

Considering a Small Lot Zoning Option for the Town of Blacksburg

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Blacksburg, like many communities in the United States, is experiencing a shortage of housing options. The Town's housing market – long dominated by multi-family housing (over 60% of the Town's housing stock) for students at Virginia Tech – is characterized within the Town's 2021 Comprehensive Plan as a market with a low supply of homes for sale, and within which prices have seen a significant increase over the past decade. The resulting lack of affordable options within the Town is highlighted within the Comprehensive Plan, which identifies two specific zoning actions that should be considered to help the Town meet its housing needs: 1) Review and revise ordinance standards such as minimum lot sizes, maximum density, and lot configuration, to provide for a broader range of housing options within Town; and 2) Investigate opportunities to reduce the cost of residential development in Town, including “smaller lot sizes and reduced parking requirements.”

Acknowledging that adjustments to lot sizes have been identified as a component of meeting the Town's housing supply needs, this memorandum presents a brief introduction to the topic, and provides a framework which the Town can use to pursue updates to its Zoning Ordinance that implement actions identified within the Comprehensive Plan.

To structure this framework, some fundamental questions are addressed; **1) Why** is a small lot zoning option beneficial? **2) What** does “small lot” mean for Blacksburg? **3) How** would new regulations address common concerns? **4) Where** would this be appropriate within the Town?

1) Why is a small lot zoning option beneficial?

The Town's residential district structure is currently oriented toward accommodating two primary forms of development – moderate to high-density housing (including multi-family, townhouse and two-family), and relatively low-density single-family housing. There is currently no option within the district structure, short of the Planned Residential District (discussed later), for the construction of small homes on small lots.

The Town's single-family and transitional residential zoning districts are characterized by large lot area requirements:

- The **Rural Residential 1** zoning district is subject to a maximum density of 1 unit per acre
- The **Rural Residential 2** zoning district accommodates planned residential development on a minimum of 30 acres
- The **R-4** district requires 10,000 square feet of lot area for a single-family home
- The **R-5** district – designed as a transitional district – requires 8,500 square feet of lot area for a single-family home. This district also allows two-family homes and townhouses on smaller lots, and has primarily resulted in the construction of those types of units.
- The **OTR Old Town Residential** zoning district allows for single-family dwellings on a slightly smaller, 7,500 square foot lot, as well as two-family homes and townhouses on smaller lots, but is geographically targeted toward areas of Town adjacent to Virginia Tech and the Downtown, limiting its applicability.
- The **PR Planned Residential** zoning district is one possible tool the Town could use to create smaller lots. However, staff understands that this is not the best option as the PR constitutes conditional zoning, and most applications for this district involve high-density multifamily development rather than the form the Town is looking to accommodate through a new small-lot option.
- The **Open Space Design Overlay** district allows for reductions in minimum lot size of up to 30% of the required minimum of the underlying zoning district, and is applicable in the R-4, R-5, OTR, RM-27, and RM-48

zoning districts. Though lot size reduction is possible through the overlay, it also contains standards to ensure that reductions result in the provision of open space as a component of new development, and contains a series of standards related to the design of open space. The overlay also requires provision of a type B buffer (either 15' with a 6' fence, or 30') in areas where developed portions of a site abut property zoned RR1, RR2, R-4, R-5, OTR or PR.

First, the problem. Most simply put, land costs and high minimum lot area requirements assure that few small homes will be built in the areas of Town zoned for single-family development; new homes coming to market within these areas are likely to be large homes with a correspondingly large listing price. Additionally, a host of other factors are correlated with the new development of large homes on large lots, such as an increase in cost per household for the provision of services like water and sewer access, and continued or growing disparity in access to housing along racial and socio-economic lines.

Second, how can a small lot option provide an important alternative in Blacksburg? A small lot zoning option with reduced lot area requirements would allow for new development in town to accrue benefits on multiple levels – economic, environmental, and equitable. From an economic perspective, a small lot option would allow more homes to be built on the same amount of land, effectively reducing land costs per unit and helping to create smaller, more affordable homes. Environmentally, small lots are an important option as well; by allowing more homes to be built closer together, the Town can unlock more sustainable land use patterns as it continues to grow, controlling the cost of services and increasing opportunities for transit usage, walking, and biking. Additionally, smaller homes on smaller lots require less energy to heat, cool, and maintain.

