

Shape Our Fremont

Where Fremont residents can learn about shaping proposed housing developments...

Issues: The Effect of Design

In our Issues article on Housing Density, we explained that Fremont's General Plan defines density as the number of housing units on an acre of land. What about the size, shape or look of the buildings? When two housing developments with the same density are compared, one can appear far more dense because of the overall design of the project. One development's style can fit the character of the neighborhood while the other just doesn't.

Planned District Design

Most of Fremont's new developments are Planned Districts. The policies for Planned Districts give the developer layout flexibility but they also entitle the city to make a subjective evaluation of the project design.

The City Council has sent several projects back for redesign even though the project complied with most requirements. They have rejected seven-plexes, flat front facades with no articulation, and buildings with nothing but full third stories and no two-story elements.

We now have a new City Council. Let them know how you feel about the design of the developments that you see being built around town. Be specific so they can review future proposals with your comments in mind.

Design Features

Let's look at a housing project of rectangular buildings each taking up the maximum allowable land with straight sides going up to the maximum height to an almost flat roof. Let's say the project meets the requirements for density, square footage, setbacks, parking, etc. But is it of the right design for Fremont? Here are some questions you might ask:

Style: Is the style of the building's exterior in character with the surrounding neighborhood or, now that housing is being built amongst commercial areas, the adjacent buildings? Does the design call for a steel and glass exterior on an apartment building adjacent to an historic town center of brick buildings? Would there be an urban-tech exterior on three-story townhouses in a neighborhood of Craftsman and Victorian style homes? Are they going to build standalone three-story townhouses between one and two-story traditional single-family homes?

Stories/Height: The number of stories may not tell you how imposing the houses will be. It may be better to ask about the height of the buildings at the edges of the property. By making only half of the third story have living space, either to one side or tucked under the middle of gabled roof, developers can make the project look far less massive.

Front Doors: Where are the front doors located? That may seem obvious, but several developments have placed the front doors facing the rear fence. The space allocated to garages can affect the placement of front doors. Two-car side-by-side garages require a wider garage door than tandem or "slide in" Y garages. They could use Y garages, realign buildings, or place some of the front doors at the side of the buildings.

View from the Street: What will the development look like from the entrance? Will there be a long narrow canyon of tall buildings with nothing but garages showing? Are the buildings varied in alignment? Are there flat walls from top to bottom or is there articulation to the front facades? Are there porches, doors, balconies and other features that break up the view?

Landscaping: Is there full landscaping all around the development or merely a few boxed shrubs? Will mature trees be removed when, with some building realignment, they might be saved? Is the residents' open space just a tiny, unbuildable corner of the property or have they placed the open space around established trees and shrubs?

Acreage: Is the property large enough for a developer to both provide the required street access and have nicely laid out buildings of the appropriate density? The Planned District ordinance says parcels should be "of sufficient size to be planned and developed ..."

Design Guidelines

The City of Fremont has published several Design Guidelines that explain design policies for the different types of developments. They address many of the points we've discussed above.

There are citywide guidelines for Small-Lot Single-Family and Multi-Family projects. Niles, Irvington, and Mission San Jose have their own special guidelines. Links to the city Design Guidelines are on the Process page of the Shape Our Fremont website.

The Planning Commission and City Council often refer to the guidelines in discussing development applications but it would help if Fremont residents spoke out about design features they would like implemented in development projects.

For information about proposed residential developments, and City of Fremont contacts, go to:

www.ShapeOurFremont.com