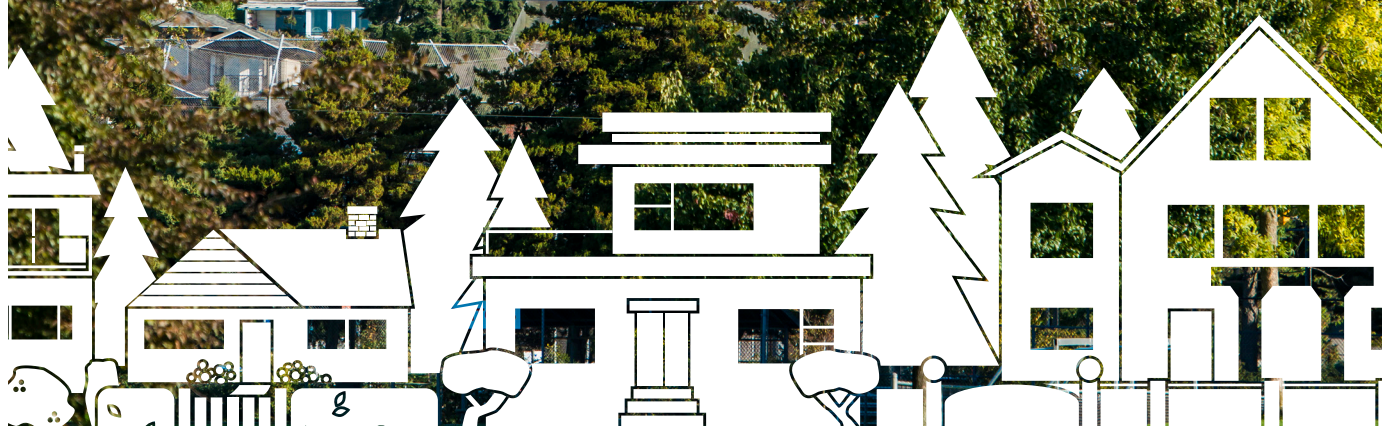


Final report  
**Neighbourhood Character  
Working Group**



December 7, 2020

*west* vanancouver

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# Neighbourhood Character Working Group

## Recommendations

### **Purpose of the Neighbourhood Character Working Group:**

*To propose regulations and policies that respect and sustain the character and heritage of West Vancouver single-family neighbourhoods.*



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# 1. INTRODUCTION

The Neighbourhood Character Working Group (NCWG) was appointed by the District's Community Engagement Committee in August 2018 to make recommendations to Council that would enhance and preserve West Vancouver's 'neighbourhood character'. As a diverse group of 10 volunteer residents from different West Vancouver neighbourhoods, we met regularly over the course of 18 months. Together we toured West Vancouver, consulted with District staff and subject matter experts, and hosted public events to ensure we understood the issues of most concern.

The following report contains recommendations that are in response to the issues of building size, housing diversity, landscaping, approval processes and impact of construction on neighbours that were brought to our attention. The focus of our recommendations is to reduce housing size and the appearance of bulk, and to recognize the value of greenery.

These recommendations also support a move to more environmentally responsible building. In addition, we recognized the need to provide more diverse housing for a broader demographic by enabling suites and coach houses in a manner that will not detract from the general character of neighbourhoods. Our proposals envisage a smaller main house, but when combined with the bonuses of suites and coach houses, the same or greater Floor Area Ratio is achieved.

While individually, these changes may not result in dramatic changes, when taken together, the NCWG believes that they will produce the desired result of maintaining West Vancouver's 'neighbourhood character' while preserving the value of our homes as the community evolves. Our goal is to maintain context and character within neighbourhoods, not to encourage conformity.

A few things of note to keep in mind while reading this document:

- Most recommendations involve tradeoffs of one sort or another (e.g. existing regulations for partially exempting underground parts of basements encourage some of the space included in maximum FAR to be included in that basement, thereby reducing more visible space in the upper two storeys, but may require more digging). Our recommendations tend to favour neighbourhood character when making tradeoffs; other priorities may suggest different tradeoffs.
- This report does not suggest changes to site coverage or setbacks – although bylaw writers may wish to consider such changes to better achieve the objectives of some recommendations. Similarly, current parking requirements for additional suites are maintained to minimize additional street parking. In general the NCWG agrees with the premise that slightly higher density and site coverage, and relaxed parking requirements, may be appropriate in the smaller, more urban lots in Lower Ambleside.
- Legislative authority does not permit municipal bylaws to protect views or light, nor to legislate style or taste.

## 2. NEIGHBOURHOOD CHARACTER WORKING GROUP

### **Purpose and Scope**

“To propose, consider and review regulations and policies that respect neighbourhood character, protect heritage and reduce the impact of development in the District’s Single Family Dwelling Zones. The working group will engage the community and make recommendations to Council regarding the creation of new bylaws and policies and/or the amendment of existing bylaws and policies.” *(Neighbourhood Character Working Group Draft Terms of Reference, August 2018.)*

The NCWG is aware that “neighbourhood character” is much more than a technical concept, and encompasses concepts such as familiarity, comfort, safety, friendliness, social interaction, sense of community and more. As well we recognize that amenities such as parks, view lines, picnic and gathering places, playgrounds, schools and community centres are all-important to the overall well-being and neighbourliness of the community.

However, this document is limited to the working group’s mandate to consider single family properties (and the suites that are permitted in those zones) and the zoning regulations that affect them. Our recommendations are further constrained by what a municipality can legally regulate.

*(See Appendix 1.0 for a more detailed discussion of the Scope of Work and Approach.)*

### **Vision**

To ensure that West Vancouver regulations, guidelines and policies protect and enhance neighbourhood character for the benefit of current and future residents. We will put forth specific recommendations that we believe are achievable and that will address a variety of housing options, access to views, light and privacy, respect of scale to existing homes, as well as landscape requirements. These recommendations will aim to also support social interaction via the community's connections to the natural environment, fostering walkability and long-term livability within West Vancouver for current and future residents. *(As adopted by the Neighbourhood Character Working Group, December 2018.)*

## Principles

The following principles have guided the work of the NCWG:

- Encourage RS-Zoned (primarily single-family) neighbourhoods to maintain a detached-house/single-family appearance.
- Reflect the uniqueness of West Vancouver's different neighbourhoods.
- Focus on houses as homes rather than development opportunities.
- Recognize the importance of natural landscape features and terrain to neighbourhood character.
- Support the economic and social sustainability of West Vancouver.
- Reduce negative impacts of construction on the environment.

## Defining Neighbourhood Character

Neighbourhood character is always difficult to define, all the more so in West Vancouver where there are over 20 named neighbourhoods, exhibiting many different characteristics.

Neighbourhood character is defined in the West Vancouver Official Community Plan (OCP) as:

*“Sense of place and its distinct aspects that cause a specific area to be familiar to the people associated with it and recognizable from other areas.”*

Other definitions include:

*The look and feel of an area;*

*Qualities that make one neighbourhood distinct from another;*

*A range of physical components including: the built environment, architectural style, street width and layout, vegetation, fence height and style, and so on.*

In our search for ways to preserve and enhance neighbourhood character in “single family” zones (a slight misnomer, since suites and coach houses are permitted in almost all West Vancouver neighbourhoods), the NCWG looked for common elements of character that could be found across the varied terrains, lot sizes, streetscapes and ages of homes in West Vancouver.

Our work identified two elements to be common to all West Vancouver neighbourhoods. We believe these should be protected and enhanced through bylaw and process improvements:

1. The built form consists almost exclusively of detached houses, even if those houses contain suites.
2. Greenery is abundant, and is an important component of the look and feel of the neighbourhoods.

In addition, we found the District's zoning bylaw recognizes and drives much of the existing neighbourhood character, primarily by regulating lot sizes, lot coverage, and the size of houses that can be built.



## Engagement

The following main steps were taken to obtain feedback from the community to inform the NCWG's work:

- observational study of West Vancouver neighbourhoods
- online survey to identify problems perceived by West Vancouver residents and analysis of 200 completed responses
- four focus groups of West Vancouver residents and analysis of input
- six stakeholder meetings with 'industry' representatives (i.e. architects, landscape designers and architects, developers, realtors) to obtain feedback on initial recommendations, and
- meetings and discussions with District planning, permitting and communications staff, Heritage Advisory Committee, Design Review Committee, Community Engagement Committee, and District mayor and council.