From an equity perspective, higher home prices associated with larger lot-area requirements price out many families from communities predominated by a low-density land use pattern. In a market like Blacksburg, where pressure on multi-family options is exerted by the student population, and the availability and affordability of single-family options is limited, there may simply be no option for some families who want to live in the Town. This is often exacerbated by competition from investors, who are able to offer cash at above asking-price, often before homes are even listed for sale. Private buyers often lack the resources to compete with investors; once bidding moves above asking-price, it can be incredibly difficult for individuals to secure financing as homes won't often appraise above asking price. This leaves many private buyers in a situation of having to find extra cash to augment their financing, or to forego competing for a home altogether.

Providing a new small lot option with the intent of allowing more homes on smaller lots could help to provide much needed inventory in Town, unlocking affordable options and providing new pathways to homeownership for the Blacksburg community.

But wait, what if I prefer a larger home and a larger lot? Providing a small lot zoning option will not eliminate the option for a larger home on a larger lot. Rather, it will allow for greater responsiveness to the breadth of demand within the housing market, including both homes on large lots and those on small lots.

2) What do we mean by a “small lot?” What is the right size for Blacksburg?

Given the Town's current array of districts, to provide a “small lot” option for Blacksburg will mean thinking about a lot size requirement of less than the current R-4 standard of 10,000 square feet. It will also likely mean thinking about minimum lot sizes that are less than those required by the more narrowly applicable R-5 and OTR Districts (8,500 and 7,500 square feet, respectively).

To provide some context, analysis has been conducted on some local examples of smaller lot development, mostly approved within the PR District. In addition to these local examples, this memo provides some national examples of newly constructed residential development on small lots.

The Airport Acres Neighborhood – Blacksburg, VA

Airport Acres is a midcentury neighborhood located in southeast Blacksburg near the Montgomery Executive Airport. Currently zoned R-4, the neighborhood is characterized by small one to two story homes (typically between 1,200 and 1,900 square feet) on lots that vary in size, with a median lot size of around 8,500 square feet (nonconforming with the R-4 standard of 10,000 square feet). Lot width in the Airport Acres neighborhood also varies, with most lots between 50 and 60 feet in width (the R-4 District requires 40 feet at minimum).



As can be seen in the images below, the side setbacks within the neighborhood are generally modest, with many homes in the range of seven to eight feet from the side lot line (the R-4 District standard is a 10 foot minimum), and a separation of 15 to 16 feet between the sidewalls of adjacent homes. Front setbacks range from 25 to more than 30 feet (the district standard), and rear setbacks within the neighborhood are quite generous at 65-80 feet in general (exceeding the R-4 standard of 25 feet).



Echols Village – Blacksburg, VA

Echol's Village is a residential community in northern Blacksburg that was built between 2007 and 2010 consisting of two-story single-family homes averaging between 1,500 and 2,000 square feet, built on lots with a median size of approximately 3,500 square feet. Lots within the development range from around 2,000 square feet (shown below) to 5,000 square feet. The community is zoned PR, and exhibits a distinct character from the surrounding residential areas (consisting of R-4, R-5, and RM-48 zoned parcels). Most lots within the community are between 35 and 50 feet in width.



Side setbacks are small, ranging from two feet to approximately 10 feet, with a pattern characterized by 7 seven to ten foot spacing between adjacent homes. Front setbacks are varied, with 10 feet being the most common dimension. The community is developed with alley access to many dwellings, resulting in modest rear setbacks in most cases.



The Village at Tom's Creek – Blacksburg, VA

The Village at Tom's Creek is located in Northwest Blacksburg, and is one of the more recent residential communities developed in the Town. The neighborhood contains a mixture of two-story single-family and two-family homes on relatively small residential lots, ranging from approximately 1,500 to over 2,500 square feet of interior space. Single-family dwellings are located on lots of approximately 5,000 square feet and up; two-family dwellings share a party wall and are split into lots of approximately 3,500 square feet each. Lot widths vary throughout the development, ranging from 30 feet to upwards of 50 feet in certain locations.



