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Proposal to improve plot-ratio rules

Summary

The existing rules governing plot-ratios for single dwellings in zones RZ1 and RZ2 are inadequate because they fail to prevent houses covering more than 50% of a block. This has resulted in dwellings that are inconsistent with the Objectives for RZ1 proposed for DV 306 and the Strategic Directions in the Territory Plan.

We recommend that ACTPLA revise the rules for plot-ratios, so that where single dwellings are built on large blocks, there is enough room for trees and gardens and there will always be at least 50% of the block not covered by buildings.

We also recommend that ACTPLA consider adopting an algorithm in which the Gross Floor Area is defined as the entire area within the polygon drawn between the external vertices of the built structure, plus the area of any upper floor. The plot ratio limit would remain at 50% or less, and would remain defined as the GFA divided by the area of the block.

Background

At a recent hearing of the Standing Committee on Planning, Public Works and Territory and Municipal Services the desirability of some modifications to the existing plot ratio rules was raised. This arose because the current 50% plot-ratio rule was not effectively achieving its purpose of restricting the bulk of dwellings in the RZ1 planning zone.

The existing Single Dwelling Housing Development Code provides for a maximum 50% plot-ratio for blocks with only one house in RZ1 (Rule 4) and for RZ2 (Rule 6A). It is proposed to retain this plot-ratio in DV306 for large blocks in RZ1 (although promoted to Rule1 in the proposed revised Single Dwelling Housing Development Code) and large single dwelling blocks in RZ2 (Rule 8 in the revised Multi Unit Housing Development Code); note that under this proposed rule there will be no plot ratio limit for any block smaller than 500m² in RZ1.

The existing rule appears to be unsuccessful in controlling the bulk of buildings in RZ1, particularly for knockdown/rebuilds. As an example we tabled photographs of the

construction taking place at 32 Stuart Street, to the Standing Committee on 11 July 2012. It is clear that this building will occupy more than 50% of its block, and we expect that there are similar examples elsewhere.

At this stage we should place on record that the GNCA does not oppose the redevelopment of older blocks. We recognize that many of the older buildings in the inner suburbs are too small to be suitable for modern families, and that the size of their windows and their thermal performance are significantly below what is expected today. We also recognise that it is often cheaper to knock down and rebuild rather than remedy these defects through extensive refurbishment. However, any such rebuild does not have to be without sympathy for the surrounding houses and should not preclude the potential to maintain the trees and gardens that make the inner suburbs so attractive. We are opposed to tasteless overbuilding.

The key point is that the present rules do not prevent developments that are inconsistent with both Territory Plan's Statement of Strategic Directions and the RZ1 Objectives in DV 306.

Quoting from Urban Design Para 2.16:

Retention of Canberra's unique landscape setting, including the integration of natural and cultural elements that create its garden city and bush capital qualities, will be accorded the highest priority. Special attention will be given to safeguarding visual amenity, protecting vegetation and other important features within the established urban landscape, and ensuring the high quality of environmental design in new development and redevelopment.

And the Objectives for RZ1 in DV 306:

Provide for the establishment and maintenance of residential areas where the housing is low rise and predominantly single dwelling and low density in character.

Protect the character of established single dwelling housing areas by limiting the extent of change that can occur particularly with regard to the original pattern on subdivision and the density of dwellings

Ensure development respects valued features of the neighbourhood and landscape character of the area and does not have unreasonable negative impacts on neighboring properties.

We recommend that in future the plot ratio rules are based on the 'total area of the construction envelope', so that objectives of both RZ1 and the Strategic Directions can be more easily be complied with.

Total Area within Construction Envelope

We propose that the Gross Floor Area be redefined as the entire area within the polygon drawn between the external vertices of the built structure, plus the area of any upper floor. The plot ratio limit would remain at 50% or less, and the plot ratio would remain defined as the GFA divided by the area of the block.

This would solve the problem of houses which, under the current rules, have plot ratios of less than 50% but which approach the set-back limits on all boundaries because the house is built around an internal courtyard or pool. One could argue that because such a courtyard is entirely, or even substantially, surrounded by built structures it forms a room, albeit an outdoor room, of the house. As such, there appears to be little reason to exclude such a room from the GFA.

This approach is easy when there is an entirely enclosed interior courtyard or pool, but how is it to be applied when the courtyard is only surrounded on two sides? In this case only half the courtyard would be included, because the defined GFA would be the area within the polygon between the vertices of the building. A three sided courtyard would of course be treated in the same way as a four sided courtyard because the external vertices would close off the fourth side of the courtyard.

Detached secondary dwellings, sheds, studios or garages, or indeed, anything that required building approval, would be regarded as a separate structure, unless it was within a specified distance (say 4 m) of the primary residence. The GFA of separate structures would be included in the total GFA for the whole site.

If these separate structures were within the specified distance they would be regarded as part of the primary residence and included in the GFA polygon. Consequently the area between such proximate but detached structures and the principal residence would be included in the GFA. However, a courtyard with only one side contacting the principal residence and facing a detached structure more than the specified distance away would not be included in the GFA.

If the separate structures were more than the specified distance from the principal dwelling their areas would add to the GFA, but not the area between them and the principal dwelling. If two or more separate structures were within the specified distance from each other, they would be regarded as forming one joint structure. The area between them within the polygon surrounding them would be counted as part of their GFA and add to the GFA of all the building on the site.