Throughout this time, the NCWG reviewed prior West Vancouver reports, existing regulations and policies that concerned neighbourhood character. We then looked for ways to guide future development to best meet the community's concerns described below and the evolving needs and interests of both current and future residents, while meeting the goals set in the OCP.

## Community Concerns

Our outreach to the community and review of previous West Vancouver studies identified the following four common neighbourhood character concerns/issues which we have attempted to address:

1. the perceived bulk of individual houses that appear out of scale with the neighbourhood context (the "size" of new homes)
2. a lack of diversity of housing forms (*detached, duplex, coach house, townhouse*), including sizes, price points and liveable options for the community
3. an increasing use of hard landscaping, and a corresponding reduction in greenscapes, and
4. a lack of consideration for neighbours by builders and designers of new homes.

## Considerations and Constraints

In our discussions with residents and stakeholders, three topics were raised which we do not address in this report:

1. trees and tree removal for construction
2. construction-related disruptions (noise, parking, street damage, etc.), and
3. multi-family residences (other than suites and coach houses).

The NCWG chose not to specifically address these topics because the first, trees, was covered in depth by the Interim Tree Bylaw Working Group (with recommendations still being considered) and for the second, existing bylaws are presumed to adequately cover construction-related issues. Lastly, multi-family residences, currently, are not permitted in single-family zones and can only be built there following a re-zoning process; the NCWG believes this process is appropriate and should continue.

In addition, we took into consideration the following factors while making our recommendations to improve neighbourhood character:

- property values
- rights of property owners
- existing (and changing) streetscapes
- tastes and styles change, and cannot be legally regulated
- environmental concerns and the impact of climate change
- current municipal regulations (both planning- and engineering-related)
- pre-existing design guidelines and restrictive covenants on some neighbourhoods, and
- limitations imposed on municipalities by the (provincial) Local Government Act.

### **Market Influences**

Real estate, perhaps especially in West Vancouver, is heavily influenced by market forces. The value of our real estate has been lifted significantly in the recent past by the demand of offshore buyers and investors who have tended to build houses to maximize value without considering the impact on neighbours or neighbourhood character. Recent changes to tax and ownership rules, as well as limitations on foreign currency, have changed that market dynamic, resulting in an oversupply of large homes, which are as a result experiencing falling prices; the NCWG expects those changing market forces will help promote acceptance of our recommendations for slightly smaller homes.

The recent Covid-19 pandemic may also make seniors more determined than ever to stay in their homes for as long as possible. The NCWG believes this may help in the acceptance of our recommendations for easier permitting of coach houses – which offer alternatives for living that are attractive to seniors, including: income-assisting rentals, downsizing options and onsite caregiver accommodations.

### 3. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations that follow are grouped in six categories:

1. Reduce Actual Building Size
2. Encourage Suites & Coach Houses
3. Limit Visual Impact of Buildings As Seen From the Street
4. Encourage Landscaping
5. Simplify Process
6. Encourage Neighbour Consideration

Some of the recommendations refer to bylaw and regulation changes, some to adopted policies (i.e. OCP) and some refer to departmental process and procedures that relate to permitting.

In the same way that neighbourhood character is the sum of many inter-connected factors, the recommendations on the following pages address the inter-connected aspects of building regulations in West Vancouver and are designed to work together to achieve the goal of maintaining and improving neighbourhood character.

We are proposing a number of rule changes that should meet our objective to make large houses appear less imposing from the street. These include recommendations concerning Floor Area Ratios (FAR) (*See Appendix 2.0 for a discussion of FAR*), rooflines, setbacks, and visible basements.

Because landscaping is so important to the overall character of West Vancouver's residential neighbourhoods, we are proposing several recommendations to enhance landscaping and soften our built environment as it evolves.

We also have a series of proposals with the objective of encouraging owners and developers to subdivide larger lots, but only where reasonable to support neighbourhood character and fit with the prevailing lot sizes, for example to produce two smaller, in-context homes rather than one overly large one. We have recommendations which encourage renovations of older homes rather than demolition and replacement with larger new houses, to support environmental sustainability as well as maintaining neighbourhood character.

As much as we would like to encourage smaller, and smaller-appearing, new houses, another objective is to encourage livable secondary suites and coach houses, which can enhance neighbourhood character by encouraging demographic diversity (for example a mix of young families and seniors) and adaptability of residences over time.

To accomplish these apparently conflicting outcomes we recommend a reduction of Floor Area Ratios (FAR) in addition to FAR reallocation and bonuses to encourage a shift of the allowable buildable space on a lot from a larger single-family house to a house that includes a suite, or to a smaller house with an adjacent coach house.

In summary, reducing the FAR allows us to add incentives for coach houses and suites while maintaining neighbourhood character; we believe that maintaining neighbourhood character is the best way to protect both quality of life and property values in West Vancouver.

The proposed rules meet these objectives:

1. smaller above-grade main houses on all lots larger than 4,500 sq. ft., and
2. on all lots up to 16,000 sq. ft. the reduced FAR will result in the same or more above-grade buildable area on the lot if a coach house is included.

We are proposing no changes to site coverage, garage exemptions or accessory building exemptions; on the smaller lots, applicants will have to choose how best to build out their property.

In several instances we propose the creation of Best Practices handouts to illustrate the results we would like to encourage. Best Practices handouts can offer a means to fine-tune recommendations (such as different boulevard treatments unique to each neighbourhood) and to define municipal expectations when bylaws alone would not be appropriate or effective.

Our final group of recommendations is to encourage neighbourly discussions before new house designs are cast in stone, in the hope that small design considerations might make a new development more readily acceptable by neighbours.

Perhaps our most important recommendation is to raise the profile of Neighbourhood Character in all District processes.

## 4. RECOMMENDATIONS

### 1) INCLUDE NEIGHBOURHOOD CHARACTER CONSIDERATION IN MUNICIPAL POLICIES

Municipal policies and procedures should be updated to include consideration of neighbourhood character.

We recommend adding language to the District's OCP and review procedures so it is noted as an important consideration for any and all development in the District (*See Appendix 7.0 for more on Neighbourhood Character in the OCP*). Specifically add this clause to 2.1.8 of the OCP:

*c) Requiring all Development Permit applications, rezoning applications, and variance applications to include a section demonstrating how the proposed project respects or enhances existing neighbourhood character.*

The goal of this recommendation is that the impact of any development, whether as-of-right or through a variance, rezoning or development permit, should consider and answer the question "how will this development maintain or enhance neighbourhood character?"

### 2) REDUCE ACTUAL BUILDING SIZE by reducing FAR from .35 to .30

The substantial disparity in the apparent size of some new houses compared to their neighbours was a common theme among a large portion of respondents to our surveys as well as resident feedback from prior studies.

The allowed square footage of single family homes in West Vancouver is regulated by a Floor Area Ratio (FAR), which is the area of the house divided by the area of the lot.

The initial introduction of FAR in West Vancouver in the early 1980s was at 0.45 of the lot area.

This allowable buildable area was changed in the late 1980s to 0.35 **plus buried basement** (*See Appendix 2.2 for clarification of "basement" and "below grade basement" definitions.*) along with a number of other "bulk" modifications. An analysis of recent real estate ads showed that when including exempt basement area, the actual gross floor area for many new homes built in recent years is over .50 times the lot area, many approaching .60.

Where current regulations for most West Vancouver residential zones permit a FAR of .35 plus that portion of the basement which is buried, a 10,000 sq. ft. lot, for example, can have a 3,500 sq. ft. house plus the buried part of the basement.

Smaller lots, mostly in Horseshoe Bay and the RS5 zone in lower Ambleside and eastern Dundarave, which are the most urban neighbourhoods of the District, have different FAR rules. Building lots of less than 7,285 sq. ft. permit a house which is the smaller of .50 FAR or 2,550 sq. ft. So for example a 6,000 sq. ft. lot could have a 2,550 sq. ft. house, plus the buried part of the basement. (*See Appendix 3 for examples of house sizes.*)

The Working Group's recommendations are designed to limit the apparent above-grade, visible bulk of houses and more accurately meet the intent of previous regulations which was to:

- scale house square footage proportional to lot size; larger lots are allowed to have larger homes
- relate the allowable square footage to what could be seen above grade (on the theory that if you cannot see it, it does not increase bulk), and
- encourage some of the allowable square footage to be put in part of the basement level to reduce the size of the two storeys above.

