

Docket Item #12
TEXT AMENDMENT #2003-0005

Planning Commission Meeting
November 6, 2003

CASE: TEXT AMENDMENT #2003-0005
PUBLIC SCHOOL ZONING

ISSUE: Consideration of amendments to the Zoning Ordinance to allow for increases in height and FAR for public schools.

STAFF: Department of Planning and Zoning

STAFF RECOMMENDATION: Staff recommends that the Planning Commission recommend approval of the following text amendment:

ARTICLE VII: SUPPLEMENTAL REGULATIONS

Sec. 7-1200 **Zoning for Public Schools**

Notwithstanding any other provisions or regulations in this ordinance, public school buildings may be built, expanded or reconstructed to a size not to exceed a floor area ratio of .60 or a height of 60 feet, if a special use permit is approved.

DISCUSSION

Background

Staff is currently processing applications for the expansion of Minnie Howard and the complete reconstruction of T.C. Williams High School. Early on in that work, Alexandria City Public Schools (ACPS) staff discussed with the City the fact that neither the Minnie Howard nor the TC Williams proposals could be accomplished without a change in the zoning rules. City staff has considered alternative approaches and discussed them with ACPS staff and, as a result, City Council in May 2003 asked staff to consider revising the zoning text to permit both proposals to proceed.

History of Zoning Public Schools Zoning

With the comprehensive amendments to the zoning ordinance in 1992, the zoning for public schools was limited considerably by two major changes. First, all school land in residential areas was zoned for residential development, with the thought that if the school was ever closed, then the reuse of the site would be limited to residential development consistent with neighboring residential areas. Second, and most significantly, with the introduction of the Public Open Space (POS) zone, the land adjacent to school buildings, typically school fields, was remapped to the POS category. The combination of these two actions resulted in several schools becoming noncomplying structures because they exceeded the size permitted for houses in the residential zone applied to the site. Pursuant to section 12-102 of the zoning ordinance, noncomplying structures are not permitted to expand, even with a special use permit.

The attached chart lists each of the existing public school buildings in the city, with the land area, the zoning and the floor area ratio (FAR) for each one. Given the changes to zoning in 1992, the following schools became noncomplying because of FAR: T.C. Williams, Minnie Howard, John Adams, MacArthur, and Mount Vernon. If any of these schools seek to expand the floor area of the existing schools, as Minnie Howard and T.C. Williams are currently proposing, they will not be able to do so under existing zoning rules.

In addition to the FAR problem, the proposed building for T.C. Williams is taller than permitted by the height in the R20 zone otherwise applicable. We are not aware of any other school that exceeds the allowable zoning height.

Proposed Text Amendment

Each of the public schools are now located within a residential zone, and subject to the same size limitations that apply to houses in those zones. In order to accommodate the proposals for Minnie Howard and T.C. Williams, as well as future additions at other schools that may exceed the residential limitations, staff is recommending that the zoning ordinance include a general provision, that allows a greater FAR and greater height for public schools, regardless of the residential zone in which the school is located.

Although recommended as a general rule as part of the Supplemental Regulations of the zoning ordinance, the new language contains two safeguards.

First, there are size maximums included in the proposed text amendment. Staff is recommending that no public school be permitted that is larger than a .60 FAR or 60 feet in height. This limitation will allow buildings that are slightly larger than the lowest commercial zoning, but smaller than most commercial and some residential zoning. The city's residential zones allow FARs from .25 to 2.5. The commercial zones allow from .5 to 2.5 FAR. Therefore, the numbers, while allowing the currently proposed school expansions to occur, also represent a theoretically allowable size in relation to other potential zoning sizes.

Secondly, the greater size allowed by the new language will require that a special use permit be approved by City Council. Under this regulatory scheme, expanded schools that are limited to the size permitted in their designated residential zone will still be permitted, and no special use permit will be required. On the other hand, if an addition or expansion exceeds those size limitations, then a mechanism will exist by which the proposal may be properly reviewed on a case by case basis and, assuming the proposal is otherwise supportable, will be permitted with a special use permit. Staff believes that the SUP process will allow the city to make distinctions among school locations based on surrounding uses and zones, on locations on major roads, and on whether open space conditions adjacent to the site ameliorate potential building height and mass.

