



## **Planning Director Code Interpretation FAR IN PLANNED RESIDENTIAL DEVELOPMENTS**

### **Issue**

How is the Floor Area Ratio calculation derived in Planned Residential Developments?

### **Applicable Snohomish Municipal Code (SMC) provisions**

#### **SMC 14.05.050 Administration and interpretation.**

- A. The City Planner shall interpret and apply this Development Code consistently. As may be necessary, the City Planner shall render new interpretations in writing, file said interpretations, and apply said interpretations in future like instances.
- B. In the event of conflict, 1) specific provisions shall prevail over general provisions, 2) text shall prevail over headings, captions, illustrations, and citation references, and 3) Chapter 36.70B RCW shall prevail over this Development Code.
- C. Regulations, conditions, or procedural requirements that are specific to an individual land use shall supersede regulations, conditions, or procedural requirements of general application.
- D. A land use includes the necessary structures to support the use unless specifically prohibited or the context clearly indicates otherwise.
- E. The word “shall” is mandatory and the word “may” is discretionary. The word “should” is mandatory unless the City Planner determines that application of the particular provision is not necessary to implement the purposes of the Development Code as set forth in SMC 14.05.020.

#### **SMC 14.25.070 Definitions - F. (excerpt)**

**Floor area, gross:** the sum of all floor spaces defined by exterior walls, including unoccupied accessory areas, basements, and mezzanines on all floor levels.

**Floor area ratio:** the ratio of a building’s gross floor area to the size of the lot upon which it is built.

#### **SMC 14.25.080 Definitions - G. (excerpt)**

**Garage, private:** a building or portion of a building in which motor vehicles used by the occupants of the building or buildings on the premises are stored or kept, without provisions for repairing or servicing such vehicles for profit.

**SMC 14.220.010 Purpose.**

- A. Allow development of land subject to critical areas while at the same time preserving the natural characteristics of a site, including topography, native vegetation, streams, wetlands, views, and other natural amenities of value to the community.
- B. Create and/or preserve useful open space for recreation and aesthetic enjoyment of residents.
- C. Permit developers to use innovative methods and approaches not available under conventional Land Use Designation methods; provided, that methods and approaches are consistent with the Comprehensive Plan, do not adversely impact neighboring uses more than development occurring under conventional methods, and do not significantly interfere with the enjoyment of other land in the vicinity.
- D. Provide for choices in the layout of streets, utility networks, and other public improvements through superior site design and the use of clustering.
- E. Encourage infill within areas of the City which have existing development.

**14.220.100 Special Design and Bulk and Dimensional Requirements. (excerpt)**

Except as specifically modified in this section, the bulk and dimensional requirements of this title shall apply to all development within a PRD.

- E. The floor area ratio or gross floor area divided by the area of the lot shall not exceed one-half.

**Applicable 2021 General Design Standards**

**4.1.B. Floor Area Ratio**

- 1. For PRDs with detached houses on individual lots, no structure shall exceed the Floor Area Ratio (FAR) of the Snohomish Municipal Code. FAR is calculated by dividing the total number of square feet within a building by the lot area.
- 2. Porches and decks that are not fully enclosed and daylight basements constructed at least 50% below grade are exempt from the FAR calculation.

**4.1.C. Garages**

- 1. When garage doors face the street, they shall be set back at least 20 feet from the property line or sidewalk.
- 2. The outer wall of the above-grade living area shall extend at least five feet closer to the front property line than the face of the garage doors.
- 3. Where alleys exist, access to garages shall be from the alley.
- 4. Detached garages shall be consistent with the character of the primary home, but subordinate in terms of mass, size, height, and level of detail. Building materials shall be consistent with those of the main structure.

## **Applicable 2024 Comprehensive Plan Policies**

- L2.1 Innovative zoning.** Utilize innovative zoning models to increase density and achieve other policy goals.
- L2.2 Urban form.** Consider elements of form such as building heights, setbacks, and relationship to the public realm in residential areas.
- L4.2 Subdivision design.** New plats should create visually accessible home sites, provide efficient circulation for pedestrians and vehicles, and exhibit an orderly lot pattern that minimizes irregularly shaped lots.
- H1.1 Housing types.** Plan for a wide variety of housing types, sizes, and densities to provide housing and homeownership opportunities to a range of ages and income levels consistent with the Regional Growth Strategy.
- H2.1 Market demand.** Designate adequate land for various housing types and densities to match market demand, while ensuring that adequate capacity is available for a variety of housing opportunities.
- H3.5 Workforce housing.** Support programs that encourage the City’s workforce to be able to live in the City.
- H4.2 Planned Residential Development.** Allow clustered housing and attached dwellings where environmental constraints would cause a reduction in density relative to an unconstrained site. Ensure that adequate usable open space is provided and building scale is proportionate with lot size.
- H5.4 Housing innovation.** Support innovative housing models such as community land trusts and tiny house villages for ownership and shared ownership opportunities.
- H6.5 Periodic review.** Periodically evaluate permit review processes to minimize costs to developers to the extent possible while preserving the public health, safety, and welfare.

