

TO: Planning Commission

FROM: Maeve Gould, AICP, Comprehensive Planner

RE: 2022 Comprehensive Plan Amendment – Preferred locations for high density student housing and housekeeping items

DATE: October 14, 2022

Overview

A 5-year update to the Comprehensive Plan was adopted in April 2021. As a follow up, an amendment to the plan is being considered to offer guidance on high density student housing as well as to include a small number of housekeeping items.

The 2022 Comprehensive Plan Amendment includes the following changes:

- Added text to the Land Use chapter regarding preferred locations for high density student housing and mixed use with student housing;
- A new map as part of the Land Use Map Series regarding preferred locations for high density student housing and mixed use with student housing;
- Housekeeping amendments including mapping issues and overlooked items from the adopted 2021 plan. These include minor amendments to the Transportation chapter, Land Use chapter, Housing chapter, and the Future Land Use Map.

The draft text and map amendments are attached. These changes are discussed by topic in this document.

High Density Student Housing

Background

Previous Blacksburg Comprehensive Plans touched on student housing, but did not provide direct policies around this topic. Older versions of the plan included information such as demographic and housing trends, University enrollment growth, and property maintenance, but did not convey policy direction about high density student housing.

The 2021 Comprehensive Plan began to address high density student housing in somewhat greater detail in the Land Use and Housing chapters. For example, the Land Use chapter discusses the need for the University to increase the amount of on-campus housing. This proposed 2022 Comprehensive Plan Amendment outlines a policy on high density student housing and mixed use with student housing. The Comprehensive Plan provides guidance on many important community issues, and as a college town this is a relevant topic.

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The text for the attached high density student housing related amendment discusses the 2019 Town Council Resolution that articulated a more definitive policy around student housing and student housing development pressure. Based on anticipated University growth, this resolution encouraged the redevelopment of older existing student housing at higher densities.

In the 2021 Comprehensive Plan Update, it was estimated that between 25,500 and 26,500 college students live within the Blacksburg Town limits. Virginia Tech total enrollment at the Blacksburg campus for undergraduates, graduate students, and professional students was 34,000. Approximately 2,400 new bedrooms of student-oriented housing opened in Fall 2022, including at developments such as The Union (formerly Sturbridge Square) and The Hub Phase 2 (formerly Terrace View). Once all of the bedrooms that have been approved by Town Council are built, the Town will have approximately 26,300 bedrooms of multifamily student housing. This number does not include single-family houses or units outside of Town limits. Based on this number and student enrollment, Town Council actions have adequately addressed the need for new student housing.

Proposed Text and Map

The high density student housing text and map provide guidance on the preferred locations for student-oriented housing. The high density student housing area on the map reflects areas where this type of housing has historically been located, and identifies areas that are most appropriate for more intense undergraduate housing now and in the future. This amendment is not intended to identify all areas of student housing, but to focus on purpose-built, high density student housing which is characterized by large building mass, structured parking, rentals by the bedroom, and student-oriented amenities. Additionally, this amendment does not affect existing zoning. Several studies and data show that there is a need for other types of housing in Blacksburg such as senior housing, workforce housing, and housing for young professionals. The designation of preferred locations for student housing should help allow for the development of these other housing types that are needed.

The Virginia Tech campus is the best location to meet the University's existing and future need for housing, particularly near academic buildings, student centers, and other campus hubs. The other locations designated on the map for high density student housing are areas within the Town that have existing infrastructure and access to services, such as transit as well as bicycle and pedestrian pathways to campus and downtown. As seen on the proposed Map E: Preferred Locations for High Density Student Housing and Mixed Use with Student Housing, the areas identified for high density student housing are the Virginia Tech campus, the Patrick Henry and University City Boulevard corridors, The Edge apartments and adjacent area, and the portion of Foxridge that has apartment-style buildings.

The attached draft text notes that when redevelopment in these areas occurs, attention should be given to interfaces with nearby neighborhoods and other areas such as the Historic District. Additionally, the text details proposed criteria that provide guidance for redevelopment in these areas. The redevelopment criteria include sheltered bicycle parking, meaningful open space, sustainable site design, and strong property management.

There are two areas on the proposed Map E that are designated as mixed use with student housing: Downtown Northwest and The Fork. These two areas were identified in studies completed by

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consulting firm Development Strategies, and are the only areas identified as suitable for mixed use with student housing. Redevelopment in these two areas should have functional commercial and retail uses on the ground floor with residential above, which can include student-oriented residential. The mixed use with student housing locations are compatible in these two areas because they are adjacent to campus as well as commercial areas.

As noted previously, this text addressing student housing is proposed to be added to the Land Use chapter, and the map is proposed to be added as part of the Land Use Map Series. The proposed text is intended to match the voice, style, and formatting of the Land Use chapter and should be used in conjunction with the overall Comprehensive Plan.

Housekeeping Items

The proposed Comprehensive Plan amendment also incorporates a small number of housekeeping items. These are mapping issues or overlooked items that were identified since the adoption of the 2021 Comprehensive Plan. The changes are discussed by topic below.