NOTE that encouraging basements has the desired effect of reducing the visible, above-ground bulk of buildings, but comes with tradeoffs in that it may lead to more earth moving and possibly more blasting (although the working group is satisfied that the current regulations regarding blasting are adequate).

## Objectives

- Reduce the overall size of new houses and encourage smaller above-ground portions to reduce visible bulk.
- Maintain the incentive to encourage part of allowable FAR square footage to be built in the basement, so that the two very visible storeys above are moderately reduced.
- Compensate for the above-ground size reduction with a new bonus for building a secondary suite or coach house (*See Recommendations 2 a) and 2 b).*)

## Recommendation

*Note that the size limitation proposed by this recommendation is partially offset by the buildable area bonus proposals in the following section "Suites & Coach Houses."*

### **Reduce FAR (Floor Area Ratio) from .35 to .30 \***

The Floor Area Ratio signifies the above-grade buildable area. On lots larger than 7,285\*\* sq. ft., limit the floor area of new houses to .30 FAR (reduced from .35) **plus** the portion of the basement that is below grade.

On lots between 4,500 sq. ft. and 7,285 sq. ft., limit the buildable area of houses to a fixed 2,200 sq. ft. (reduced from 2,550) **plus** buried basement.

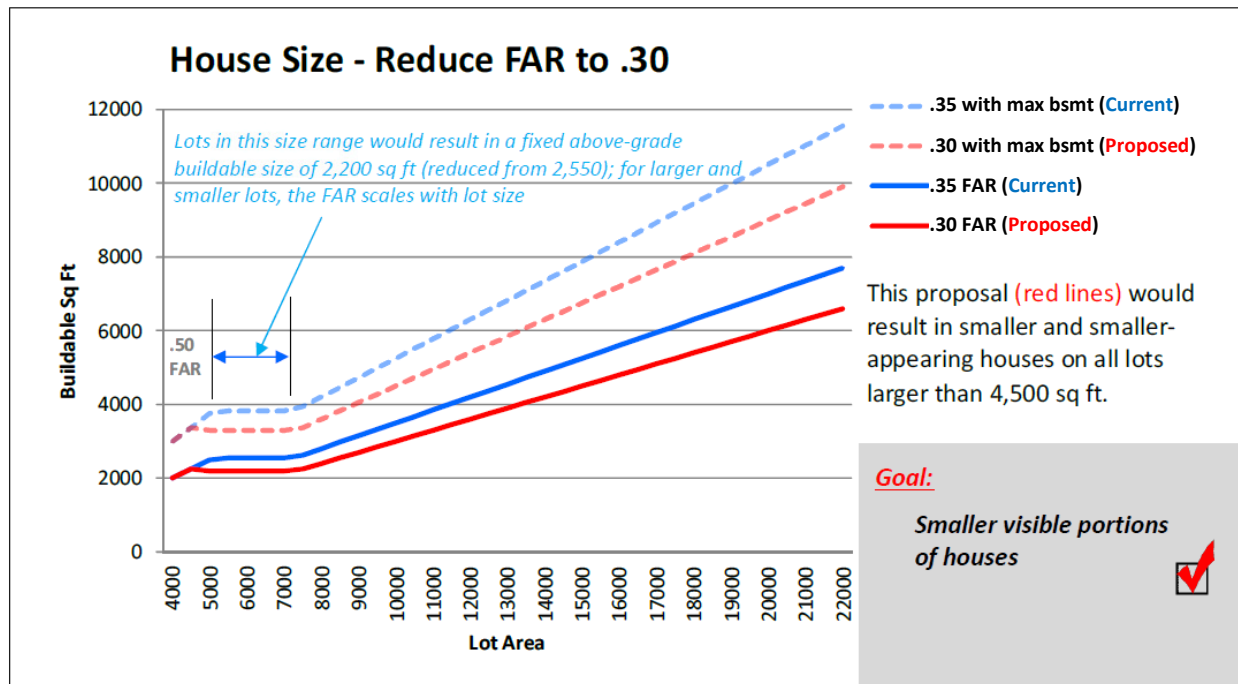
On lots smaller than 4,500 sq. ft. (only 130 such lots) no change to the FAR (remains at .50) **plus** buried basement.

- A house such as the one in Example 1 (see Appendix, 3.0) on a 12,000 sq. ft. lot would be reduced in size from a total of 6,300 sq. ft. (with 4,200 sq. ft. above grade) to a total of 5,400 sq. ft. (with 3,600 sq. ft. above grade).
- The house in Example 2 (see Appendix, 3.0), on a 9,180 sq. ft. lot, would be reduced in size from a total of 5,400 sq. ft. (with 3,212 above grade) to about 4,950 sq. ft. (with 2,754 above grade).
- \*Note that the exact values may change slightly in the final bylaws to more smoothly accommodate the transition from Floor Area Ratio to fixed buildable area. (See Appendix 11.0 for a more detailed look at the math behind the numbers.)

*\* (See Appendix 4.0 for an alternative recommendation.)*

*\*\* (See Appendix 11 for the logic behind the numbers.)*

The graph below compares the overall effect of the reduced FAR recommendation for building lots of different sizes.



*Graph does not include exemptions for garages or accessory buildings.*

**Notes:**

- In the graph, “max bsmt” assumes a typical home of two storeys above a basement, with approximately equal floor plates on each level. It is possible to have a larger basement if the main floor plate is larger than the top floor, and/or the garage is attached to the house and the basement extends below the garage as well as below the main floor plate.
- This recommendation would not change the existing regulations for site coverage, however staff may wish to adjust site coverage regulations to maintain proportion to the FAR.
- This recommendation would not change the existing regulations regarding FAR exemptions for accessory buildings or enclosed parking (whether an in-house or a separate garage), however the Working Group believes it may be worth considering a reduction in the garage exemption to 220 sq. ft. (from 440) to reduce bulk in houses where the garage is integrated into the house.



### 3) ENCOURAGE SUITES AND COACH HOUSES

One goal of the Working Group is to encourage livable suites and coach houses on properties suitable for them, in such a way as to maintain neighbourhood character (i.e. moderate density and an overall detached house feel to the streetscape). We also wish to compensate for reducing the buildable FAR as recommended above by encouraging the buildable area on a lot to include a coach house and/or suite. Note that in this report, the term “Coach House” is meant to include “Laneway House” and “detached secondary suite.”

The tool we have chosen to accomplish both the above goals is to add an incentive bonus of additional buildable area on a lot if a suite or coach house is included. The bonus is meant as an incentive, and does not suggest the size of the suite or coach house that is permitted.

The result should be, assuming a builder decides to add a coach house, that the total buildable square footage on most lots will be about the same, but we will see a smaller main house with a coach house behind. This would support our goals of diversity and smaller houses with minimal effect on overall value.

And if a builder chooses to add a secondary suite in the main house, the house may overall be about the same size as we are seeing now (although smaller above-grade because the suite bonus will only apply to suites built in the basement level) but the community will have the benefit of a secondary suite in the house.

The Working Group believes that coach houses should be encouraged in the urban areas (RS5 zones) even though the lots there are typically smaller than elsewhere in the District. Issues of site coverage and size may be different for these smaller lots, but perhaps more flexibility on parking requirements could help, since transit and shopping are closer to hand. A separate District initiative to study coach houses is underway and a Local Area Plan is coming for the area, both of which will provide an opportunity for more public input on this subject.

#### Objectives

- Incentivize legal secondary suites in new-build houses:
  - We recognize that some suites may not be used initially as rentals but as the market demand changes over time they will become part of the housing stock.
- Encourage coach houses for both new builds and existing housing stock:
  - Encourage **new builds** to put some of their square footage into a coach house, thereby reducing the main house size without diminishing value.
  - Encourage retention of **existing housing** stock by permitting the addition of coach houses on older properties that may be close to allowable FAR.
- Maintain a significant size distinction between the main house and its coach house.
- Streamline the permitting process for coach houses.

