



**Town of Sullivan's Island, South Carolina  
Historic Preservation and Design Study Group  
A Subcommittee of the Land Use and Natural Resources Committee of Council**

Thursday, May 26, 2022

Subcommittee met at 4:00pm, at Town Hall, 2056 Middle Street, all requirements of the Freedom of Information Act having been met. Present were,

Subcommittee voting members: John Winchester (Chair), Aussie Geer (Vice Chair), Eddie Fava, Elizabeth Tezza, Beverly Bohan, Michael Daly and Manda Poletti.

Staff: Charles Drayton, Planning and Zoning Administrator, Max Wurthmann, Building Official, and Pam Otto, Study Group staff member.

- A. **Call to Order.** Chair Winchester called the meeting to order at 4:00pm, stating the press and public were duly notified pursuant to state law.

Media: None present

Public: Fifteen (15) members present, including Land Use and Natural Resources (LUNR) Committee members Gary Visser and Scott Millimet; Design and Review Board (DRB) members Ron Coish and Babak Bryan; and Planning Commission member Mark Howard.

- B. **Approval of Minutes from May 12, 2022 meeting.**

**Motion:** A motion was made to approve the May 12, 2022, meeting minutes by Ms. Tezza; seconded by Ms. Bohan. This motion passed unanimously with a 5-0 vote.

- C. **Items for Discussion.**

Chair Winchester mentioned this was the seventh (7<sup>th</sup>) meeting of the Study Group. He also gave a brief recap of the previous meeting, mentioning there seemed to be a clear consensus that the residents represented believe that some of the new homes constructed appear to be too massive and out of scale. (Michael Daly and Manda Poletti arrive at this time) He asked if there was anyone who disagreed with that statement, there was no disagreement from the assemblage. Chair Winchester felt the best approach would be to develop a straw man proposal, as is seen below. He asked for everyone to keep in mind that all future historic restoration projects will not be fully elevated and that nothing being discussed today will require anyone with a new construction to build lower than the code currently allows. Only a new construction requesting increases from the DRB would have these limitations apply.

# STRAWMAN PROPOSAL

## New Construction SF and Lot Coverage

### SQUARE FOOTAGE

- 25% reduced to 10%
- introduce more restrictive language....ground floor 2 feet above BFE or less  
AND, subject to design guidelines used today
- DRB will have discretionary authority to waive 2ft/BFE in cases of non feasibility/impracticality and specific steps taken to reduce mass

### LOT COVERAGE

- increase from 15% to 20% or 25%
- DRB discretionary authority ( from 15% to, up to 20%) removed
- Note: current requirements for no more than 30% impervious and 50% natural growth remain

#### 1. New Construction: Potential options for granting DRB relief.

##### **Principal building square footage.**

At this time, the DRB has the discretionary authority to grant an increase of twenty-five percent (25%) to allowed square footage. For a house on a half (.5) acre lot, 25% is a thousand (1,000) square feet (sf). If you lower that increase to ten percent (10%), as per the strawman proposal, that is four hundred (400) sf.

If you introduce more restrictive language, increases could be restricted to homes staying low, maybe with the ground floor two (2) feet above base flood elevation (BFE) or less. That way the DRB would have stronger language to support them. Chair Winchester suggested that the DRB have the ability to waive that requirement if an applicant was able to demonstrate that the lower house was not feasible. He also stated that the goal from the last meeting was to reduce the appearance of mass, which can be done by bringing homes lower.

##### **Lot Coverage.**

Chair Winchester said it had been brought up to increase the allowed lot coverage from fifteen percent (15%) to twenty percent (20%) or 25%. Mr. Fava agreed with this as it allows an architect to lower and spread out a house. Chair Winchester stated that there was push back against this is that most don't want to increase lot coverage. However he asked everyone to keep in mind that the fifty percent (50%) natural vegetation requirement would still apply as well as the thirty percent (30%) impervious cap. Mr. Visser asked if those numbers get added together, Wurthmann stated that the gap, 20%, is covered by pervious surfaces.