Side setbacks are small, with most dwellings sitting approximately two to five feet from a side property line, resulting in modest separation between homes. Front setbacks within the Village range between ten to 20 feet, and rear setbacks are more generous.



The Wasena Neighborhood – Roanoke, VA

Wasena – located in Roanoke – is characterized by an eclectic mixture of architectural styles, with homes built between the 1920s and 1950s on relatively compact lots located within the City’s RM-1 Residential Mixed-Density District. The district allows single-family, two-family and townhouse dwellings, and requires a minimum lot area of 5,000 square feet (3,500 square feet per dwelling unit for two-family and townhouse dwellings) and 50 feet of lot frontage.



The median lot within the Wasena neighborhood is approximately 6,500 square feet in area and 60 feet in width; most lots within the neighborhood match this size.

The RM-1 District requires only a three foot side yard, however most homes within the neighborhood provide between five and fifteen feet of side setback on either side, resulting in a rhythm of homes that varies across a block and from street to street. Homes are typically set back 20 feet in the front, though some homes provide a larger setback, up to 35 feet. Rear setbacks are also generous.



Grandin Village – Roanoke, VA

Grandin Village, like Wasena, was predominantly built out between the 1920s and 1950s, and is also zoned RM-1. Development within the neighborhood is similarly eclectic, with a mixture of architectural styles. Lot sizes in the neighborhood range from around 6,000 square feet to over 10,000 square feet, with the vast majority of lots falling between 7,000 and 9,000 square feet in area.



The pattern of lotting at the street in Grandin Village is very similar to Wasena, with the difference in lot area between the two neighborhoods appearing to be mostly a function of greater lot depth in the Grandin Village neighborhood. Lots are predominantly 60-65 feet in width, and side setbacks are substantially similar to those seen in Wasena. Front and rear setbacks, given the difference in lot width, are correspondingly larger.



Norton Commons – Louisville, KY

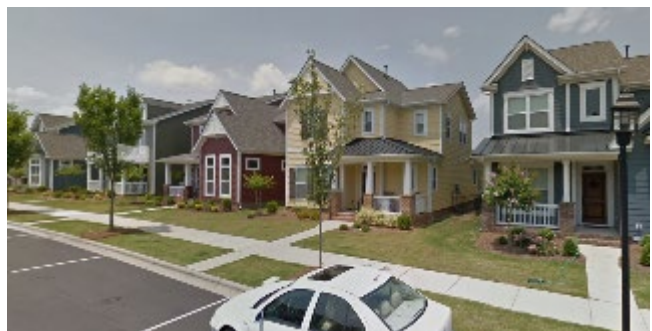
Norton Commons, which began construction in 2004, is a residential community located in Eastern Louisville, Kentucky. It is a TND, or “Traditional Neighborhood Development,” which encourages a walkable mixture of dwelling types (including single-family and townhouses) with commercial uses, educational facilities, and recreational opportunities. Lots – and homes – within the development vary in size, but the majority of lots comprise 1/10 of an acre or less, with some lots for detached single-family homes under 2,000 square feet, with 25 feet of frontage or less.

The area is considered highly desirable; the combination of compact development, walkable residential and retail opportunities, and access to a wealth of open space amenities has struck a chord with buyers looking to locate in Louisville’s east end.



Antiquity – Cornelius, NC

Similar to Norton Commons, Antiquity – which began construction in 2008 – provides a compact mix of housing types, including detached single-family homes and townhouses on small lots. The development also intersperses some mixed-commercial uses and open space throughout, with single-family homes located on lots as small as 2,500 square feet and 25 feet in width.



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3) How would new regulations help Blacksburg to allow this type of small lot residential development, while also addressing some common concerns?

A new small lot residential zoning district would enable the Town to accommodate the creation of small homes on small lots by-right (subject to standards), without the need to use the Planned Residential District process. The true purpose, and real utility of a district like the PR is to allow the Town to accommodate and provide a pathway for high-quality development that is otherwise not anticipated by the regulations within the Town's Zoning Ordinance.