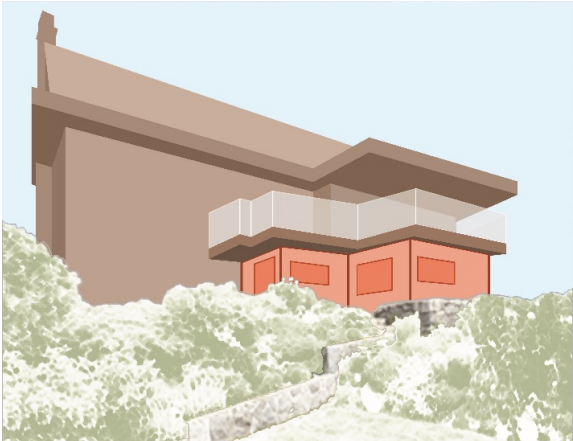
The mechanism we have chosen to incent suites and coach houses is to propose a bonus to the buildable area on a lot. Our recommendations as outlined below are for bonuses of a fixed size. We realize this approach leads to the potential for inequity as it is applied to the range of lot sizes available in West Vancouver but it has the advantage of simplicity, recognizes that slightly more density on smaller, more urban lots is appropriate, and that the desired size of both suites and coach houses is more related to their use than to the size of the lot or house they are part of.

Bylaw drafters may determine that it is more appropriate to scale the bonuses with lot size similar to the way FAR scales (ie. a suite bonus that increases FAR from .30 to .345) and the NCWG would not be averse to that approach as long as it meets the overall goal of reducing visible house size while incenting secondary suites, whether attached or detached.

**Recommendations**

**a) Provide a 500 sq. ft. FAR bonus for a suite**

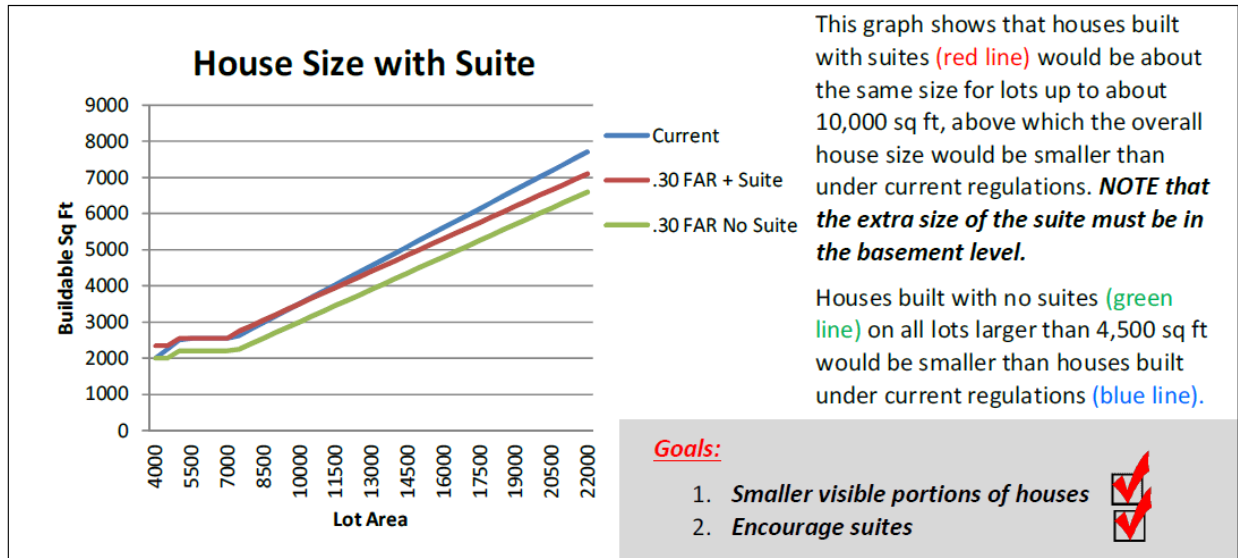
If a legal suite is built into a new home, the total allowable buildable area for the lot should be increased by 500 sq. ft. for lots larger than 7,285 sq. ft.; for lots smaller than 7,285 sq. ft. the incentive bonus should be 350 sq. ft. (and the bylaw writers may wish to consider scaling the bonus proportionately). This bonus square footage would go in the basement level, and because it is a bonus to the FAR for the lot, would not have to be buried below grade and could extend beyond the main floor plate. The maximum size of a suite should remain at the current 968 sq. ft. and all other regulations and guidelines for suites should remain in force.



In this house, the portion of the lowest level below the deck would normally be counted in the FAR of the house both because it is an unburied part of the basement level and because it extends beyond the building above footprint. Under this recommendation, if that part of the house was part of a legal suite, up to 500 sq. ft. could be excluded (bonused) from the FAR calculation.

So the suite bonus buildable area, even though it must be on the basement level, does not have to be buried, or covered by the main floor above. This provides the suite with the opportunity for more natural light to improve the livability of basement suites.

This graph shows the overall effect of the suite bonus when combined with the FAR reduction as proposed in Recommendation 1 above.

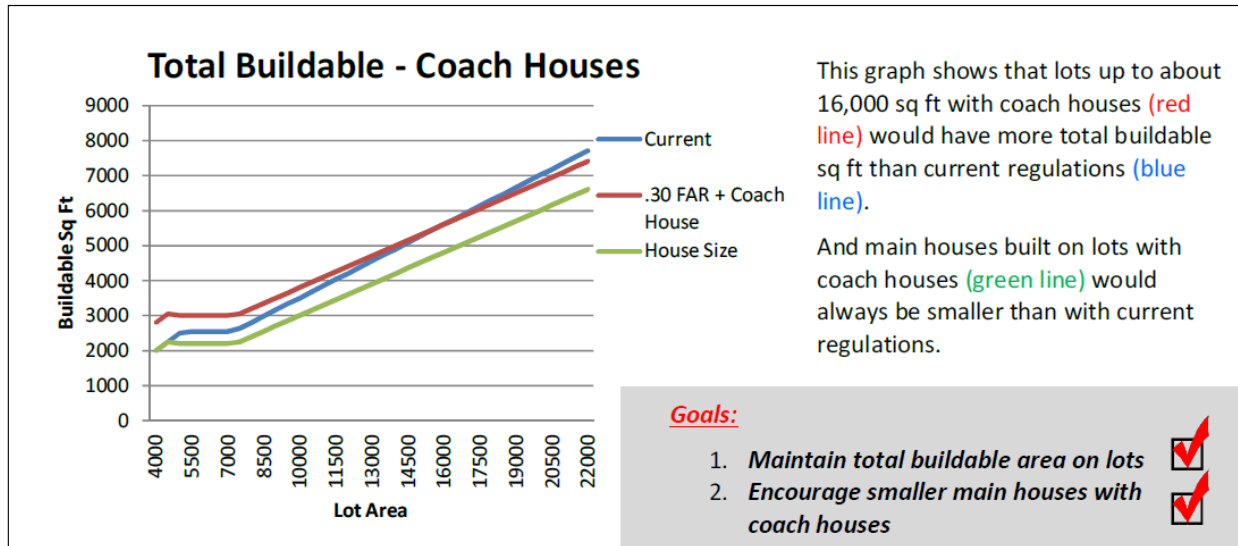


Graph does not include exemptions for buried basements, garages or accessory buildings.

**b) Provide a 800 sq. ft. FAR bonus for a coach house**

If a coach house is built on a lot the allowable buildable area on that lot should be increased by 800 sq. ft. with all such increased square footage or FAR allowance restricted to the coach house (no increase in buildable area of the main house size). To maintain a clear distinction from the main house, the maximum size of a coach house should be the larger of 1,200 sq. ft. or 0.10 of the lot area to a maximum of 1,600 sq. ft. All other rules and guidelines regarding coach houses (setbacks, finishes, total lot coverage, etc.) as they evolve should remain in force. The Working Group recognizes that staff is working on revised guidelines for coach houses and these recommendations could change and be adjusted to meet future guidelines

This graph shows the overall effect of the coach house bonus when combined with the FAR reduction as proposed in Recommendation 1 above.



