



## Background Summary - Concerns

### Introduction

The City of Fort Lauderdale contains a rich variety of residential neighborhoods, many of which developed under codes established earlier in the city's history. Those codes established basic parameters for building, focusing on minimum building line setbacks, height limits, and floor area. These prescriptive standards defined a "potential building envelope," the area within which a structure could be placed. However, most buildings that were built traditionally did not maximize these envelope limits. Most were substantially smaller, resulting in areas of relatively low scale, single and multifamily buildings, and with substantial green space, shade trees etc..

More recently, some residential areas have experienced significant redevelopment, which sometimes has changed the character of a portion of a neighborhood. In some places, new, single family structures have appeared which are much larger than those seen traditionally. In other cases, zoning now permits multifamily buildings in what had been a single family area, and these new structures are by nature larger in scale. Changes in site layout, parking design and landscaping have accompanied these new building trends, which can affect the sense of open space, and the character of a block as perceived from the street. Sometimes, this increase in scale is also perceived as impacting privacy, light and air.

### Different Viewpoints

To some people, these changes are of concern, and they may advocate revisions to the city's Neighborhood Development Criteria in response. In some areas, residents wish to invite more investment, and they may caution that any potential changes should encourage this. Others will also maintain that the ability to realize economic benefits from one's property should be respected. Still others will wish to assure that the quality of life be maintained for established residents. It is expected that the degree to which these, and other viewpoints, interact may vary with different parts of the city, and this balancing of viewpoints will be a continuing part of the public discussion.

**For more information contact:**

City of Fort Lauderdale  
Planning & Zoning Dept.  
Adrienne Ehle, Planner III  
700 NW 19th Avenue  
Ft. Lauderdale, FL 33311

Phone: 954.828.5798  
Fax: 954.828.5858  
Email: aehle@fortlauderdale.gov

**Consultant Team:**

Winter & Company:  
Noré Winter  
Abe Barge

Code Studio:  
Lee Einsweiler

Strategies for Liveable Communities:  
Jean Scott

## Sources of These Concerns

In recent years, various statements have been made about the character of neighborhood development. Some of these occurred at a broad planning and policy level of discussion, while others appear in more specific conversations and reports. A preliminary listing of concerns is identified here. This list is gleaned from city policy documents, neighborhood planning reports, and interviews with elected officials in the Fall of 2008.

This summary of concerns serves as a starting point for studying revisions to the city's Neighborhood Development Criteria. It will guide community outreach discussions, and help frame the analysis of alternative responses to the concerns.

The concerns are organized into these categories:

- (1) Community-wide
- (2) Neighborhood level
- (3) Site design
- (4) Building design
- (5) Implementation
- (6) Other planning considerations

In each category a series of issues is listed. These appear in random order, and no priority or ranking of significance is implied.

## 1.0 Community-wide Concerns

Some of the concerns about the character of neighborhood development apply throughout the entire city. These include policies related to livability that appear in the Comprehensive Plan and Community Area Plan.

### Green Building

Development that is more sustainable, which reduces its impacts on the environment is an objective. This includes the way in which a building itself is designed to save energy, but also the way in which it is located on its site, how landscapes are treated and even how a structure may affect energy use of neighbors. A new building that blocks solar access opportunities of other properties, for example, is a concern. Landscape treatment that may affect energy consumption, such as creating shade to reduce air conditioning loads, is also a factor. While the full scope of Green Building issues extends beyond this project, there are basic site planning principles that could be considered.

### Maintaining Neighborhood Character

Some residents assert that the general character of established neighborhoods should be maintained, while also accommodating compatible new investment. This applies to several areas that offer livable places with an attractive sense of traditional scale and character. How are these areas identified, and how may development criteria be revised to achieve this objective?

### Sources of the Background Summary:

- Comprehensive Plan
- Community Area Plan
- Code of Ordinances & Unified Land Development Regulations
- Planning & Zoning Board
- Council of Fort Lauderdale Civic Associations, Proposed Neighborhood Development Criteria
- Riverside Park Neighborhood Character Plan (Draft)
- Individual interviews with City Commissioners (Fall, 2008)

*As more information is collected during the course of this project, this summary will be revised.*

## Changing Neighborhood Character

In other areas, city policies may now promote change, with zoning that permits higher densities. In these places, changing character is expected. But, even where a change in character is anticipated, it sometimes does not reach expectations, in terms of creating a sense of neighborhood. Projects that are designed to be isolated, and only inward-looking, for example, can have edges that are not conducive to a strong sense of community character. How can redevelopment occur in a way that helps build a sense of neighborhood and enhances the character of the street for all?

