

NORTH RIDGE CITIZENS' ASSOCIATION
Guidelines for Responding to Special Use Permit Applications
for Residential, Commercial, & Civic Properties
(March 9, 2020)

The preamble to the Zoning Ordinance of the City of Alexandria lists among the purposes of the ordinance: “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)).

City zoning ordinances specifically require that the landowner seeking a Special Use Permit [definition?] demonstrate that a proposed exception to the zoning ordinance will not make nor create a structure that by location, appearance, style, or environmental impact, is incompatible with the neighborhood for which it is proposed. [citation?] When an Alexandria landowner seeks to tear down and replace a structure or build a new structure that requires a Special Use Permit, the City Planning Commission and Council look to the neighborhood association for input about its compatibility. [citation?]

The North Ridge Citizens' Association (“NRCA” or “Association”) considers judging the compatibility of residences and nonresident properties within its purview to be one of its most important responsibilities. To ensure consistency and reliability in its assessments, in 1989 NRCA developed and has since applied its Guidelines for Responding to Special Use Permit Applications for Residential Development of Substandard Lots. [definition of ‘substandard lot’?]

Over the years NRCA has applied these guidelines with architects, developers, homeowners, church congregations, business owners, and their legal representatives to reach outcomes acceptable to all parties. NRCA has facilitated compromises—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 sought to protect the North Ridge urban forest to not only retain existing canopy but 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 and will underpin the Association’s consideration of Special Use Permits.

General Approach

To assure consistency for North Ridge homeowners and property developers, the Association will evaluate proposals according to the criteria listed below and other factors peculiar to a given proposal.

Process

We will encourage the owner/developer to work closely with the Association 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 *before* final regulatory decisions on the proposal. The Association Board will then vote on whether to approve the proposal, disapprove, or recommend modifications. The Association’s Land Use Committee /

Planning & Zoning Committee will implement the decision of the NRCA Executive Board [or the entire board?].

Criteria

1. Compatibility.

Residential. New housing construction must be compatible with existing houses both in style and size.

Style. Considerations of style should take into account design (contemporary, colonial, Tudor, Victorian, etc.), materials (brick, frame, etc.), and quality. Our neighborhoods can tolerate considerable variety, but outliers such as Georgian colonials with huge columns, redwood California contemporaries, could be out of place. As to size, the Association recognizes that living habits and design parameters have changed significantly over the past 75 or so years since the original development of North Ridge, yet the character and charm of the neighborhood has been a constant attraction to newcomers and a reassuring element of its residents decision to stay there.

Size. People may seek more space, which has led to additions to existing homes throughout the neighborhood. Newly constructed houses are likely to be larger than existing houses. However, large homes of the type found in areas such as Fairfax County or Seminary Ridge are not appropriate for our substandard lots. Proposals to build on the small lots typical of our neighborhood must scale their plans to fit in with the existing neighborhood. Developers must do more than merely satisfy minimum code requirements on Floor Area Ratio (FAR) and setbacks. On the other hand, nearby neighbors must recognize that newly constructed houses are likely to be larger than existing houses.

Commercial & Civic. Whether it be for 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 residence. A major concern in non-residential development is the protection or replacement of existing trees, as well as the extensive use of canopy 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 torn down will be a guide to what is suitable as a replacement. The Association will be skeptical of efforts to cram too much house onto a small lot, even if there is no setback or FAR problem. [cite these portions of the zoning ordinance?]
3. Definiteness of Plan. In order for the Association to make a meaningful judgment on neighborhood compatibility, the proposal that will be considered by NRCA must include a site plan showing all garages, porches, outbuildings, parking, and scaled elevations on all sides of the house to be built, showing design and specifying materials. Since any approval will be plan-specific, any material change in the plans after approval would obviate the approval.

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. However, design considerations that are beneficial to existing neighbors sometimes necessitate minor variances. In those instances, variances may be allowed, but only when strongly supported by neighbors.
5. Setbacks and Height. Many of the existing houses in our neighborhoods are nonconforming on their side setback lines. The Association is aware of the fact that building to the limits of the side or rear yard setback minimum may not provide sufficient space to neighboring houses. This is particularly so if a house to be torn down is a one-story being replaced by a two-story or is considerably further from the common lot line than its proposed replacement. The new house must be designed and sited with sensitivity to this concern. 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 an increase in height will result. Further, the height of the house in relation to its neighbors, even if a bit higher, should not be so much higher that it materially alters the streetscape look of the block.
6. Trees. A primary North Ridge goal is to protect and maintain as many trees as possible. The Association expects the owner/developer, in concert with the City and the City Arborist, to ensure that trees not slated for removal are protected during construction, which includes protecting them from construction materials, equipment and chemicals used or released on the building site. **As for trees proposed to be removed, the Association will take an especially critical look at any proposed loss of significant healthy trees that were not endangered by the pre-existing house. To this end, all trees of at least six-inch diameter at breast-height should be identified and categorized by species and health on the site plan, and identified as to be saved or removed. Where canopy trees are destroyed, it is incumbent upon the landowner to replace those trees elsewhere on the property where at all possible.**
7. Footprint. 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. The City's standards on stormwater runoff also will be carefully applied. In those instances where the overall square footage *[of home only or also porches, decks, etc.]* is more than 70 percent of the maximum allowed under the applicable FAR 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 size and type. *[Is the floor area or the overall footprint of the house, porches, decks, etc. the criterion?]*
8. Adjacent Neighbors. Significant 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 consensus opinion in the neighborhood or of the NRCA Executive Board. Neighbors who disagree with a Board action will be encouraged to present their own views to the appropriate officials.