Ms. Heller asked if garages are included in that number. Chair Winchester stated that right now the provisions of the ordinance exclude garages if you are in compliance with elevation, it is another incentive for the homeowner to lower their home. Mr. Millimet said that if a house is elevated, you can probably park three (3) vehicles underneath, he then asked what is to stop a homeowner from building a 3-car garage if they lower their home. Chair Winchester said all garages are capped at a certain size. Ms. Tezza stated that size was seven hundred fifty (750) sf. Mr. Bryan is very concerned about increasing lot coverage, he understands the desire to lower homes, but he feels that people will still try to get the biggest building possible. He feels there needs to be stricter boundaries on setbacks for the second story or else there will be architects who can find ways around the limitations. Mr. Visser asked what he meant by setbacks and Mr. Bryan said the second story so that the mass of the second floor is not restricted to the perimeter with an open space in the middle, like a castle. Chair Winchester reiterated that all of the other design guidelines would be in place. Ms. Wilson verified that what was being discussed was principal building square footage, the heated footprint of the house. She said this process would not lead to bigger houses, it would just redistribute it to the lower floor. She went on to say that she thought lot coverage was really principal building coverage in this diagram. Ms. Coste was nervous about the DRB having discretionary authority. It was asked how, due to Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) maps changing, can you restrict someone from building as high as they want. Chair Winchester said the Town does that now, homes are restricted to eight (8) feet above finished grade.

Mr. Millimet asked why not just set a limit, with no discretionary increases. Ms. Bohan said she had studied the design review guidelines of four (4) different municipalities. She said that part of the DRB application shows that the Town defines impervious coverage and total principal square foot coverage, then it shows the allowances the DRB can give. She says it was told to her that if there was no DRB, then there would be less creativity and more vertical boxes. Ms. Bohan then stated that makes it difficult to set a hard limit and that all situations are different. Mr. Fava stated that flexibility was needed to allow the DRB to be formed, so people would come to the DRB. He said in Charleston, most of the line items fall into a zoning category whereas on Sullivan's Island it is the DRB. Mr. Millimet stated that if given a limit, most architects would not take pride in a vertical box. Ms. Tezza said it was happening before the DRB, people were wanting to build the biggest possible house and ended up with those boxes. She stated that now with a DRB, there are no boxes but there are a lot of big houses. Ms. Tezza went on to say that she believed the DRB is allowed to give too much relief, there needs to be a compromise.

Ms. Wilson feels the DRB is very important to creativity of design, they need more support and power. She feels that all homes should go to the DRB and that the architects need to work harder to meet the expectations. Ms. Poletti knows that the forms are tedious but that they work because it keeps the Town unique. Mr. Daly feels that limiting the square footage is a good thing. He feels that houses look smaller when they are broken up and spread out.

Ms. Geer feels that 25% is too much but she does not want to tie the hands of the DRB and the 10% can only be given in very unique situations. The DRB has helped create unusual houses and that is what makes the island special.

Mr. Bryan feels it is odd to allow discretion to 2 Boards that overlap. There is no longer a need to justify the DRB by granting discretionary increases. It would be easy to just have all houses go to the DRB and set defined restrictions, with no allowances. Then the BZA could deal with all of the unique situations. He feels that neighborhood compatibility is very poorly defined in the current ordinance and that is the only measure of the current DRB. Chair Winchester said it is so the Town can have a say in how historic properties are renovated, also that he has been a long-time critic of the DRB but they have also done a lot of good work.

Ms. Perkis is against any increase in what can be built. Chair Winchester asked if it was possible to separate the 2 different proposals by the strawman, leave lot coverage and go back to square footage to come up with something that will address the problem. Ms. Wilson feels that allowing more of the square footage to be on the first floor is a good thing, not a bigger house just a shift in the ratio. She also feels that the DRB does need to be given some power to assist someone who is up against a design challenge.

