

**NORTH RIDGE CITIZENS' ASSOCIATION**  
**Guidelines for Evaluating Construction**  
**and Other Property Modifications**

**May 11, 2020**

**Preface**

The preamble to the Zoning Ordinance of the City of Alexandria lists among the purposes of the ordinance to “Protect the established character of existing residential neighborhoods and commercial and business areas and the social and economic well-being of the residents.” (Sec.1-102 (B)).<sup>1</sup> While a dozen other purposes are identified by the ordinance, this particular intent most directly affects the North Ridge community and hence the North Ridge Citizens Association (NRCA). It is therefore foundational to the role NRCA has come to play in protecting the stability and sustainability of our neighborhoods.

Zoning ordinances of the City of Alexandria that govern new or replacement construction are overseen by City staff who, reporting to the Alexandria Planning Commission and City Council, are charged with ensuring that standards of measure are being met. When Alexandria property owners and developers stay within the legally defined limits of infill requirements on standard-sized lots (as so adjudged by City zoning staff), construction plans and designs, including landscaping, do not require approval of the Alexandria Planning Commission or City Council. When a landowner seeks to exceed a zoning requirement on a substandard-sized lot, however, that landowner must apply to the City for a special use permit (SUP). At that point City zoning ordinances specifically require that the landowner demonstrate that a proposed exception to the zoning ordinance will not make nor create a structure that by location, appearance, style, or environmental impact, will be incompatible with the neighborhood for which it is proposed. (Division A. Single-Family and Two-Family Zones, Sec. 3, pp. 1-43)

To gauge neighborhood compatibility, the Planning Commission, City Council, and their respective staffs have historically looked to the City’s civic associations as a principal resource for making the determination that planned construction or reconstruction will be compatible with the neighborhood. Over the years, NRCA has been proud to serve in its role in assessing the compatibility of residence and nonresident properties within its purview. The Association works to ensure consistency and reliability in its role in measuring neighborhood character and compatibility. In 1989 NRCA developed and has since applied its Guidelines for Responding to Special Use Permit Applications for Residential Development of Substandard Lots.<sup>2</sup> These guidelines have been employed in dozens of instances that were successful in ensuring that infill development on substandard lots was compatible with the immediate surrounding neighbors.

NRCA has worked successfully with architects, developers, homeowners, church congregations, business owners, and their legal representatives to reach outcomes acceptable to

---

<sup>1</sup> See Item 1, Appendix, page 6.

<sup>2</sup> The size of a standard lot is set by zoning ordinance. In Alexandria standard residential lot sizes are titled by number indicating in thousands the minimum square footage: R-5, 5,000 ft<sup>2</sup>, R-8, 8,000 ft<sup>2</sup>, R-12, 12,000 ft.<sup>2</sup>, and R-20, 20,000 ft.<sup>2</sup>. These designations further prescribe lot width; frontage, rear, and side setbacks; maximum height; and threshold height. Worksheets providing these minimum lot standards are provided in the appendix to this document. Alexandria also prescribes minimum standards for nonresidential lots that vary according to the purpose of the nonresidential property. These are defined in detail in *Alexandria Zoning Ordinances*.

all parties. The Association has facilitated compromise—sometimes contentious—on structure, design, and environmental impact. It has both supported and opposed the position of City staff, depending on the merits of a particular application. It has especially sought to protect the North Ridge urban forest to not only retain existing canopy, but to restore that which has been lost.

This document is the 2020 update to the Guidelines. It is an organic document that will continue to evolve with changes in the City’s zoning standards, will underpin the NRCA’s consideration of SUPs, and when requested will provide a basis for gauging and informing the Association’s level of support of nonresidential capital projects.

## **Process**

To assure consistency in evaluation and decision making for North Ridge homeowners and property developers, the Association will evaluate proposals according to the criteria listed below. We encourage the owner/developer to work closely with both NRCA through its Land Use Committee and neighbors to minimize or eliminate concerns. This process includes, at a minimum, an opportunity for citizen review and input at a regularly scheduled Association meeting. The NRCA Board of Directors will then vote on whether to support the proposal, provide support contingent upon recommended modifications, or oppose the proposal. The Land Use Committee will implement the decision of the NRCA Board and notify accordingly the Alexandria Planning Commission, City Council, and appropriate City staff.

## **Criteria**

### 1. Compatibility.

*Residential.* New housing construction must be compatible with existing houses in both style and apparent relative size. Considerations of style should take into account design (contemporary, colonial, Tudor, Victorian, etc.), materials (brick, frame, etc.) and quality. Our predominantly colonial neighborhoods can tolerate considerable variety, but extremes, be they log cabins or Arizona territorials, would be out-of-place.

