

PUBLIC TESTIMONY
MERCER ISLAND PLANNING COMMISSION
01/30/19

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City of Mercer Island Planning Commission, Staff, and Council:

Good Evening. My name is David Cutler, and I am a partner at Northwest Studio, the Architect for the FASPS. I live at 2206 East Crescent Drive, Seattle, WA 98112.

On behalf of the French American School of Puget Sound, thank you all for the considerable time and effort required to get to this point.

We understand that this first draft of the code is a starting point, and we appreciate the City's thoughtful and good-faith effort to craft a code that, going forward, can work for all.

As Ed has indicated, and per the January 23rd Staff Report to the Planning Commission, the draft code establishes "significantly more restrictive setbacks, height, lot coverage and gross floor area standards when compared to the [existing] residential zoning designations." Furthermore, they are also much more restrictive than those that govern the large areas zoned "Commercial" and "Business" that currently exist on the Northern half of the J's property and on the NE end of Herzl.

Now that we have seen the draft code, we have a few observations based on our very brief review – I will speak to those that impact Small Sites.

1. The "tiered" system: Small Sites vs Large Sites.

FASPS is currently exploring two options for development in partnership with the J and HNT – one, on the School's properties facing SE 40th, and the other, on Herzl. Both are "Small Sites" and part of a larger master plan. I'd like to focus on Herzl, as this is the preferred FASPS site.

We whole-heartedly endorse differentiating between large and small sites. After nearly twenty years of practice, I can definitively say that the smaller the site, the more acute its physical challenges and the narrower the margin between feasibility and infeasibility – this is especially true for a non-profit like FASPS.

With this in mind, I would like to walk through several of the proposed CF development parameters that, while well intended, may render development of a new school on a Small Site, for all practical purposes, infeasible:

2. Setbacks, Coverage, Screening, and Height:

The CF zone uses a series of “belts and suspenders” to help minimize the potential visual and functional impact to neighboring residential properties. On Herzl, as is likely the case with many other narrow, infill sites, the collective impact of these standards is that development may be infeasible.

- As the first diagram in your set illustrates, the effective Lot Coverage has been reduced by one third (1/3), from approximately 63% under the existing mix of Business (B) and Residential (R-9.6) zoning to less than 40% under the CF zone. For reference, the existing Herzl site has a coverage of approximately 58%, and the existing leased school site, which is fully utilized, has a coverage of approximately 50%.¹

We appreciate that coverage is intended to address development intensity as well as environmental performance. For small infill sites, we recommend establishing a more realistic site-wide target of 55-60%, or to base coverage on site-specific conditions and geometries, recognizing that the stormwater code will ensure environmental performance.

- As the second diagram in your set illustrates, the effective Gross Floor Area on Herzl has been reduced by 75% from the existing mix of Business (B) and Residential (R-9.6) zoning. We are embarking on this master planning effort so that we may have the ability to evolve our curriculum and modernize our facilities. If we were to build new program based on the 2017 State Office of Public Instruction median building area per student (135sf/student), the new CF zone GFA limits would require us to reduce our enrollment by 90 students, or 20%.²

We suggest considering alternatives to setback-based floor area standards, such as site-wide FAR, or instead, relaxing the setbacks.

- As the third diagram in your set illustrates, the developable area on Herzl (excluding the access tract) ranges between 111’ to 193’ in width. The proposed 50’ setbacks on either side leaves an unreasonably narrow area for new school development – and relative to building height, the code sets an “impact angle” that is also unnecessarily restrictive. For reference, existing R-9.6 zoning allows an 8,000 gsf, 30’ tall single-family structure to occur within 10’ of a side lot line without screening, an impact angle of 72%.

¹ Pace Engineers, “Limited Topographic Survey for Impervious Surfaces” from CUP Application, received by City of Mercer Island Development Services, 8/22/2007.

² Preliminary estimate of max GFA on Herzl based on CF standards is 46,465 sf. Washington State OSPI lists median building area per student at 135sf. $46,465 / 135 = 344$ students. Current FASPS CUP allows an enrollment of 435 students – 344 students = 91 students. WASHINGTON STATE OFFICE OF THE SUPERINTENDENT OF PUBLIC INSTRUCTION K-12 CAPITAL FACILITIES COST STUDY, February 3, 2017.

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We agree with the need to address the visual impact of building bulk. Together with full screening within 20' of any residential lot line, we believe the existing "impact angle" for private schools permitted as a conditional use in R-8.4 and R-9.6 zones, or 41 degrees, is sufficient as the baseline for the new CF zone. Additional stories should be permitted under this "impact angle," subject to design review and other controls within the code. Looking at the next diagram in your packet, one can see that the lot area available for three stories, based on setbacks alone, is unusable.

We suggest that reasonable accommodations be made to establish usable areas for building heights, and setbacks should be written to be site-specific, similar to the existing Public Schools development standards.

- Additionally, we offer one more observation about the CF zone:

The next page in your packet shows two methods of height measurement. The code prescribes the former – setting a single height for the entire structure – a practice ill-suited for development on sloping sites. We suggest the latter, which will allow buildings to step with the grade, reducing overall bulk and scale and better accommodating critical functional aspects such as getting adequate light and air to students.

When we began this process roughly a year ago, we began with a pledge to work collaboratively together. Today, we continue that commitment, and over the coming months, we look forward to rolling up our sleeves with you all.

Thank You,

northwest studio
david cutler, partner