### Bonusing Recommendations Limitations and Conditions

1. Only one bonus for a secondary suite (either the 500/350 sq. ft. for an in-house secondary suite or 800 sq. ft. for a coach house) should be permitted per property, although both a suite and a coach house should be permitted on a single property if the lot is large enough to meet the site coverage and non-bonused FAR requirements.
2. If a coach house larger than 800 sq. ft. is built, the additional area over 800 sq. ft. must come from that allocated to the main house (i.e. a reduction of FAR buildable area by an equal amount); similarly if a suite larger than 500/350 sq. ft. is built, the excess over the bonused amount must come from the buildable area of the house.
3. None of these recommendations should change the existing regulations regarding garage and accessory building FAR exemptions or overall site coverage. However, it may be prudent to limit the combination of accessory building exemptions and coach house bonuses on lots below a certain size, perhaps 12,000 sq. ft. In addition, it may be warranted to reduce the accessory building exemption of 220 sq. ft. if a coach house is built on a smaller lot.
4. A coach house bonus smaller than 800 sq. ft. might be more appropriate for lots smaller than 5,000 sq. ft.
5. This “bonus” of 800 sq. ft. for a coach house should apply to existing homes as well as to new builds. Where a coach house is added to a property with an existing house, the total allowable built square footage of the house and coach house together should be calculated as .30 of the lot area + 800 sq. ft. + buried basement (not 800 sq. ft. in addition to the current house size) and all other regulations for lot coverage, parking, etc. must be honoured.

## **Recommendations (cont'd):**

### **c) Streamline the permitting process for duplex and coach house applications**

The Working Group notes that a separate study is underway to make recommendations regarding duplexes and coach houses.

1. Coach houses are encouraged in this report because they are seen to enhance neighbourhood character.
2. The recommendations addressing coach houses are primarily designed to ensure their fit within the neighbourhood context.
3. Duplexes are not addressed in this report, as they require a rezoning process for inclusion in single family neighbourhoods and the Working Group agrees with this approach.
4. When considering a Development Permit for a duplex, duplexes that present to the street as detached houses would be best to maintain neighbourhood character (for example front/rear or up/down duplexes may present more like detached houses than the more typical side/side units in the current duplex zones).

### **d) Relax some requirements and restrictions on coach houses**

1. Current rules for a coach house over a garage require it to be smaller than the garage, complicating structural aspects. While this rule could be relaxed, the views of neighbours should be considered (perhaps the Development Permit process could be waived for one-storey coach houses, but retained for two-storey ones).
2. Similarly, a Development Permit should be required for a coach house with a basement, providing an additional layer of consideration and oversight for projects with more intensive use of the lot; alternatively, coach house basements should be included in FAR and maximum size calculations.
3. The parking requirement for coach houses could be eased when in proximity to transit without significantly compromising neighbourhood character; allow coach house parking within setbacks, especially on smaller lots.
4. It may be desirable to expand title options for coach houses (i.e. allow stratification/subdivision of coach houses, and bare-land strata). However the NCWG is concerned that this may have the unintended consequence of permitting subdivision of lots that would otherwise be too small; this may be better handled by the subdivision rules, more investigation is required.

## 4) LIMIT VISUAL IMPACT OF BUILDINGS SEEN FROM THE STREET

The street face of some houses can appear plain and/or imposing. To address this concern, the current Highest Building Face (HBF) regulations are designed to force articulation\* (architectural detail/interest) on the tallest face of a house, including some setback of the upper floor from the main floor. While the Working Group notes that the HBF is not always the face visible from the street, our recommendations focus on the HBF when visible from the street.

It is possible under current regulations to have a basement which is fully exposed to the street, magnifying the apparent size of houses and giving the appearance of a three-storey house, which is technically not permitted. (Maintaining natural light and providing easy access for livable basement suites are factors that must be considered when addressing this issue.)

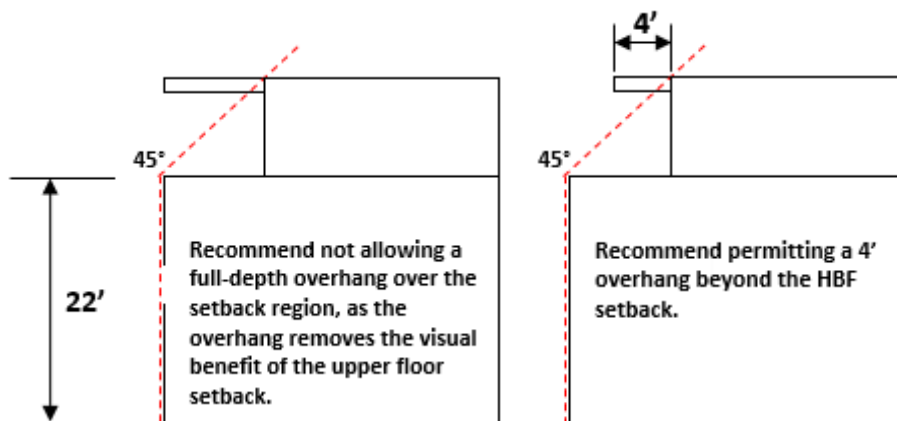
### Recommendation Objectives

- The face of the house that presents to the street should be articulated (not a single flat plane).
- Houses should not present to the street as a full three storeys.

### Recommendations

a) **Refine the Highest Building Face (HBF) Regulations.** The HBF rules are designed to force articulation of the highest building face, to provide architectural interest and make the building less imposing. Above 22 feet in height, at least 2/3 of the width of the building must be set back so it falls within a 45 degree plane, as shown in the diagram below.

- i. **When the HBF faces the street, overhangs beyond the HBF setback area should be limited to a maximum of 4'.** (See Appendix 5.0 for details on Highest Building Face)



When an overhang extends the full distance to the plane of the wall below, the articulation value of the setback is lost.

Note that this recommendation only applies to the HBF calculation and is not intended to otherwise limit overhang size.

\* In architecture, **articulation** refers to the fragmentation of form and surface in order to break large uninteresting or oppressive mass into more human size components. For example, a flat facade could be articulated with the use of indents and shadow.

- ii. When the highest building face is on the street side (i.e. the house is on the high side of the street, see Picture A below) a new regulation is recommended to **ensure that the basement storey is shielded from the street view** with permanent landscaping and/or design to discourage the full three-storey look of houses from the street (i.e. the apparent bulk of the building will be reduced)

If facing the street, exposure of the basement should be no more than 24 feet of its horizontal width or half of its vertical height. The basement may be hidden by a permanent landscaped berm or landscaped wall. It would be permitted to have a patio area in front of the basement face, provided the face itself is screened from the street.



*This house presents as 3 full storeys; we recommend this should not be permitted.*

Picture A



*For houses like this one, on the high side of the street with a garage integrated into the front basement level, the maximum recommended 24 feet of the horizontal width of the basement that is exposed to the street will allow vehicle access to the garage.*

Picture B

- iii. **The 1/3 exclusions to the 45 degree plane setback requirements for HBF should be contiguous** so the resulting setbacks will appear substantial. Most of the top floor of this home is set back from the lower floor, providing more architectural interest, as intended by the HBF rules. Per the rules, about 1/3 of the width of the upper floor is excluded from the setback requirement, (the orange section on the left in this case) adding to the visual interest.



*If the 1/3 exclusion is split into more than one piece of the upper floor (as is currently permitted) much of the positive effect of the regulation can be lost. For example, if the orange 1/3 exclusion was divided into 3 separated sections of 1/9 each, the sections would not have the same visual weight and the result would be less effective.*

- iv. **Provide a Best Practices guideline** illustrating good examples of articulation on the street face of two-storey houses in an effort to discourage large, flat, blank two-storey facades.

- b) **Reduce front yard setback by 10' if garage is oriented 90° from street** (setback would be reduced to 20' on most lots from the current 30'; to 15' on RS5 lots, down from 25'). This is meant to encourage fewer garage doors exposed to the street view (and will make it easier to have basements with more natural light). This relaxation of setback is only available on lots where street-entry driveways are permitted (i.e. lots without lane access), and should only apply to the garage itself. An uncovered deck should be permitted over the garage within the 10' relaxed setback area but any portion of the house built above the garage must conform to the unadjusted setback.