As to size, NRCA recognizes that living habits and design parameters have changed significantly since the original development of North Ridge in the 1930s. People demand more space, which has led to additions to homes throughout the community. However, large homes of the type found in Fairfax County or even Seminary Ridge are inappropriate for our 5,000 ft.<sup>2</sup> substandard lots. Homeowners building on the small lots typical of North Ridge are expected to design their houses to fit in with the existing neighborhood and observe all zoning ordinances set forth by the City. Developers are encouraged to do more than merely satisfy minimum code requirements on floor area ratio and setbacks. On the other hand, nearby neighbors must recognize that new houses will be somewhat larger than existing neighborhood homes.

*Commercial & Civic.* Whether considering an automobile dealership, church, or firehouse, NRCA insists that new construction be compatible with the general colonial flavor of North Ridge. Our Association has worked with developers and architects to develop non-residential properties that have added to the beauty of the community and provided convenience to North Ridge residents. A major concern in non-residential development is the protection or replacement of existing trees, as well as the extensive planting of trees where new construction presents an opportunity to repair and recover our urban forest.

2. Residential Lot Size. The size and style of a house that is to be enlarged or replaced will provide a guide to what is suitable as a replacement. NRCA will be skeptical of efforts to cram too much house on a small lot, even when there is no issue of setback or floor area ratio.
3. Scope of Plan. NRCA cannot compose a significant judgment on compatibility of a proposal absent specific plans for construction. These plans must include a site diagram showing all garages, porches, outbuildings, and parking and scaled elevations on all sides of the house to be built. It should illustrate design, landscaping, and specify construction and landscaping materials. Since approval will be plan-specific, any material change in the plans after approval would obviate the Association's decision.
4. Variances. No building plan will be approved that requires variances unless it is supported by a majority of the adjacent neighbors. Generally, variances should be avoided, and strict compliance with side- and rear-yard setback ratios should be the norm. Design considerations that are beneficial to existing neighbors, however, sometimes necessitate minor variances. In those instances variances will be allowed, but only where supported by contiguous neighbors.
5. Setbacks and Height. Many of the existing houses in our neighborhoods are nonconforming on their side setback lines. Most neighbors, however, bought their homes or chose to remain and add on to them under the reasonable expectation that neighboring houses would not be razed and replaced by a new structures, or at least not with ones of grossly increased height and bulk. When teardowns are replaced by new homes, the new house should be designed and sited with sensitivity to the concerns of its neighbors. As a general rule, the side-to-side (or rear-to-rear) distance between the new house and an existing house should equal or exceed the average distances between existing adjoining houses in the immediate neighborhood. This is all the more important when a single-story house is to be replaced by one with two stories. The height of any new house in relation to its neighbors should not be so disparate that it materially alters the streetscape appearance of the block.
6. Canopy Trees. NRCA provides advice to owners and developers about the need to protect and maintain the neighborhood's cherished signature characteristic, its mature native tree canopy. The canopy trees on individual properties are an extension of the forested wetland and stream bed of the neighborhood's Monticello Park, nationally recognized as an important migratory refueling station for 36 species of warblers and as an age-old forest of native oaks, hickories, tulip poplars, black gum, and understory trees and shrubs. North Ridge's widely known and celebrated mature tree canopy adds considerable monetary and aesthetic value to all properties. The tree canopy shields the neighborhood from noise and pollution from I-395 and cools the temperatures in the summer, reducing utility bills. Maintaining the tree canopy is needed to decrease erosion and soak up water after heavy rains to help keep the City stormwater drainage system from overflowing into the Potomac.

When renovating or performing new construction, NRCA asks the owner/developer to remove only those trees that are absolutely necessary and to replace them with a greater number of canopy trees than was removed, given that it takes time to replace the lost canopy of a mature tree. Also, because renovations and new constructions increase the overall developed footprint of the neighborhood in relation to green space, thereby decreasing permeable area, there is a greater need for increased density of canopy trees to maintain tree coverage.

Given that many years must pass before a newly planted canopy tree provides the crown coverage and ecological benefits of a mature tree, NRCA advocates a replacement ratio of three 10- to 15-foot canopy trees to every lost mature tree. Understory trees and shrubs are not considered as part of the tree canopy. Although the City's *Landscape Guidelines* require only 25 percent vegetative canopy coverage for properties under construction/renovation, NRCA asks developers and homeowners to maintain at least a 50 percent canopy tree coverage, not to include understory trees or shrubs, given that the existing North Ridge tree canopy constitutes an urban forest that has been significantly reduced by drought, disease, and development.

