.13, respectively. The average lot size in Mission Canyon is 39,020 square feet (s.f.), or 0.9 acres. The average home size and FAR in Mission Canyon for a lot size in the range of the average lot size (between 38,000 and 40,000 s.f.) is **2,722 s.f.**, and

**0.07 FAR.** Table 1 below compares this data with the City of Santa Barbara’s draft proposed FAR for two-story homes and the FAR guidelines for Summerland and Montecito. Note that the data collected for the average home size in Mission Canyon does not indicate if the homes are one- or two-story or if a garage is included in the square footage calculation.

**Table 1: FAR Comparison**

Jurisdiction	Maximum Home Size Permitted for a lot of 0.9 acres	FAR
City of Santa Barbara	4,937 s.f.	0.13
Summerland	4,451 s.f.	0.11
Montecito	4,050 s.f.	0.10

As noted in Table 1, the average FAR for the average lot size in Mission Canyon (0.07 FAR) is lower than the proposed FAR guidelines for Santa Barbara, Summerland FAR standards and existing Montecito guidelines.

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## THE ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF USING FAR

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In order to ensure that a structure is compatible with the community, the size of a structure can be reviewed in relation to other structures on similar sized lots in the surrounding neighborhood. FARs are one method to use either as a guideline or standard<sup>1</sup> to ensure that the floor area of a proposed house is in scale with development on similar sized parcels in the neighborhood. Alternative methods to accomplish the same goal include neighborhood context, size, bulk, scale, and architectural treatments.

While the use of FARs may be preferred by the community as an objective method for analyzing a proposed project’s potential for neighborhood compatibility, FARs can have unintended negative consequences and can limit design flexibility.

### Advantages of FARs

- May prevent overly voluminous development proposals, especially on small lots (under approximately 9,000 square feet).
- Could ensure neighborhood compatibility, particularly in neighborhoods with mostly small lots.
- May help to ensure a consistent design review process by providing a quantitative standard for considering volume.
- Accounts for volume more than setback and lot coverage requirements by measuring the floor area of multiple stories.

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<sup>1</sup> A “standard” is a required procedure that reflects a legal obligation while a “guideline” is a recommended procedure not legally required. Guideline statements would use the word “should” rather than “shall”.

## Disadvantages of FARs

A significant amount of research and MCPAC time would be required to identify and implement an appropriate FAR that addresses Mission Canyon projects. These include:

- The jurisdiction must determine an appropriate definition of “floor area” for purposes of measuring FAR. As noted in the Design Concepts Handout provided to the MCPAC on January 10, 2007<sup>2</sup>, there are different approaches for defining “floor area”. The attachment is included with this memo for reference.
- Determining an appropriate maximum FAR and the method for calculating FAR will require extended MCPAC and public deliberations.
- Adopting FARs can be controversial and could significantly delay adoption of Design Guidelines.

If FARs are adopted, there can be unintended negative consequences:

- Project applicants may decide to build a structure larger than originally intended, up to the maximum FAR, to achieve the maximum value for their lot.
- Could discourage remodels of homes that are already near the FAR limit (i.e homes that are in need of repair, but cannot expand, may be reluctant to initiate projects that only provide cosmetic improvements).
- May focus project approval or disapproval on house size rather other design aspects of the project.
- FAR regulations may impede variety in architectural treatments.

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## OTHER JURISDICTIONS EXPERIENCE WITH FAR REGULATIONS

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City of Santa Barbara staff interviewed over half a dozen jurisdictions regarding the effectiveness of FAR regulations<sup>3</sup>. The City reports that most staff members in other jurisdictions interviewed found FAR limits to be an accepted method to address volume issues in their communities. However, many had the following concerns about current FAR guidelines and standards:

- High-quality architecture not assured.
- Significant design factors not controlled:
  - Structure’s location on a lot.
  - Arrangement of structure’s components.
  - Scale of architectural elements.
- Irregular maximum allowed floor areas can result when lot sizes within a neighborhood vary greatly.

Some jurisdictions have rejected the use of FARs altogether for the following reasons:

- Redundant with existing setback and open space requirements. (City of Turlock).
- Too inflexible and proscriptive. (City of Santa Rosa).

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<sup>2</sup> Design Concepts Handout, Attachment E, pg. 38.