*The garage entry for this home is to the left, the garage door is hidden from the street.*



**c) Include over-height covered decks in FAR calculations**

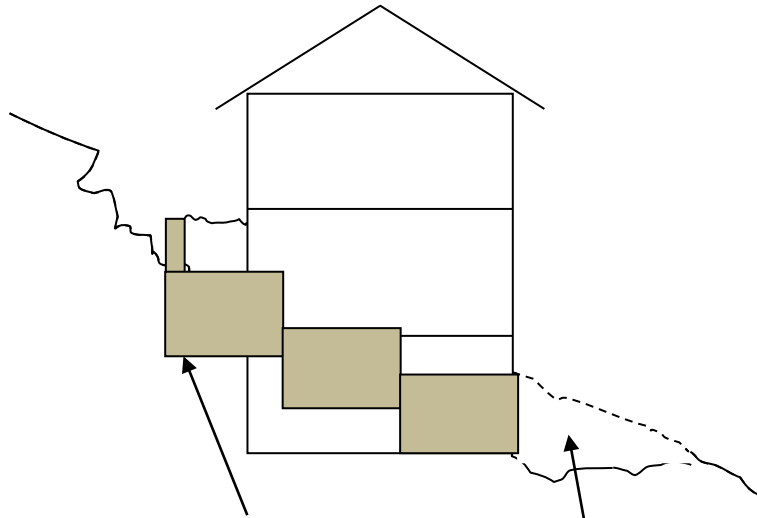
- i. Include in FAR calculations all covered deck areas (except the four feet closest to the building) regardless of the height of the roof above the deck. (Current regulations have this intent, but apparently only count second floor covered decks.)
- ii. For cases where the roof overhang is greater than 14.4' above the ground or main floor height, the FAR calculated below it should be doubled (to remain consistent with the handling of interior over-height spaces).



*Current regulations do not count the area below this roof deck as floor area because the roof height over the deck is more than one storey; if it was a second floor deck all of it would be counted except the 4' strip closest to the building face.*

d) **Eliminate manipulation of grade with planters** (which, under current regulations can be used to maximize building height and exposed building height) by:

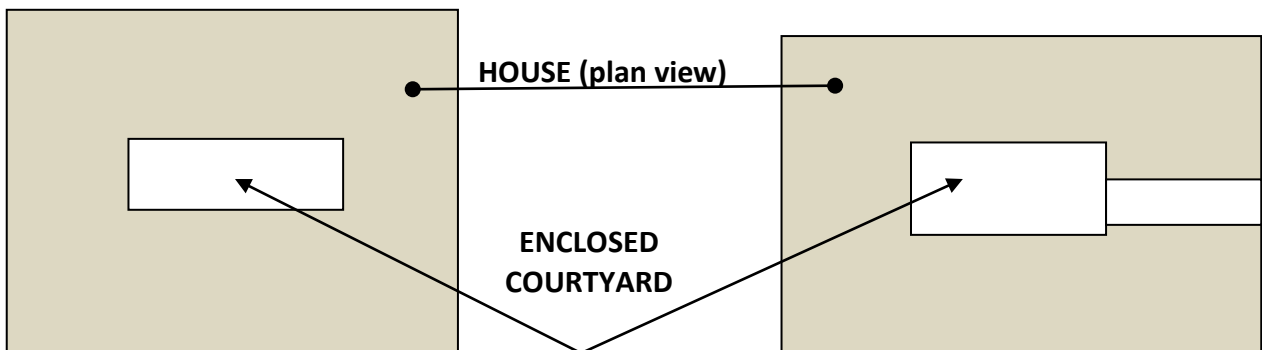
- i. ensuring only walls and slopes that are reasonably considered permanent are included in the calculation of finished grade, and
- ii. Increasing the minimum required planter dimension extending out from the building face in order for them to count as “grade.”



*Adding planters here and removing dirt here to maintain “average grade” makes the house look larger and can artificially increase the basement FAR exemption.*

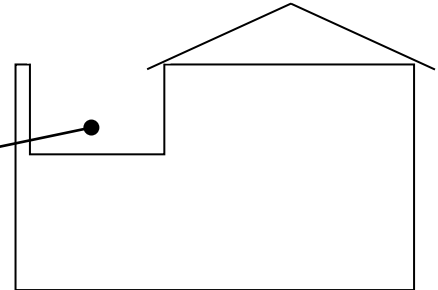
e) **Include all semi-enclosed spaces in FAR calculations** when they are integral to the interior of a house. *(To more accurately reflect the apparent **visible size of homes with interior unroofed courtyard space**; see diagram below.) Spaces such as these that would be included in FAR if they had a roof should not be excluded simply because they are unroofed.* Note that this change does not restrict the use of interior courtyards or privacy walls, it merely ensures their space is counted in FAR since from the outside it appears as part of the house volume.

- i. Interior Courtyards



- ii. Privacy Walls: Limit the height of exterior walls, typically at the second level of the house, that add to apparent building bulk. (*To more accurately reflect the apparent visible size of homes with privacy walls.*) For any such wall that is higher than required by safety codes, the enclosed space should be counted in FAR.

*This effectively enclosed area is currently not counted in FAR*

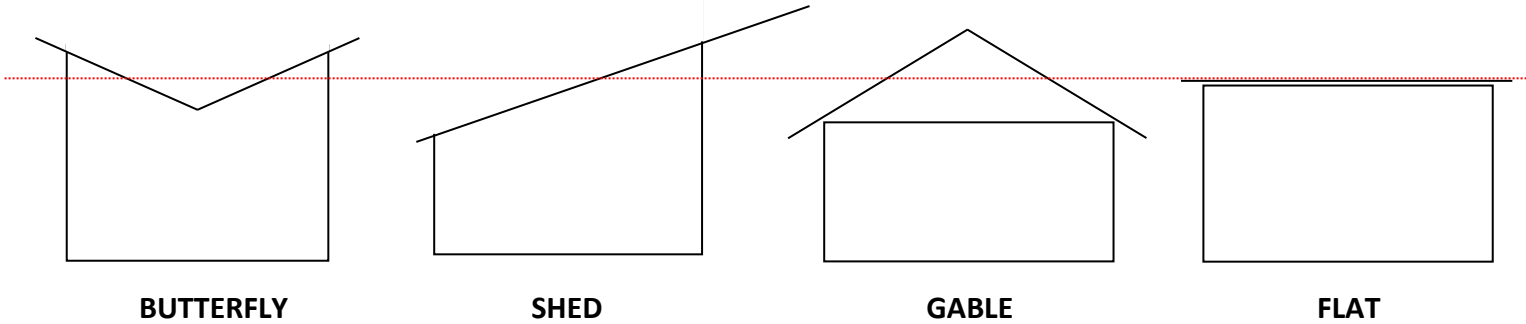


- e. **Limit the length and height of unarticulated (blank) side walls** (*To limit the size of imposing blank walls facing neighbours*); consider requiring a minimum window area in side walls.

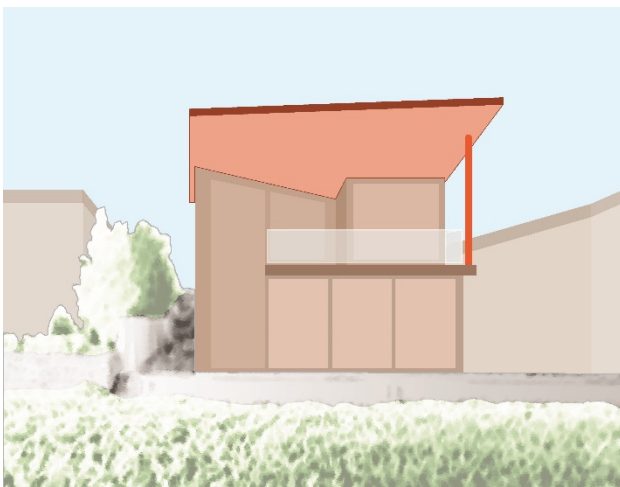


- f) **Limit the height of butterfly and shed roofs to match flat roofs**, particularly those facing neighbours, to the height of an equivalent flat roof. *(To lessen the visual impact of the higher walls that result from these roof styles.)*