## Historic Preservation

While Neighborhood Conservation is the broader concern for established neighborhoods, there are places presently identified as having historic significance, and there may be others with the potential to be listed as such. Even though a more considered level of design review occurs in a historic district, pressure for redevelopment can continue. How any potential development criteria modifications would interact with the city's preservation review process is an issue to consider. If changes in criteria do occur, how can they also help improve the preservation process?

## High Quality Design

Some people have expressed a goal to promote higher quality in building, with durable materials and components, such as windows and doors, that enhance the character of the area. In some cases, recent development has failed to convey a high quality in design and construction. If promoting design excellence is an objective for future development, how can this be achieved? While the focus of the project is on mass and scale and other more basic impacts on neighbors, it is important that potential criteria revisions facilitate higher quality design.

## Redevelopment Opportunities

The city seeks to stimulate appropriate investment in its neighborhoods. How can revisions be crafted such that they facilitate compatible infill and encourage investment?

## 2.0 Neighborhood Level Concerns

Several issues exist at the level of an individual neighborhood, or an "area" with similar development patterns. Topics in this category address the character of the public realm, including streets and sidewalks, as well as broader design variables that are shared among several properties as experienced from the public way.

### Streetscape Character

Streetscape elements include features within the public right of way, as well as elements that may abut it, which are collectively perceived to be part of the public realm. These include the street itself, a sidewalk, a drainage swale and landscape elements. These combine to portray a distinct setting.

### Definition:

#### Compatibility

*How development can be accommodated which is compatible with its setting is a key consideration in this project. Clarifying a definition of "compatible" will be a part of the discussion, but it includes how a new development contributes to furthering the desired character of an area. In general it will incorporate:*

- character of the street edge
- mass & scale
- views & privacy
- open space

Some places reflect a more rustic context with a "soft" edge to the roadway, and lush plantings along the street edge, while others are more urban with defined street edges, linear sidewalks and manicured lawns.

In some areas, the character of the streetscape has eroded. New, more expansive driveways and parking in front setbacks are examples of more recent encroachments that are altering the streetscape. This can affect the visual continuity and "pedestrian-friendliness" of some established areas and is a concern.

### **Development Impacts Along Zoning District Edges**

In a place where two different zoning boundaries abut, there may be significant differences in the scale of building that occurs. Where a higher density zoning district is adjacent to a single family zone, for example, a much taller building may be constructed than those seen in the abutting district. These may also have large walls close to the property line, and may include balconies that "loom" over neighboring properties. How development along these edges should occur is a concern.

### **Lot Assembly**

In some areas, two or more lots may be combined to yield a larger building, often with a higher density. The building size and parking needed for it may result in projects which may erode the existing neighborhood fabric. This also can affect the perception of the rhythm and scale of building fronts along a block as well as the degree of open space seen traditionally. The relationship of lot assembly to development patterns is therefore a concern.

### **Use of Alleys**

In many areas of the city, traditional blocks are arranged on a grid with rectangular blocks. In some cases these also have alleys. Some are used for access to parking and for service functions, but others are not in active use or they are not well maintained and appear to be vacated. In response, property owners have constructed new driveways from the street, rather than use the alley. This results in an increase of parking and access drives within the front yard, creating a negative impact on the streetscape. What should be the role of alleys in development? The future role of alleys, and how decisions are made about their use, therefore, are concerns.

### **Waterway Edges**

Waterways extend throughout the city, and many residential areas overlook them. Typically, the water edge is the "rear" of a property, and yet it is also widely viewed by others who live across the waterway, or who travel on the water. To some extent, these properties are "double-fronted." The character of the water edge is therefore a key feature to consider and protecting waterways is also a neighborhood consideration. In some places, outdoor use areas have been constructed immediately at the water edge, which is changing the character. The potential encroachment of outdoor living space on the waterway there is a concern.

