



Planning Commission
1650 Mission Street, Suite 400
San Francisco, California

October 4, 2017

**The Solution to Monster Homes: Upzoning
Opposing the Residential Expansion Threshold**

Dear Commissioners,

We write to express our opposition to the Residential Expansion Threshold and ask that it be scrapped. The program was meant to streamline alterations and prevent “monster homes,” but has instead codified low-density, scaled-back homes that are inherently unaffordable. It should be dropped in favor of a program that allows for more buildable area and – most critically – upzoning to spur dense housing construction.

From the outset, the Residential Expansion Threshold has been predicated upon the flawed notion that smaller massing is good. The department’s website notes that the program looks to “limit the size of [a] finished project to be more consistent with neighborhood character.” This motivation must be thrown out if we are to take meaningful steps to address the housing shortage.

Frankly, why is the Planning Department spending so much time and brain power on anything that is not about increasing the number of units of housing available in San Francisco? Some San Franciscans may feel that large homes are intrusive, but this cannot continue to eat up valuable staff time in the middle of the most desperate long-term housing shortage the city has ever seen.

If the purpose of this policy is to encourage homeowners to not build large single-family homes, but instead to be nudged towards creating ADUs and multifamily housing, the Planning Department has seriously strayed from its goal. Encouraging small buildable areas makes it unlikely ADUs will be built and makes co-op style shared housing a near impossibility.

Incentivizing and perpetuating smaller massing entrenches exclusionary zoning at a time when all zoning must be reconsidered. Protecting “neighborhood character” exacerbates racial and economic segregation and decreases our housing supply, worsening rents and home prices for all. YIMBY Action, for its part, has called for the upzoning of all single family and duplex lots to allow for more apartments throughout the city. That is the obvious solution to “Monster



Homes.” Forcing homes to be smaller does not create more affordable neighborhoods. Only increasing the supply will put genuine downward pressure on prices.

The Planning Department itself has pointed to “missing middle” housing as part of the solution to our affordability crisis, writing in its report “Housing for Families with Children” that “mid-size buildings are much less expensive than single family homes and fit in with the scale of our urban neighborhoods.” It goes further, writing:

One reason that the Missing Middle is no longer being built is because of our zoning restrictions. ... Larger lots are frequently found in the eastern part of San Francisco where podium-style and even tower housing can be built, but the City has a limited number of lots large enough to host this scale of building. Small-lot, three to five story, family-friendly housing would be entirely in keeping with our western neighborhoods, where relatively few households occupy comparatively large swaths of our city’s land.

It is rational to dismantle the system of incentives driving production of oversized units, but it is foolhardy to squander the remainder of the massing allowed under current zoning in the middle of an extreme housing shortage. That massing can and should be redirected toward producing additional units of housing to help alleviate the shortage.

We implore you: Do not let the Residential Expansion Threshold stand in the way of building missing middle housing. Now is the time to talk about upzoning, form-based zoning, and relaxed density controls — before a new policy enshrining the status quo is enacted, not after. At the very minimum, the Residential Expansion Threshold should be part of a package deal that reduces density controls.

Sincerely,

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