<sup>3</sup> City of Santa Barbara Single Family Design Guidelines update/Neighborhood Preservation Ordinance Update, Issue Paper D Part I.

- Too complex. (City of San Rafael). San Rafael felt it was easier to interpret and implement a size limit on upper-story additions instead.
- Large lot regulatory ineffectiveness. (County of Santa Barbara). The County did not include FAR regulations in the recently adopted Toro Canyon Plan because lots in Toro Canyon area typically an acre or larger. FARs have proven generally ineffective in addressing large-house issues in Montecito because lots in Montecito tend to be large and the FAR table is a guideline rather than a standard.
- No correlation found with perceived neighborhood compatibility. (City of Oakland).

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## FAR OPTIONS

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There are a variety of options to consider when a community wishes to control the size, bulk and scale of development. Following are three options used by other jurisdictions for implementing FARs.

### 1. FAR Maximums by Lot Size

Option 1 is proposed by the City of Santa Barbara (final adoption is planned for May 1, 2007) for two-story homes on lots below 15,000 s.f. in size. The FAR maximums (Table 2 below) will be used as a guideline only on lots larger than 15,000 s.f. For single-story homes, the City limits size with zoning ordinance standards such as setbacks, height limits, minimum open yard areas, and daylight plane ordinances (explained further in the FAR Alternatives section). If Mission Canyon wanted to adopt FAR standards or guidelines, the City's example could be used as a starting point for discussion but extensive research would need to be conducted to refine the data for the unique circumstances in Mission Canyon.

**Table 2**  
Draft City of Santa Barbara FAR Table

Lot Size	Max Home Size including garage	Max Home Size excluding garage	Max FAR including garage
<b>STANDARD (Required)</b>			
4000	2200	1700	0.55
5000	2450	1950	0.49
6000	2700	2200	0.45
7000	2950	2450	0.42
7500	3075	2575	0.41
8000	3200	2700	0.40
9000	3450	2950	0.38
10000	3750	3250	0.38
11000	3875	3375	0.35
12000	4000	3500	0.33
13000	4125	3625	0.32
14000	4250	3750	0.30
14999	4375	3875	0.29

Lot Size	Max Home Size including garage	Max Home Size excluding garage	Max FAR including garage
<b>GUIDELINES ONLY</b>			
15000	4375	3875	0.29
20000	4690	3940	0.23
½ acre	4713	3963	0.22
¾ acre	4855	4105	0.15
1 acre	4996	4246	0.11
1.5 acres	5279	4529	0.08
2 acres	5563	4813	0.06
2.5 acres	5846	5096	0.05
3 acres	6129	5379	0.05
3.5 acres	6412	5662	0.04
4 acres	6695	5945	0.04
4.5 acres	6978	6228	0.04
5 acres	7261	6511	0.03
5.5 acres	7545	6795	0.03
6 acres	7828	7078	0.03

## 2. Slope-Based FARs

Option 2, Slope-Based FARs is sometimes used because structures on hillsides are more likely to be visible from more areas. FAR or lot coverage maximums varied by slope can also indirectly limit grading and hillside alterations by not allowing as much floor area on sloped lots as on flat lots of the same size. Table 3 below, from the City of Belmont, bases its FAR limits entirely on slope, with the maximum allowed FAR becoming more restrictive as the slope increases. As with the example shown above, if Mission Canyon wanted to adopt slope-based FAR maximum, the data would need to be researched and refined for applicability to Mission Canyon's sloped lots. Also note that the Mission Canyon Area Specific Plan currently limits most development and grading on slopes of 30% or greater, unless it would preclude all reasonable development of the parcel. This option would require a study to determine the appropriate maximum allowed slope-based FAR.

**Table 3: City of Belmont Slope-Based FAR Maximums**

Slope	Maximum Allowed FAR
10% and less	.53
11%	.53
12%	.53
13%	.52
14%	.52
15%	.51
20%	.48
25%	.44
30%	.40
35%	.34
40%	.29

45% and up	.27
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### 3. FAR Incentives for Good Design

Option 3 is used by some jurisdictions with FARs to make requirements less restrictive in exchange for desirable architectural and design elements. The City of Redondo Beach has established a FAR of .65, but allows cumulative increases of FAR up to .8 if “good design” elements are included in a project, shown in Table 4 below. This method can encourage good-design elements and may be perceived by applicants as less restrictive; however, it is uncertain how many projects would be close enough to the FAR threshold for applicants to take advantage of the bonuses. If Mission Canyon wanted to adopt this method, it would require extensive research to establish the FAR maximum(s), and then determine which elements of “Good Design” would be eligible for FAR increases.