NRCA takes a critical look at any proposed loss of healthy trees that were not endangered by the preexisting house. All trees of at least six-inches in diameter at breast-height should be identified and categorized by species and health on the site plan. NRCA expects owners/developers to work with the City Arborist and officials from the Natural Resources Division who will inspect their trees to determine their health and importance to the ecosystem. NRCA's Tree Canopy Team can provide additional support. Upon request they will work with homeowners identifying their healthy trees, discussing how to protect them during construction and what canopy trees to plant. NRCA asks that all trees be encircled with protective fencing 15 feet from the trunk, if possible. Contractors/workers should be instructed not to dump construction water and debris into the soil, as this changes the pH, polluting it and making it unsuitable for healthy tree growth.

7. Footprint Area. The amount of lot covered by house, porches, decks, driveway, garage, and accessory buildings is both a compatibility and an environmental concern and will be examined carefully by the Association, and the City's standards on stormwater runoff will be carefully applied. In those instances where the overall square footage of the residence is more than 70 percent of the maximum allowed under the applicable floor area ratio (FAR)<sup>3</sup> limitation, the plans submitted to the Association for review should include a detailed computation of the gross floor area and the exclusions allowed by the ordinance, identified by type and size, including, but not limited to porches, decks, basements, and attics.
8. Adjacent Neighbors. Substantial deference will be given to the opinion of neighbors immediately adjacent to or confronting the property to be redeveloped. However, a negative or positive opinion from a single neighbor is unlikely to be deemed sufficient to outweigh a favorable consensus opinion in the neighborhood or by the NRCA Executive Board. Neighbors who disagree with a NRCA Board action are encouraged to present their objections to the appropriate officials.

---

<sup>3</sup> The floor area ratio (FAR) is the relationship between the total amount of usable floor area that a building has, or has been permitted to have, and the total area of the lot on which the building stands. The ratio is determined by dividing the total or gross floor area of the building by the gross area of the lot. A higher ratio is more likely to indicate a dense or urban construction.

## **Appendix**

	<i>Page</i>
1. City of Alexandria Zoning Title, Purpose, and Intent	6
2. NRCA Residential Property Assessment Worksheets	7

*Ed. Note:* The following statement is preface to the City of Alexandria's zoning ordinances. It provides a listing of purposes and intents that are meant to guide the development of our city. By implication and references they are therefore to also to guide NRCA's Design and Development Guidelines.

**CITY OF ALEXANDRIA, VIRGINIA**  
**ZONING TITLE, PURPOSE, AND INTENT**  
**ARTICLE I. GENERAL REGULATIONS**

**Sec. 1-100 Title, purpose and intent of ordinance.**

1-101 *Title.* This ordinance and the official zoning map made a part hereof shall be known and may be cited and referred to as the City of Alexandria Zoning Ordinance.

1-102 *Purpose and intent.* This ordinance is enacted in order to promote the health, safety, and welfare of the residents of the City of Alexandria and to implement the consolidated master plan of the city. To these ends, the ordinance is designed to:

- (A) Guide and regulate the orderly growth, development and redevelopment of the City of Alexandria in accordance with a well-considered plan and with long-term objectives, principles and standards deemed beneficial to the interest and welfare of the people.
- (B) Protect the established character of existing residential neighborhoods and commercial and business areas and the social and economic well-being of the residents.
- (C) Promote, in the public interest, the utilization of land for the purposes for which it is best adapted in harmony with the established character of the city.
- (D) To reduce or prevent congestion in the public streets.
- (E) To facilitate the creation of a convenient, attractive and harmonious community.
- (F) To expedite the provision of adequate police and fire protection, disaster evacuation, civil defense, transportation, water, sewerage, flood protection, schools, parks, forests, playgrounds, recreational facilities and other public requirements.
- (G) To protect against destruction of, or encroachment upon, historic areas and archeological sites.
- (H) To preserve existing and facilitate the provision of new housing that is affordable to all segments of the community.
- (I) To protect against one or more of the following: overcrowding of land, undue density of population in relation to the community facilities existing or available, obstruction of light and air, danger and congestion in travel and transportation, or loss of life, health, or property from fire, flood, panic or other dangers.
- (J) To promote the public necessity, health, safety, convenience and general welfare by equitably apportioning the cost of providing the additional public facilities necessitated or required by development.
- (K) Provide for the preservation of environmentally sensitive areas and urban forested lands.
- (L) To promote tourism.
- (M) To further the purposes of the city charter.