The PR District is designed to encourage innovation, ingenuity and imagination; to allow for unique ideas and configurations on parcels within the Town that contain a number of constraints to traditional development. It allows for a mixture of uses, and requires a minimum amount of open space (the district requires a minimum of one-half acre to initiate).

Contrastingly, the type of small lot residential development that the Town is seeking to accommodate should not be considered "innovative," or "imaginative," as a number of examples above have shown that this is both a traditional development form, as well as a desirable form for contemporary residential development. Rather, small lot residential development should be accommodated within the Town's Ordinance as a base zoning district, with a series of standards that allow for its creation by-right within the Town – where appropriate.

The form and pattern of small lot development must be considered; lot size isn't everything.

A small lot zoning option for Blacksburg must be right-sized to ensure that resultant residential development meets the Town's expectations and provides a useful, practical option for the creation of new housing opportunities within the community. But lot size is not everything. Currently, the Town is seeing a preponderance of new development seeking to achieve the greatest square footage possible in newly constructed homes, even when lot sizes are reduced through one of the options available (Open Space Overlay, PR District).

More conversation is needed to determine how far the Town wants to go in allowing for small lot development. An important component of this conversation is whether the community desires to ensure that new homes on small lots manifest as modestly sized, more affordable homes, or whether a new district should continue to provide flexibility for the construction of relatively larger homes on small lots. The results of this conversation will set the direction for additional controls on development within a new district, which may include minimum lot width, minimum setbacks, maximum heights, and limitations on the types of dwellings allowed, among others.

A brief discussion of each of these follows.

Lot Width. In conceptualizing a new small lot option for the Town, it is critical that consideration be given to the experience of this type of development at the street level. On foot, on bicycle, or in an automobile, the typical experience of a Blacksburg resident with small lot development will be that of the pattern or rhythm that the development establishes along a street – something that is much more closely related to minimum lot width requirements than it is to minimum lot area requirements. Small lots may often lack the area – in depth, for instance – of larger residential lots, but from the street may present a very similar appearance. The Town's current R-4 District standards, for example, require 40 feet of width, but 10,000 square feet of lot area. To meet this area requirement at the minimum width, a lot would need to be 40 feet wide and 250 feet in depth; something not seen frequently in the Town's current development pattern.

Consideration should be given to the perceptible difference between such a lot that might meet the area standards (at 250 feet in depth) and a lot that may be 40 feet wide and half the depth required; 125 feet. Such a lot would not meet the minimum area for the district (by half), but would potentially look identical

from the street. As such, as the Town looks to create a small lot district, lot width – or frontage – must be given careful consideration.

Setbacks. Minimum lot area and lot width/frontage standards must be aligned with thoughtful controls on setbacks to ensure that new residential development is feasible on small lots, and that the desired form and pattern is achieved. Many small lot residential zoning districts contain minimal setbacks, with the understanding that allowing for a smaller lot must coordinate with allowing for the development of a reasonable building envelope on the lot. Setbacks should be calibrated to ensure that they allow for adequate buildable widths on a lot, as well as for the accommodation of other site elements that may be desired. For example, if a 35 foot minimum lot width is required for new development, and a minimum ten foot side setback is required on either side, the buildable width of a lot is reduced to 15 feet. Controls on setbacks can be varied to allow for flexibility in placement of homes, such as requiring a cumulative setback, and allowing reductions in individual setbacks to a minimum established number (e.g. an eight foot side setback may be reduced to no less than five feet, if the opposite side setback is correspondingly increased to ensure 16 feet of total side setback).

Lot Coverage and Floor Area Ratio. Lot coverage and floor area ratio maximums are a key consideration for small lot residential development. The current R-4 District requires 10,000 square feet of lot area, and allows for lot coverage to a maximum of 45 percent, with a floor area ratio of .5, which would allow for roughly 4,500 square feet of coverage and a maximum gross floor area of 5,000 square feet. When considering how such controls manifest on smaller lots, it is often important to allow for some additional coverage. For example, on a 5,000 square foot lot, 45 percent coverage allows for 2,250 square feet of coverage; on a 3,500 square foot lot, 45 percent coverage would allow for only 1,575 square feet of lot coverage. Such a control can help to ensure that new homes on small lots maintain proportionality (small lot: small home). However, to encourage the creation of small homes on small lots, standards must be tailored to ensure that the resulting building envelopes are consistent with the community's vision, and can result in a product desired by the local housing market.