#### **Definitions:**

##### **Neighborhoods**

*The term "neighborhood" is used infrequently in this paper, and it will mean different things to residents of Fort Lauderdale. A neighborhood is generally assumed to be an area that has geographic and social aspects. Some may be a similarity of development character within a neighborhood, but some may also have differing development patterns. Many neighborhoods are formally recognized and even have markers denoting their boundaries.*

##### **Areas**

*This paper generally focuses on sets of blocks that have similar development features and zoning regulations. These are termed "areas," in order to distinguish them from the more commonly used definition of "neighborhood." An "area" may happen to coincide with a recognized neighborhood boundary, but in other cases, may not.*

## **Neighborhood “Breeze ways” and View Corridors**

Air circulation and view corridors are key considerations in residential areas, and while this is of interest throughout the city, it is especially noteworthy where properties abut waterways. The potential to construct a larger building along the water which blocks breezes and views to properties inland is a concern. If a solid wall of buildings can occur, it may constrict air movement substantially; this problem may increase as building heights increase. How criteria for planning individual sites, and groups of sites, may affect these environmental variables is a question.

## **3.0 Site Planning Issues**

Some concerns also relate to how an individual site is developed. These address the placement of a building on its site, the extent of paving that is created for driveways, parking and outdoor uses, as well as the amount of green space that exists, and how it is landscaped. Some related concerns are:

### **Loss and Quality of Green Space**

The proportion of green space to the amount of built area is an issue. A large structure that covers a substantial proportion of a lot can result in less green space, particularly as it is perceived from the public way and from abutting properties. Also with a reduction in the amount of green space associated with higher density (duplex, cluster, townhome, multifamily) projects, it is important that the quality of the green space that is provided, should serve as an amenity for residents and enhance the character of the neighborhood.

### **Loss of Mature Trees**

Increasing sizes of building footprints and expanded paved surfaces also may result in loss of mature trees on a site, which can reduce the tree canopy of an area. This has visual, as well as environmental impacts to consider.

### **Privacy**

When larger buildings are constructed close to abutting property lines, they can impact the sense of privacy of neighbors. The way in which an outdoor use area is designed also contributes to these impacts. A courtyard designed for active use, for example, when placed immediately adjacent to a neighboring property can affect privacy.

### **Exposed Parking Areas**

Wide driveways and expanded areas of surface parking can impact the character of the street and diminish the pedestrian experience. This may occur as a semi-circular driveway for a single family residence, a parking forecourt for a multifamily building, or a row of pull-in parking sites for town houses. The design and location of surface parking is therefore a concern at this level of consideration.

## 4.0 Building Design Issues

Some issues relate to the design of individual buildings. These include the overall mass and scale of a structure, as well as how details are used to convey a sense of scale. The effects of upper level balconies, decks and windows on adjoining properties is also a consideration.

### **Building Massing**

An abrupt change in scale, where a new building with long, tall walls abuts a smaller neighboring structure, is a special concern. This may be especially important when a multifamily building is constructed abutting a single family zone district.

### **Street-facing Garages**

Garage doors dominate the front facing facades on some new developments, and they erode traditional residential neighborhood character. This may appear in a row of townhouses, and also in cluster building types. This changes the character of established residential streets, and results in fewer street-facing activities, which can affect the appeal for pedestrians walking in the area. The extent to which curb cuts can predominate along a site, and the degree to which parking can occur in front influences the perception of these street-facing garages. The design and orientation of enclosed parking as it relates to the street is therefore a concern.

### **Massive Walls Next to Single Family Houses**

Long, tall walls are a special concern, especially when constructed adjacent to a smaller existing single family residence. In some cases, this occurs where a new large single family house is constructed. In others, it happens in a zone that once was single family in nature but is now zoned for multifamily use. There, the change in scale may be a "transitioning" one, as the overall scale of the neighborhood rises. Nonetheless, those remaining in single family homes are impacted. In yet a third condition, the change in scale may occur along the boundary of two zone districts, one of which remains single family and the other of which is multifamily. In that situation, the difference in scale is permanent. Building mass and the height of side walls are therefore concerns in these circumstances.