### **Interpretation**

#### **Discussion:**

Mr. Peter Condyles, representing Toyer Strategic Advisors, Inc., has requested an interpretation of the administrative design standard related to the application of the Floor Area Ratio (FAR) for Planned Residential Developments (PRDs) and other small lot single family development types. Specifically, he requests that garage area be exempted from the FAR calculation.

The Snohomish Municipal Code (SMC) does not provide guidance on how the FAR is calculated, though it was adopted in 2005, so this has been a matter of staff interpretation without the benefit of a written policy for a number of years. The Design Standards provide more language relative to FAR than the SMC. A previous Code Interpretation dated March 25, 2015, specifically addressed basements and found that a basement level can only be exempted from FAR if it is at least 50% below grade (a daylight basement). Since that time,

the General Design Standards were updated in 2021, and the FAR language was revised to provide more clarity. However, they still do not address the matter of garages.

**Analysis:**

The definition of FAR is “the ratio of a building’s gross floor area to the size of the lot upon which it is built”. Gross floor includes “the sum of all floor spaces defined by exterior walls, including unoccupied accessory areas, basements, and mezzanines on all floor levels”. Because FAR includes the references to gross floor area, the implication is that garage space is included in the floor area calculation. However, these definitions are common among jurisdictions that also exempt certain spaces from the FAR calculation.

The intent of the FAR standard is to “ensure that single family development with small lot sizes are not overbuilt”. There are a number of factors that control the visual scale of a building relative to its site, including building setbacks and height limits. Specific to garages, the PRD design standards require an additional setback of five feet behind the outer wall of the living area, intended to reduce the visual effect of the garage and make the house itself appear more prominent. These provisions serve to reduce the visual impact of structures on a lot, regardless of the size of the lot itself. Additionally, recent state legislation, such as HB 1337 (2023) requires local governments to permit up to two accessory dwelling units on any residential lot. These tend to be within detached garage structures, which also serve as parking for the accessory unit. It is overly burdensome on property owners and builders to apply a FAR standard that includes all portions of the structural floor area when it is the legislative intent and mandated by the state to provide housing options on a per-lot basis, including small lot subdivisions.

The legislative timeline is an important consideration, given the reliance on policy guidance and the direction to individual staff to revise their review process. The FAR itself was originally adopted in 2005 and has not been adjusted since that time. The code interpretation regarding basements was then issued in 2015, providing a narrow and conservative interpretation in determining FAR. Many staff use this interpretation as guidance for their permit reviews. The General Design Standards were then updated in 2021, providing some improved clarity, although not sufficiently for this particular request. The ADU bill was passed by the Washington state legislature in 2023, and then the City adopted its new Comprehensive Plan in 2024, which encourages more housing types and flexibility.

Given these factors, it is appropriate to apply a level of flexibility for builders and homeowners in how the FAR is determined. A formal policy is necessary to calculate FAR consistently, uniformly, and equitably. It is appropriate, given the requirement from state legislation and other controlling factors already in place, to exclude vehicle storage space from the area, whether this is located within the principal structure or in a detached accessory structure. However, the Land Use Code may need to be amended in the future to match this policy.

**Conclusion**

FAR should be calculated by determining the total square footage of all enclosed and temperature-controlled portions of the proposed building(s), exempting garages, and basements that are at least 50% below grade (pursuant to the 2015 code interpretation). That total floor area should then be divided by the total lot area to derive the FAR.

Minor code amendments may be necessary to bolster this interpretation moving forward. Recommended amendments will be to add a new term to Chapter 14.25 SMC for *Floor area, usable*. This term is necessary to exclude the unusable areas from FAR. The term should be defined as follows: “the measurement of floor area that is the sum of all gross floor areas of a structure, but excluding the floor area of basements that are at least fifty percent below grade, garages, sheds, attics, breezeways, and unenclosed porches”. Additionally, SMC 14.220.100(E) should be amended to replace *gross* with *usable*.

Dated this 17<sup>th</sup> day of March, 2026.



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Brooke Eidem, AICP  
Planning & Development Services Director

**NOTE:**

This decision is made pursuant to the authority granted to the Planning Director in accordance with SMC 14.05.050. Any aggrieved party to the Planning Director’s Decision and administrative determination may appeal the decision to the Hearing Examiner following the procedures contained in Chapter 14.75 SMC. If no timely appeal is filed, then the Planning Director’s Decision shall be final. Appeals must be filed with City Clerk within 14 days from the date of this decision. Appeals must include a filing fee of \$500 (five hundred dollars).