BASEMENT EXEMPTIONS

Section 113.0234. Calculating Basement Gross Floor Area

BACKGROUND

The Building Code Definition of Basement intended underground spaces to be used exclusively for storage and mechanical activity. Consequently, basements are exempted from GFA count if they are a certain number of feet below natural ground.

ISSUE

Currently, basements are considered "free space" that do not contribute to GFA/FAR since they cannot be seen. But, underground spaces are increasingly used for daily living. This trend was not originally envisioned nor intended by the Building Code Definition of "Basement." For example, current uses feature home theaters, recreation areas (ping pong & pool tables) and craft spaces. They also include home offices, exercise and meditation rooms, saunas, pools and spas, additional bedrooms, baths and guest/maid quarters.

This provision has been used to increase actual development density above allowable FAR by as much as 25 to 30%. In the Coastal Area, such excess is often inconsistent with allowable density, as well as with the scale and character of the surrounding neighborhood, making it inconsistent with the Land Use Plan and the CA Coastal Plan.

This trend is occurring mostly in the luxury property market, specifically on beachfront and hillside lots in the Coastal Zone. Unfortunately, many of these lots also have questionable soil, drainage and geological stability. Although project review may assess geotechnical suitability of proposed construction within the subject property lines, cumulative impact analysis of excessive soil exportation and shoring close to property lines on a neighborhood scale isn't addressed.

In fact, it is unknown what effects are being generated by the increasing number of full basements currently being installed in sensitive geological areas. Where these effects might occur are also unknown, as underground water movement and soil fractures are being disrupted over a wide area. A more conservative development approach is advised

to comply with community density requirements and to protect the community from environmental hazard.

OBJECTIVE

Provide a one or two sentence statement of what you want to achieve with the proposed amendment.

Redefining the amount of allowable GFA to reduce basement size. This would align new construction with neighborhood densities and mitigate growing, but as yet unidentified, impacts to area-wide geological stability.

SOLUTION

Briefly summarize how you propose to address the issue and achieve the objective with your proposed amendments.

The GFA of all basements (as defined by the current height above grade limitations) should count towards FAR at 50% discount. This provides some benefit to applicants, who can increase overall project size by going underground; but, it also provides benefit to the community by reducing the size of development both above and below ground. Furthermore, due to the high seismic sensitivity throughout San Diego, all projects with basements should provide a geotechnical study prior to processing a permit.

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§113.0103 Definitions: Gross Floor Area

Gross floor area means the sum of the horizontal square footage of all existing, proposed, and phantom floors of a building which may or may not be completely enclosed within the exterior surface of the surrounding exterior walls or footings. See Section 113.0234 for additional information on calculating gross floor area.

§113.0234 Calculating Gross Floor Area

Gross floor area is calculated in relationship to the structure and grade adjacent to the exterior walls of a building. The elements included in the gross floor area calculation differ according to the type of development proposed and are listed in Section 113.0234(a)-(c). Gross floor area does not include the elements listed in Section 113.0234(d). The total gross floor area for a premises is regulated by the floor area ratio development standard.

1. Elements Included in Gross Floor Area for Development in All Zones

(1) Gross floor area includes all existing and proposed floors within the horizontal area delineated by the exterior surface of the surrounding exterior walls of the building.

(2) Gross floor area for basements is calculated as follows:

1. ~~For lots that slope less than 5 percent along each edge of the building footprint, gross floor area includes the area of all portions of abasement where the vertical distance between existing grade or proposed grade, whichever is lower, and the finish-floor elevation above exceeds 3 feet, 6 inches as shown in Diagram 113-02I.~~

1. ~~For lots that slope 5 percent or more along any edge of the building footprint, gross floor area includes the area of all portions of a basement where the vertical distance between existing grade or proposed grade, whichever is lower, and the finish-floor elevation above exceeds 5 feet, as shown in Diagram 113-02J~~

Section 113.0234. Calculating Basement Gross Floor Area

1. The GFA of all basements (as defined by the current height above grade limitations) count towards FAR at 50% discount.
2. A geotechnical study is required prior to processing a permit for a basement.