**CURRENT RULES:**



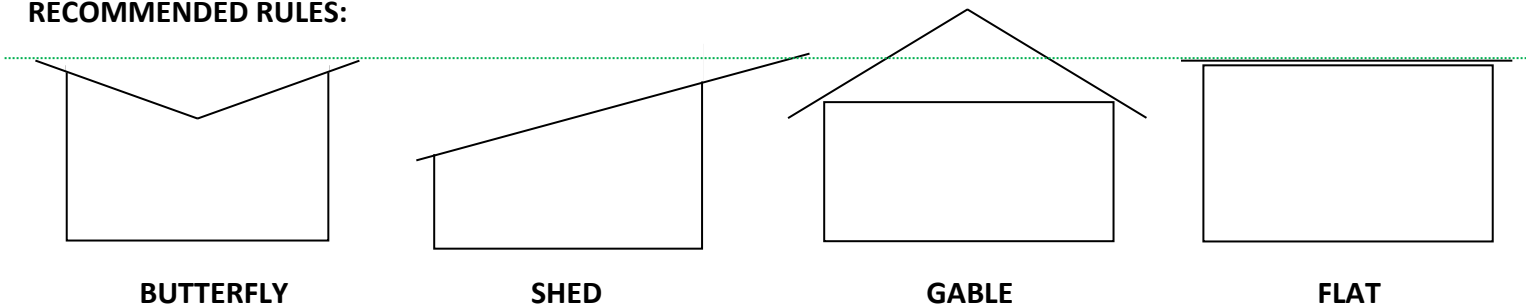
For sloped roofs, current regulations measure the roof height to a mid-point, as shown by the **red line**.



*Shed roofs, even on a smaller house, can dominate their neighbours.*

We recommend that butterfly and shed roofs should be measured to their highest point (**green line**.)

**RECOMMENDED RULES:**



## 5) ENCOURAGE LANDSCAPING

Landscaping and drainage are important components of neighbourhood character in West Vancouver; the District has a well-deserved reputation as a “visibly green” municipality.

Landscaping can mask and soften the built forms that make up our housing stock, and help provide a cohesive streetscape by visually linking the boulevards on a block. We would like to encourage significant and well-designed landscaping, including on the boulevards where practical.

(A boulevard is the area between the paved road surface and the homeowner’s property line. Boulevards are owned by the District of West Vancouver but homeowners have responsibility for their care and maintenance. While landscaping by the homeowner is encouraged, the Boulevard Bylaw dictates what can and cannot be done on boulevards.)

Drainage is particularly important in our community because of the mountainside terrain and the amount of rain we receive. Bylaws require property owners to provide proper drainage so as to not impact their downhill neighbours. Both soft and hard landscaping are factors that affect drainage as well as appearance. Many neighbourhoods in West Vancouver have open ditches for drainage, which contribute to the country lane feel while enhancing the environment by slowing and filtering ground water as it makes its way to the ocean.

### Objectives

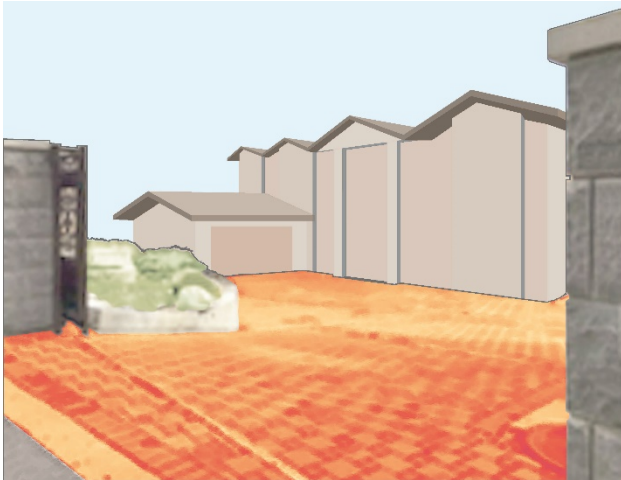
- Encourage a greener streetscape, with green landscaping used to partially screen houses, walls and fences from the street.
- Encourage boulevard designs that tie in to the lot and the neighbours.
- Encourage responsible site drainage.
- Discourage excessive hard surfaces visible from the street.

### Recommendations

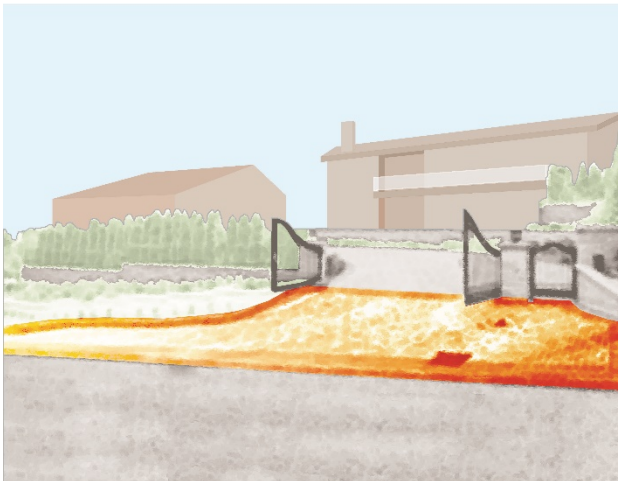
- a) Include boulevards in the landscape plan** which is required for a building permit. Including the boulevard as well as the lot itself, showing how the boulevard would visually connect the public and private spaces and tie into the adjacent streetscape will encourage developers to consider neighbourhood character. If the boulevard is not planned to change, the landscape plan should state “no boulevard changes planned” and a “before” picture should be included so that can be confirmed on completion.
- b) Cap the cost of the bond** required with a landscape plan at a maximum of \$25,000 so it does not discourage elaborate landscaping (a bond as a percentage of the cost of the landscaping can incent low-cost plans).
- c) Provide a Best Practices handout for boulevard landscaping.**

**d) Limit hard surfaces** visible from the street (even if they are permeable concrete pavers)

- i. Apply current front yard ground cover regulations (a maximum of 50% covered by hard surfaces) to all street frontages, including corner/flanking lots.
- ii. Include concrete pavers in the definition of hard surfaces.
- iii. In cases where more than 50% of the front yard can be hard surfaces (to allow for access and/or turning zones) the amount over 50% should be a softer/greener form of hard material, such as turf blocks.

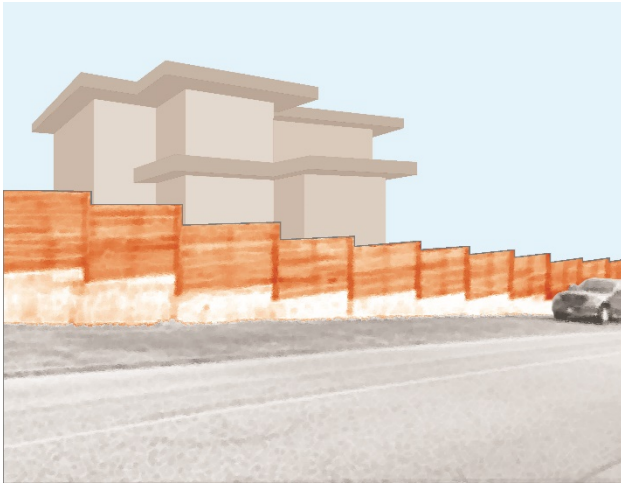


- iv. Boulevard parking should not appear as an extension of the property or the property's driveway.



- e) **Fine tune boulevard parking space rules:** in cases where boulevard parking is permitted, it should be offset by additional vegetation designed to tie into and/or soften the streetscape.

- f) **Limit the maximum height of a fence** or a combined fence and retaining wall as seen from the visible street side to six feet unless overruled by safety or code requirements.