Table 4, City of Redondo Beach FAR Increases for “Good Design” Elements

<b>FAR Increases for “Good Design” Elements in Redondo Beach</b>	
<i>“Good Design” Elements</i>	<i>Allowed FAR increase</i>
Front porch	.04
Rear or alley loaded covered parking	.04
Side loaded covered parking	.02
Additional second floor side setback	.04
Additional second floor rear setback	.04
Bermuda or Hollywood driveway <sup>2</sup>	.02
Front yards with less than 30% coverage	.02

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## ALTERNATIVES TO FAR

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The following three options could be adopted as ordinance amendments in the Land Use and Development Code (LUDC) or guidelines in the Design Guidelines to control size, bulk, and scale beyond using neighborhood compatibility guidelines.

### 1. Second-Story Setback Requirements.

Second-story setback requirements prevent second story volumes from being located near the edge of the building, which create uninterrupted walls. While second-story setback requirements are not always popular among architects because they can limit flexibility by encouraging a home’s second-story volume to be centered in a lot (sometimes referred to as the “wedding cake effect.”), they can address privacy, noise and light issues from a second-story. The Draft Mission Canyon Design Guidelines include a guideline to encourage setbacks of the second story in the “Elements of Design” section. Alternatively, second-story setbacks can be required by ordinance in the Land Use and Development Code (LUDC).

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<sup>2</sup> Two paved wheel tracks each between 2.5 and 3.5 feet wide, separated by a planted strip at least three feet wide.

## 2. Limit Second Stories to a Certain Percentage of First-Floor Footprint.

One purpose of FAR is to limit incompatible large second stories. Jurisdictions with a goal of regulating second-story volume may choose to explicitly limit the proportion of second stories to a certain percentage of the first story, such as 40%. The City of Sunnyvale's Design Guidelines state that the area of the second floor should not exceed 35% of the first floor. The City of San Rafael limits upper-story additions to 75% of maximum lot coverage on lots of 5,000 square feet or greater and 50% of maximum lot coverage for lots less than 5,000 square feet. The advantage is that this addresses second-story issues specifically, unlike FARs which address overall size. This option also allows more architectural flexibility in locating the second story as compared to the second-story setback requirement approach. As noted for Option 1, this option could be adopted in the Design Guidelines or regulated in the LUDC.

## 3. Daylight Plane Requirements.

Angle-plane, or daylight plane requirements create second-story setbacks by creating a maximum roof height line that slants inward and upward from another point on the property. For example, the City of Carpinteria's side yard "encroachment plane" limits locating the structure at a 30-degree angle measured from the vertical, at a point beginning six feet above the existing grade along the interior side property line (Figure 12 below). The City of Santa Barbara has a solar ordinance requiring a daylight plane on the northerly property lines in order to prevent shadows cast by the southerly sun. The advantage is that this allows for gradual

increase in height and architectural flexibility. This method would probably best be adopted as a regulation in the LUDC because it entails detailed calculations and the exceptions to the encroachment plane, such as antennas, would need to be determined. Daylight plane requirements are generally ineffective on larger lots as a guideline or standard for controlling home size.



**Figure 12** – New residence conforms to the intent of the Encroachment Plane Guideline.

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## CONCLUSION

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The information presented here is a brief summary of the difficult issues to consider when considering methods to preserve and enhance neighborhoods and guide and/or regulate size, bulk and scale of development. While there may be a few isolated exceptions, the FAR data collected for Mission Canyon indicates that the majority of home sizes in relation to the lot is not excessive, and is in fact lower compared to FAR maximums used by other jurisdictions. Based on the data, as well as the disadvantages of using FAR outlined above, use of the alternatives to FAR such as guidelines for second story setbacks and/or limiting second stories to a percentage of the first story is recommended as the first step for inclusion in the Design Guidelines for this planning area to address neighborhood compatibility concerns.