Under this approach, if a larger building is appropriate, then there is a mechanism to allow the larger building; if it is not appropriate, then the SUP process allows the City to reject the proposal. The proposed text amendment provides a mechanism and a process to make such decisions and does not require that the size of a school be dictated by residential zoning.

Minnie Howard Ninth Grade School

Anticipating this text amendment, the application for an addition for Minnie Howard includes a request for a special use permit to allow an increase in FAR. Prior to 1992, the entire Minnie Howard site was located in the R-12 zone, with an FAR limit to .30. In 1992, a large portion of the site, all of the land east of the school building, including the parking lot, was rezoned to POS. The Minnie Howard building, which has not changed in decades, became noncomplying as to FAR, and continues to be. The fields to the east, with the parking lot, became part of the POS zoning, created to apply to publically owned parks and recreation areas.

The schools are requesting a rezoning of the parking lot site, changing it from POS to R-12. In addition, this text amendment is being recommended, allowing an increase in FAR for public school buildings to up to .60 FAR. The R-12 zone now permits an FAR of .30. Assuming the rezoning requested is approved, then the amount of land involved in the school building site is seven acres or 305,316 square feet of land, and the proposed building is 167,494 square feet, for an FAR of .549.

The proposed height of the expanded Minnie Howard building is 38 feet, within the 40 feet height limit of the R-12 zone. See also staff’s discussion of surrounding uses, and context of neighboring zoning densities in staff reports REZ #2002 -0005 and DSUP #2002-0045.

Zoning Information for Minnie Howard School site

	Current	Proposed*
Total land area	12 acres	12 acres
R12	5.7 acres/248,893 sq.ft.	7 acres/ 305,316 sq.ft.
POS	6.3 acres	4.9 acres
Building floor area	123, 600 sf net	167,494 sf net
FAR	.50 (R-12 allows .30)	.549
height	33.5' (R-12 allows 40')	38'

* Proposed with rezoning and text amendment approval

T. C. Williams High School

The T.C. Williams High School is located in the R-20 zone. The building site is now a 19.8 acre parcel containing 862,488 square feet of land. The proposed new T.C. Williams building will be located on that parcel as well as on a portion of an adjacent schools parcel currently zoned POS. As part of its application for the new school, ACPS is requesting a rezoning of the portion of that POS parcel that is proposed to be occupied by part of the school building. In addition, this text amendment is necessary because the proposed building will exceed both the FAR(.25) and the height (40 feet) of the R-20 zone.

Assuming the rezoning requested is approved, then the amount of land involved in the school building site will be 23.6 acres or 1, 031,367 square feet of land, and the proposed new school will be 525,002 square feet of floor area, for an FAR of .51. The proposed height of the new T.C. Williams building is 53 feet. Both FAR and height exceed the existing limits in the R-20 zone.

Zoning Information on T.C. Williams High School Site

	Current	Proposed *
Total land area in school site	28.3 acres	28.3 acres
R20	19.8 acres/	23.7 acres/
POS	8.5 acres	4.62 acres
Building floor area	355,000 sf	547,000
FAR	.41(.25 allowed in R-20 zone)	.51
Height	34' (40' allowed in R-20)	53' (highest point)

* Proposed with rezoning and text amendment approval.

Conclusion

In both cases, the expansion of the Minnie Howard Ninth Grade Center, and the new T.C. Williams High School building, staff believes that it is appropriate to review the merits of the proposed building in the SUP review process. Those applications should not be foreclosed because of the zoning. Therefore, for those two schools and for any others in the future, staff recommends that the zoning ordinance be changed, allowing for larger school buildings than presently allowed in the residential zones, but requiring an SUP to ensure that the building is appropriate for its location.

RECOMMENDATION: Staff recommends approval of the proposed text amendment.

STAFF: Eileen Fogarty, Director, Planning and Zoning
Barbara Ross, Planning and Zoning

Attachment: Chart of zoning tabulation/FAR study