

DRAFT
Planning Commission
Summary of Recommendation for Defining Gross Floor Area

Adopted by the Menlo Park Planning Commission January 26, 2009

In May 2007, the Menlo Park City Council asked the Planning Commission to recommend revisions to the definition of Gross Floor Area. The Council's goal is to eliminate ambiguity and eliminate the possibility for "creep" in building square footage (SF). At the same time, the Council asked the Commission to consider the merits of possible exclusions. At the end of February 2008, Mayor Cohen also asked the Commission for a written summary.

Proposed Exclusions

The Commission is highly aware that the community does not want spurious exclusions which merely benefit the developer; we are also aware that Council wanted us to consider cases where public benefits are available from allowing exclusions. As an overarching concept, the Commission's recommendation allows exclusions that meet two tests:

- The exclusion would create public benefit, such as reducing noise or visual impacts on neighbors or providing greater building amenity to the community.
- The exclusion is not expected to significantly increase use intensity over what would otherwise be expected.

The Commission recommends the following significant exclusions. These exclusions are largely consistent with previous implementation of GFA.

Noise Generating Mechanical Areas

The Commission recommends that the GFA definition exclude and limit areas dedicated to noise-generating equipment. Note that a building's mechanical equipment may easily be located on the roof top or on the ground, and meet our Noise Ordinance (<50db at the property line during 10pm-7am; <60db daytime). Locating the equipment inside the building would create significantly less noise impact on neighbors. A property owner is unlikely to place the equipment indoors where it will count against the SF limit when they can put the equipment outside and make the SF useable. The Commission believes that without the exclusion the equipment will be located outside, so allowing extra SF to enclose the equipment will not increase use intensity. And, exempting areas that enclose mechanical equipment creates the community benefit of reducing noise further below the Noise Ordinance threshold.

Stairwell Shafts

The Commission recommends that the GFA definition be consistent with the building code and count stairwells only once (rather than once per floor). Property owners have a strong incentive to minimize shaft space inside a building if it counts against the allowed SF because shafts are not marketable space. Stairwells play two roles in a building; they provide required fire egress, and daily access for users. Egress codes can be met by using open stairways attached to the exterior of the building, where it would not count against GFA. In our mild climate, stairs are frequently located on the exterior of a building where they do not count against allowed SF. The Commission believes that without this exclusion, egress and main stairwells will generally be provided outside, so allowing extra SF to enclose stairways will not increase use intensity. Yet, exempting these stairways can provide the community with a wider variation of building appearances, and stairs that are attractive generally to more users year round are Green as they encourage use over elevators.

Elevator Shafts

Elevators are frequently required in 2 and 3 story buildings only to meet ADA codes; stairs are always provided. New buildings should not be penalized over older buildings for providing full access to the elderly and handicapped. The Commission proposes an elevator is counted as being on one floor, consistent with the building code. Note: elevator lobbies would still count on each floor.

Attics and Basements

Attics with low headroom are not developable; excluding this and Other Non-Occupiable Spaces encourages architectural variation from the common “flat top” roof line and flat facades. Excluding basements with low headroom allows for varying topography, proper foundation design and ADA maximum ramp slopes.

Parking and Recycling

The Commission recommends exempting covered parking and trash/recycle rooms. Parking, enclosed or provided below grade, is very expensive but greatly improves aesthetics. Trash and recycle rooms that require more space than a “trash enclosure” in a parking lot may be less obtrusive within a building, and this again improves aesthetics.

Note on Bulk

Although adding elevators and enclosing stairs will likely increase a building’s volume, prohibiting the aforementioned exclusions would not be an effective control over bulk. Several buildings in town, notably the Casa Mills building at 200 Middlefield Rd., have very large unenclosed center courtyards that greatly increase building bulk without increasing GFA. If the City wishes to control bulk, it would be better to do that with an explicit bulk control, rather than by precluding the potential benefits of the above exclusions.

Handling Pre-existing Conditions

There may be a number of properties where the change in GFA will cause a significant change in an existing building owner’s allowed GFA; the Commission recommends a controlled means of honoring pre-existing conditions.

Environmental Review

The Commission recommends that Council make the finding that none of the above exclusions require additional CEQA review because they do not significantly increase use intensity; the exclusions are substantially the same as those that the City had previously used in applying the definition of GFA.