Town Street Classifications Map

This is an existing map included in the Transportation chapter. The 2021 adopted Comprehensive Plan reflects Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) street classifications from 2014, which are also used by the Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT). The FHWA classifications are dated, and do not reflect some roads that should be designated as collectors. As a result, the Town proposes changing these definitions to better reflect our current and future desired road conditions. The proposed classifications are more streamlined, and reflect more recent vehicular volume data. On the proposed new map attached to this report, some collectors were removed or added, based on available vehicular volume data. The proposed text changes describing the street classifications are also attached to this report. To stay up to date with the current transportation network, staff may update this map as new vehicular volume data becomes available.

Transportation Project Priorities Table and Map

This is an existing table and map included in the Transportation chapter. The proposed change is to add the Mount Tabor Realignment project, which was inadvertently left out of the 2021 Comprehensive Plan. This project was included in the 2016 Comprehensive Plan as a part of the Mount Tabor Road Improvements project. This amendment proposes it be added back as a separate project, labelled as revised number 21 on the map and in the table. The other projects have been renumbered accordingly. Additionally, Planning and Engineering staff collaborated to provide a description and proposed cost estimate for this project, which is included in the table attached to this report. The realignment is also shown on the proposed Transportation and Project Priorities Map attached.

Two other small changes for this table are proposed. Number 28 on the table is the South Main Street Improvements project, from Eheart Street to Country Club Drive. The Town is proposing to slightly broaden the extent of the project, from Miller Street to Country Club Drive. This will allow the project to have a more complete scope regarding possible street improvements. The Town is also proposing to add a sentence to the description of this project to note that it may include intersection improvements, for example at Country Club Drive. This change is suggested based on public input and staff assessment of the road segment.

These changes will also be reflected on the Future Land Use Map, if adopted.

Future Land Use Map

This map is part of the Land Use Map Series. The proposed changes below are items that were overlooked as part of the 2021 Comprehensive Plan update.

- The areas near Old Town Hall and Fire Station 1 (220-420 Progress Street NE and 303-309 Jackson Street) are currently shown with a future land use designation of Commercial. These are proposed to change to Medium Density Residential, which is more compatible with surrounding uses.
- Fire Station 1 (200 Progress Street NE) is currently shown as Downtown Commercial, and is proposed to be designated Civic. This is a more appropriate designation for the current use as a Fire Station and is in keeping with the designation of other Town uses.
- Since the adoption of the Comprehensive Plan last year, a boundary line adjustment has occurred at 1789 Merrimac Road for the Stroubles Ridge development by Community Housing Partners. When the boundary line adjustment was completed, this property was designated as R-5 Transitional Residential zoning, but was not given a future land use designation. Future land use designations for boundary line adjustments are typically codified in the next update to the Comprehensive Plan. The proposed future land use designation is Medium Density Residential, which is compatible with the R-5 zoning district.

Other Housekeeping Items

Below are a minor overlooked item and a typo that were identified after the 2021 Comprehensive Plan was adopted.

- The text describing the Paths to the Future Map is located in the Land Use chapter. Proposed text (attached) has been added to note that staff may update this map as needed. This map is used frequently by staff, developers, and the public and should be updated as sidewalk and trail segments are completed. This will allow for better accuracy in planning for the transportation network.
- A typo was identified in the Tiny Homes section of the Housing chapter. The proposed change is attached to this report.

Amendment Process

Long Range Planning Committee

A Long Range Planning Committee meeting was held on September 28, 2022 to review the proposed amendment. Staff and Committee members discussed each item within the proposed amendment and staff answered questions from the Committee. For the high density student housing locations text, the Long Range Planning Committee recommended clarifying the redevelopment criteria related to building designs that are context sensitive and specific to Blacksburg. The wording has been changed so that the intent of this redevelopment criteria is more clear. The Committee also recommended including accessibility as an important part of bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure in the high density student housing text.

The Committee noted that the proposed high density student housing map (new Map E) identifies the Historic District as well as some public buildings. The Committee recommended adding the St.

Luke and Odd Fellows Hall to this map, to show its adjacency to the Downtown Northwest mixed use with student housing area. The map has been changed to reflect this. Additionally, for clarity, the Long Range Planning Committee provided other small wording clarifications for the housekeeping items that have been incorporated into the proposed amendment. The meeting notes are attached to this report.

Public Information and Input Meeting

A public information and input meeting was held on October 6, 2022. Staff provided background information, explained all of the items within the proposed amendment, and answered questions from the public. For the high density student housing portion of the amendment, there was some discussion around Virginia Tech providing student housing on campus and where on campus student housing should be located. As a result of this discussion, specificity has been added to the high density student housing text that student housing on campus should be located near the core campus and close to academic buildings and other campus hubs. The meeting notes and sign-in sheet are attached to this report.

Summary

Planning Commission is asked to consider and make a recommendation to Town Council on the proposed amendment. The Planning Commission Public Hearing is scheduled for November 1, 2022. Town Council will discuss the proposed amendment at a Work Session on November 13, 2022 and the Town Council Public Hearing is scheduled for December 13, 2022.

Attachments:

- Town Council Referring Resolution 8-A-22
- Preferred High Density Student Housing Locations text
- Map E: Preferred Locations for High Density Student Housing & Mixed Use with Student Housing
- Town Street Classifications map
- Town Street Classifications text
- Transportation Project Priorities table
- Transportation Project Priorities map
- Map A: Future Land Use map
- Paths to the Future text
- Tiny homes text
- September 28, 2022 Long Range Planning Committee meeting notes
- October 6, 2022 Public Information and Input meeting notes and sign-in sheet
- Public Comment