## **NRCA Residential Property Assessment Worksheets**

The following are standardized worksheets—by R-code—for assessing North Ridge residential property plans and proposals. They are meant to ensure that all relevant data are collected and that consistency of practice is maintained.

SUP # \_\_\_\_\_

Zone: R-5  
Residential Single-Family

Address: \_\_\_\_\_  
Alexandria, VA 22305

### Zoning Analysis Table

	Required/Permitted	Provided/Proposed
<b>Lot Area</b>	5,000 ft <sup>2</sup> min*	
<b>Lot Width</b>	50 ft min**	
<b>Lot Frontage</b>	40 ft min	
<b>Front Yard</b>	20 ft min***	
<b>Side Yards</b>	1:2 height to setback ratio, 8 ft. min	
<b>Rear Yard</b>	1:1 height to setback ratio, 7 ft min****	
<b>Net Floor Area</b>	.45 FAR	
<b>Maximum Height</b>	30 ft*****	
<b>Maximum Threshold Height</b>	2.5 ft, highest in contextual blockface, or minimum floodplain	
<b>Garage?</b>		
<b>Parking issues?</b>		

\* 6,500 min for corner lots

\*\* 65 ft min for corner lots

\*\*\* 25 feet min for other uses

\*\*\*\* 25 feet min for other uses

\*\*\*\*\* 40 ft for church or school

**Comments:**

SUP # \_\_\_\_\_

Zone: R-8  
Residential Single-Family

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Alexandria, VA 22305

### Zoning Analysis Table

	Required/Permitted	Provided/Proposed
<b>Lot Area</b>	8,000 ft <sup>2</sup> min	
<b>Lot Width</b>	65 ft min (measured 30 ft from front-lot line)*	
<b>Lot Frontage</b>	40 ft min	
<b>Front Yard</b>	30 ft min	
<b>Side Yards</b>	1:2 height to setback ratio, 8 ft. min**	
<b>Rear Yard</b>	1:1 height to setback ratio, 8 ft min	
<b>Net Floor Area</b>	.35 FAR	
<b>Maximum Height</b>	30 ft max***	
<b>Maximum Threshold Height</b>	2.5 ft, highest in contextual blockface, or minimum floodplain	
<b>Garage?</b>		
<b>Parking issues?</b>		

\*80 ft min for corner lots

\*\* 25 feet min for church, school, etc.

\*\*\* 40 ft for church or school

**Comments:**

SUP # \_\_\_\_\_

Zone: R-12  
Residential Single-Family

Address: \_\_\_\_\_  
Alexandria, VA 22305

### Zoning Analysis Table

	Requires/Permitted	Provided/Proposed
<b>Lot Area</b>	12,000 ft <sup>2</sup> min	
<b>Lot Width</b>	80 ft min*	
<b>Lot Frontage</b>	60 ft min**	
<b>Front Yard</b>	35 ft min	
<b>Side Yards</b>	1:2 height to setback ratio, 12 ft. min	
<b>Rear Yard</b>	1:1 height to setback ratio, 10 ft min***	
<b>Net Floor Area</b>	.30 FAR	
<b>Maximum Height</b>	30 ft****	
<b>Maximum Threshold Height</b>	2.5 ft, highest in contextual blockface, or minimum floodplain	
<b>Garage?</b>		
<b>Parking issues?</b>		

\* 95 ft min for corner lots

\*\* 45 ft min for curvilinear streets with radial lot lines

\*\*\* 25 feet min for church, school, etc.

\*\*\*\* 40 ft for church or school

**Comments:**

SUP # \_\_\_\_\_

Zone: R-20

Residential Single-Family

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Alexandria, VA 22305

### Zoning Analysis Table

	Required/Permitted	Provided/Proposed
<b>Lot Area</b>	20,000 ft <sup>2</sup> min	
<b>Lot Width</b>	100 ft min* (measured 30 ft from front-lot line)	
<b>Lot Frontage</b>	75 ft min**	
<b>Front Yard</b>	40 ft min	
<b>Side Yards</b>	1:2 height to setback ratio, 12 ft. min	
<b>Rear Yard</b>	1:1 height to setback ratio, 12 ft min***	
<b>Net Floor Area</b>	.25 FAR	
<b>Maximum Height</b>	30 ft****	
<b>Maximum Threshold Height</b>	2.5 ft, highest in contextual blockface, or minimum floodplain	
<b>Garage?</b>		
<b>Parking issues</b>		

\* 120 ft min for corner lots

\*\* 55 ft min for curvilinear streets with radial lot lines

\*\*\* 24 ft min for church, school, etc.

\*\*\*\* 40 ft for church or school

**Comments:**