Further, floor area ratio is not commonly used to control development of small lot residential communities. FAR was, in fact, a zoning control created to control the development of skyscrapers. In thinking about controls on the form, rhythm, placement and pattern of development on small lots, FAR often becomes a redundant control. Setbacks, height limitations, and coverage limitations can effectively control the size of structures in most residential districts. The Town may want to consider not including FAR in the district controls.

Height. Controls on height for a new small lot residential option must also be carefully considered. In thinking about development on smaller lots, with homes being located closer to lot lines and less distance between buildings, height can become an important characteristic of new development. Many small lot residential districts maintain consistent maximum height controls with other residential districts in the ordinance; 30 to 35 feet (or two to two and a half stories) in Blacksburg, for instance.

Understanding that privacy may be a concern, some small lot zoning districts control building height based upon another feature of the lot, such as lot width. For example, lots of 40 feet or more in width may be limited to 35 feet in height as they can provide more generous setbacks, but lots less than 40 feet in width may be limited to a lesser height to compensate for smaller setbacks. Determining an appropriate approach to height will be an important component of the creation of small lot district for Blacksburg.

Types of dwellings allowed. Many of the examples of small lot residential development provided in this memo accommodate a mixture of dwelling types from single-family to two-family to townhouse dwellings. When considering a small lot residential option for the Town of Blacksburg, a critical component of the work will be to determine if and how a mixture of dwelling types is allowed.

Other districts that allow for multiple dwelling types in Blacksburg, such as the R-5 Transitional Residential District or the PR Planned Residential District, have primarily produced dwelling types on the higher-density end of the spectrum, such as two-family and multi-family dwellings. To ensure that a new small lot option meets the Town's intent of providing thoughtful new housing choices for residents, and does not become a de-facto tool simply for additional density through development of multifamily dwellings, controls on the types of dwellings allowed must be carefully considered. The primary purpose of a new small lot district for Blacksburg is the creation of new single-family dwellings on small lots. There may be limited opportunities for other dwelling types within the district, and the team will explore what these may look like during the process of creating the district. However, such opportunities should be carefully considered so as to not change the fundamental character and purpose of the district.

4) Where do the small lots go?

Camiros is working with Town staff to identify areas within Blacksburg that may benefit from small-lot residential zoning. As a component of the work moving forward, discussion will be necessary to determine how a new district is applied to the map, how rezoning may be initiated, and where in Town would be appropriate for this form of residential development. Currently, this tool is being envisioned as most appropriate for new small lot subdivisions as opposed to a tool for infill development in established residential neighborhoods. This will ensure that conflicts with the character of existing residential neighborhoods in Town are minimized as new small lot development occurs.

5) Additional items to consider.

In the course of developing a small lot option and standards for the Town of Blacksburg, there are a number of additional considerations that must be made. Through the process, we anticipate discussions will be needed around a few additional topics and their implications for small lot residential development. These topics may include:

Occupancy.

In Blacksburg, careful consideration must be given to the unique pressures placed upon the housing market by the large student population, so that these new options do not default to tools for the creation of student housing. To ensure that the community can benefit and that new options are provided for residents or those who may want to live in Blacksburg, a key component of the work ahead will be to consider options for addressing occupancy within the small-lot residential district to address this concern.

Options are being explored and researched, to ensure that the district does not change in character to become student-oriented housing. One option that has been identified is to limit occupancy of dwellings within the district to families plus one unrelated individual, or to two unrelated individuals at maximum – a strategy that has been employed in another university town: Athens, Georgia.

Permissions for accessory apartments.

The Town's ordinance currently allows accessory apartments within structures in a relatively narrow range of districts including the RR-1, RR-2, and R-4. In conjunction with consideration of additional dwelling types

that may be allowed in a small lot district, a decision will need to be made to determine whether accessory apartments will be allowed.

Parking.

Small lot zoning districts can contain reductions to parking requirements to ensure that new homes can be built on smaller lots, without a need to increase lot size to accommodate parking. This is an additional item that will need to be considered when developing an approach and standards to a small lot residential district.