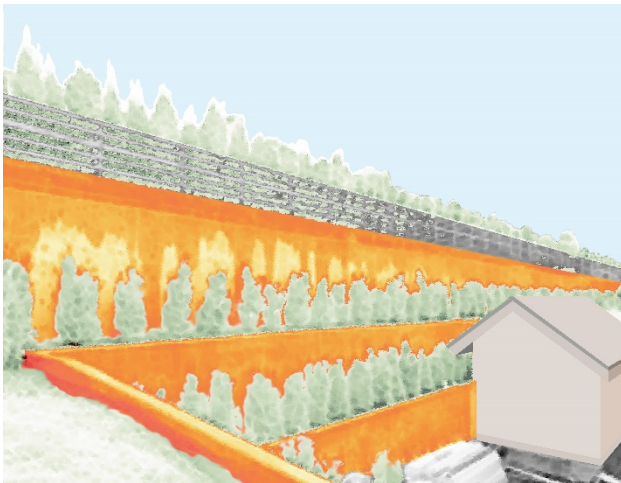


- g) **Require softening of fences and retaining walls with landscaping** on the street face of properties with green landscaping; provide a “Best Practices” handout.

- h) **Provide a Best Practices handout for retaining wall treatments;** encourage the use of natural rock walls.

- i) **Limit extreme grade modifications through regulation:**

- i. encourage houses to follow the natural grade, and
- ii. limit grade modifications by excessive removal or importing of soil; possibly limit the amount of soil that can be added or removed from a lot; possibly limit grade changes to adjacent lots.



Significant grade modifications to create a flat lot from a natural hillside should be discouraged; better for character and for the environment to design a home that follows the natural contours.

- j) **Provide a Best Practices drainage handout.**

## 6) SIMPLIFY PROCESS

In some cases existing District bylaws appear to conflict with “maintaining and enhancing neighbourhood character.” The recommendations in this section are designed to help align regulations that have accumulated over many years with today’s sensibilities, with the expected benefits in italics.

Appendix 6 has a more in-depth discussion of each recommendation.

### Recommendations

- a) **Simplify subdivision of appropriately-sized lots** (where subdivision is more likely to support the neighbourhood context than a single out-sized home) *to encourage two smaller homes instead of one very large home.*
  - i. Reduce subdivision costs by removing Community Amenity Contribution (CAC) payments for single-lot subdivisions in established single-family-detached zones (CACs require an applicant for subdivision which requires rezoning to pay 75% of the value of the theoretical lift in value that results from the subdivision). *(See Appendix 6.1)*
  - ii. Reduce the minimum lot size (width and area) in all RS zones 5% to enable the Approving Officer to approve subdivision of large lots that are currently just below the threshold for subdivision in that zone *to encourage subdivision of large lots to a size still in keeping with neighbourhood character.* *(See Appendix 6.2)*
  - iii. Allow greater diversity of lots when considering sub-division (panhandles, corner/flanking lots, zero-lot-line duplexes.) *(See Appendix 6.3)*
- b) **Limit the maximum buildable sq. ft. for each RS zone** to 150% of the FAR of the target minimum lot size in the zone *(this is a similar size limit as exists for consolidated lots; would limit house size on the approximately 15% of lots in West Vancouver that are between 150% and 200% of target lot size; done in other municipalities).* *(See Appendix 6.4)*
- c) **Allow flexibility of front-yard setback where appropriate.** Create a simplified variance process for approval of modified front yard setbacks based on adjoining houses when approved by the neighbours. *(So in an established neighbourhood where the front yard setbacks have been changed and legal-non-conforming older houses are likely to stay, a new home could be sited to match the existing homes; significant setback differences in immediate neighbours can be very disruptive to neighbourhood character.)* *(See Appendix 6.5)*
- d) **Simplify and reduce permitting costs for renovations** *to encourage renovations rather than demolitions; to help maintain neighbourhood character, view lines, and the environment.*



- i. Relax the threshold for engineering utility upgrades (perhaps trigger on increasing the number of bathrooms or bedrooms rather than triggering at a renovation cost of \$100K).
  - ii. Relax regulations that complicate and add cost to simple renovations (such as for example, where updated bylaws regarding setbacks make a once-legal home now non-conforming, see 5c above).
- e) Remove the penalty to basement FAR exemption for having an exterior stair, path or door access, up to 3 feet wide, to the basement.** *(Simplifies calculations, enhances livability of basement suites; no adverse size implications.) (See Appendix 6.6)*
- f) Deter basement exemption gaming.** When calculating basement square footage size for the purposes of determining the basement exemption, the basement floor grade for FAR calculation purposes should be the higher of the actual basement floor or 9 feet below the main floor level of the home. This change is intended to deter falsely increasing the size of the basement exemption (and as a result allowing larger houses) by digging the basement floor deeper. *(See Appendix 2.2)*
- g) Investigate Development Permits:** Based on feedback from NCWG public engagement and from stakeholder groups we recommend staff investigate adding a requirement for a “Form & Character” Development Permit for:
- i. FAR between .30 and .35 (because we have seen examples of houses at .35 FAR that due to good design, good landscaping, sensitivity to neighbours and neighbourhood context are perfectly acceptable).
  - ii. Any house over 10,000 sq ft, regardless of lot size and FAR (because houses of this size can have a potentially large impact on any neighbourhood and could benefit from extra attention to design and context).

The Development Permit process would provide an extra level of review for larger houses such as these. We believe this may be accomplished using the “intensive residential” provisions of the Local Government Act and may require a clear definition of the specific conditions that would be required for approval.

## 7) NEIGHBOUR CONSIDERATION

### Objectives:

- Raise awareness of neighbourhood character and neighbour impacts on any new development.
- Encourage applicants and designers to consider the neighbours and neighbourhood character from the beginning of their planning.
- Ensure applicants are aware of Best Practices for character, boulevards, landscaping, heritage, etc. by producing handouts.
- Alert neighbours that construction is being considered, early enough in the process that they may have a chance to influence it (i.e. before permits and plans are cast in stone).

### Discussion:

Often, the first time neighbours hear of proposed construction coming next to them is when the construction sign goes up—after the plans have been finalized and approved, contractors are lined up and construction is imminent. At that point it is very difficult, expensive and time-consuming to have the applicant consider even the simplest change, even though it might have been technically easy for them to implement. We would like to encourage earlier conversations between residents and builders.

For major new developments that go to council for approval, applicants generally cite Official Community Plan (OCP) guidelines in their applications (riparian rights, housing diversity, etc.) to bolster their case. We believe that Neighbourhood Character should be at least equally valued and considered for all development.

### Recommendations

- a) Provide a Best Practices handout** that outlines our expectations as to consideration of impact on neighbours when planning and building a new home.
- b) Encourage discussions in the early stages of design** by creating a voluntary “pre-consultation” system for all permit and development applications so developers and builders will be encouraged to have a discussion with staff and get copies of the “Best Practices” handouts early in, rather than after, the planning process.
- c) Notify neighbours when a permit application is received** by posting a notice and/or sending a letter to neighbours when an application is received for a building permit, development permit or subdivision.

The Working Group realizes that this recommendation is fraught with potential problems, among them:

- If consulted, neighbours may feel they have a ‘veto’ over as-of-right construction next door, which is clearly not the case.
- Neighbours would visit the permit desk to see possibly incorrect and/or non-conforming plans which have not yet been reviewed or approved.

- This process could eat up a lot of staff time, and put staff in the untenable position of interpreting or defending plans which have not yet been assessed or approved; they might be forced or expected to arbitrate disputes between neighbours.

In spite of these problems the Working Group found this draft recommendation to be one of the most popular with reviewers in our engagement process. The opportunity to talk to a builder before their plans are cast in concrete is very important to the community.

**So we ask staff to seriously consider any possible way that such early communications could be encouraged in such a way as to satisfy an important community need without leading to inordinate staff time and work.**

- d) **Building permit applications should include a site plan showing the adjacent properties** so the proposed structure can be viewed in context with the neighbours regarding setbacks, etc. (can be from GIS, not necessarily a full survey)
- e) **Demolition permits issued only after building permit for the same lot** so lots planned for redevelopment are less likely to sit empty or be cleared and unattended while the design and permit phases are underway; may incent rental of the house.

## **8) MEMBERS OF THE NEIGHBOURHOOD CHARACTER WORKING GROUP**

### **Citizen Members:**

Russell Brink

Susan Chunick

Tom Dodd (Chair)

Louis Fourie

Herb Locke

Theodore Malapanis

Steve Nicholls

Nancy Smeal (Vice-Chair)

Patti Ulveland

### **Council Liaison:**

Councillor Peter Lambur

### **Staff Support:**

Courtney Miller

Maeve Bermingham

The NCWG met bi-weekly or weekly starting August 2018.