### **Long, Tall Side Walls in General**

A long, tall wall of a new building that is located near the side yard setback line can impact neighbors, in terms of light and air, views and privacy. They can also contribute to a sense of massiveness in new buildings as seen from the street. This is especially noticeable when the length and height of a new building wall is substantially greater than those seen traditionally in the neighborhood, and when it has little architectural detailing or variation in materials. The impacts of the side walls on neighbors is therefore a concern, even in areas where multifamily buildings abut each other.

## 5.0 Implementing Criteria Revisions

While many concerns relate to the physical aspects of building and site design, there also are questions about how potential revisions may be applied.

### **Predictability**

Development regulations should be easy to interpret, such that all players can understand what the likely outcomes will be. Property owners should be able to determine what is permitted, and neighbors should not feel "surprised" by development. How can criteria be crafted that are easily understood and efficient to administer and yield predictable results?

### **Flexibility**

While simple, prescriptive standards are desirable because they are predictable, they may also limit reasonable choices that could be compatible. There may be situations in which an alternative design approach could meet the intent of a particular design standard, but in a different way. How can criteria be applied such that there is some flexibility for special conditions and alternative solutions which may still meet the intent of the regulation?

### **Mid-Century Neighborhoods**

Some of Fort Lauderdale's neighborhoods date from the Mid-twentieth Century. These have different characteristics that may suggest different approaches. An area with low-scale, ranch style houses, for example, may be affected differently by new development. How should these be treated? Should criteria vary by context, or should they be the same throughout a particular zone district?

### **Standards and Guidelines**

The city's development criteria exist in what may be considered a blend of "standards," and "guidelines." For purposes of this project, "standards" are prescriptive. They use a fixed dimension as a limit for development, such as a minimum setback line. These are predictable and simple to administer. The other tool is "design guidelines," which establish a clear intent, but focus more on the quality of the execution of the design. These, however, are more discretionary and require interpretation to determine compliance. How should these two tools be coordinated in the city's Residential Development Criteria?

### **Efficient Development Review Process**

As potential revisions to the Neighborhood Development Criteria are considered, it is important to seek ways in which to maintain an efficient review process, and even improve upon it. Providing clearly written and well illustrated criteria, for example, can expedite interpretation by all users. Minimizing the number of steps in the review and permitting process is also a consideration.

## **Tailoring Criteria to the Setting**

The characteristics of neighborhoods vary widely across the city, and the conditions of the various residential zone districts have very different implications in their criteria, in terms of neighborhood character. To what extent can a "one-size-fits all" approach be effective? Alternatively, where is a more context-sensitive response needed? And, how can this finer-grained response be applied consistently and efficiently within the city's zoning categories and building types regulations?

## **6.0 Other Planning Concerns**

In addition to the preceding list of issues that focus on residential development, some concerns have been voiced in interviews that are much broader. These are not expected to be directly addressed in this project, but nonetheless may merit transmitting to city staff and officials for consideration in other venues.

These additional concerns are noted below. In some cases, proposals for criteria revisions may indirectly address some of these issues. In other cases, they will not, but it is still important to acknowledge these issues and report them to the City Commission as related concerns.

### **Transit Systems**

The extent to which new development can make use of existing and/or future transit systems, and can help to support the expansion of transit is also important. For this reason, building where it can make use of existing or potential transit routes may be more appropriate than in other locations.

### **Pedestrian and Bicycle Connections**

In older areas of the city, individual building sites are interconnected with traditional sidewalks that provide continuity for pedestrian circulation. This does not exist in all areas. This lack of connectivity can be an issue. How development criteria may help to improve connections is a question.

### **Impacts of Incompatible Uses Adjacent to Neighborhoods**

Industrial uses that abut residential neighborhoods is a concern. How effective are existing buffering standards for this condition?

### **Neighborhood Plans**

Specific plans for individual neighborhoods can help provide a framework for investment, both for the public and the private sectors. What is the role of neighborhood plans in promoting neighborhood development and compatibility?

## **Promoting Transit-oriented Development**

TOD projects tend to locate along mixed use corridors, which can abut other residential neighborhoods. Promoting TOD planning and crafting criteria for compatible edges is a consideration.

## **Learning about Re-zoning**

In some cases, neighborhood advocates may wish to seek rezoning for an area. Ways that residents can initiate this process is a process that would need to be addressed.