Mr. Millimet feels that stormwater drainage is one of the biggest problems the Town has at this time. Ms. Poletti stated that now if you are constructing a new home or adding square footage to an existing home, you have to have an engineer design a stormwater plan and it has made a big difference.

Mr. Fava said it is possible to comply with Sullivan's Island but still have issues with water drainage due to the lack of a drainage system by the South Carolina Department of Transportation (SCDOT). He said the DRB application process is very complicated, but he also thinks the DRB is very important, generally ending in a better project. He also stated the Town needs a design professional to help the Zoning department. Chair Winchester said the purpose of the Study Group is to recommend changes to the ordinance, he asked Mr. Fava for recommendations he would give. Mr. Fava said one way would be to limit the allowances the DRB could offer. He stated the DRB could say "no" more often, but they also need the tools to do that.

Mr. Coish said the DRB had been very picky and the history of the DRB shows it is heading in the right direction. He also feels the application is fine. He asked Mr. Fava what he would like to see gone from the application. Mr. Fava said he would like to see it simplified. He said that the application for City of Charleston is one (1) page. He feels the DRB should overlook design but that any increases or allowances are a zoning issue. Ms. Coste asked if it is possible the application is Charleston is shorter due to an historic standard already in use. Mr. Fava said somewhat. Ms. Coste asked if the Town had some sort of historic standard that it follows. Ms. Bohan said that the standard followed is the Department of Interior (DOI) standard.

**Motion:** A motion was made by Ms. Bohan, in reference to §21-27 C., that the Historic Preservation and Design Study Group recommend a reduction in DRB discretionary authority from 25% to, up to, 10% for new construction; seconded by Ms. Tezza.

### **Discussion**

**Manda Poletti** - Asked if this was just speaking about elevated homes. Ms. Bohan said all new construction, elevated or not. Ms. Poletti thought the percentage was being used as an incentive to keep homes down low, not across the board. That means there is no incentive to keep homes lower, except for the ability to have a garage. Ms. Bohan said it would take the pressure off of the DRB. Ms. Poletti asked the architects in the room if their clients would be more likely to keep their house low if they could get the same DRB allowance for going up. Ms. Wilson feels that the DRB application needs more requirements for compatibility standards and the architects should be able to submit a clear application, so the Board is able to see and understand what is being discussed. Mr. Fava said it would depend on the homeowner, they all have a different idea of what they want.

**Michael Daly** - Said Ms. Wilson makes sense, if you can spread out the first floor and give more opportunity to use space, the second floor will work itself out.

**Aussie Geer** - Agrees that even with the 10%, some people will elevate anyway. She feels at least it is a tool for the DRB to encourage people to keep their homes low.

**Elizabeth Tezza** - Agrees with the motion and feels the opinion of the architects is valid. If there is a hardship, they can go to the BZA. She supports reducing the discretionary authority of the DRB but still allowing them some discretion. She feels that the island does not want the houses to all be the same but that some of the new houses are too big.

Chair Winchester feels that the term “neighborhood compatibility” has not served well. The Town owes the DRB something better, with stronger language, to properly instruct the DRB as to what the 10% is for. He feels that one criteria for the 10% should be to lower the house, and another should encompass all of the other design guidelines. He agrees with Ms. Poletti that there should be some incentive to lower the house, but the DRB should also be allowed to say when it does not make sense to lower a house.

Ms. Tezza said the language is “up to 10%” and that is where the subjectivity of the DRB comes into play, when it is sent to the Planning Commission have it sent with a discussion point as to what the DRB should consider before granting any allowance.

Ms. Poletti said the Planning Commission could refine that language so it is not so subjective.

**Motion:** A motion was made by Ms. Bohan, in reference to §21-27 C., that the Historic Preservation and Design Study Group recommend a reduction in DRB discretionary authority from 25% to, up to, 10% for new construction; seconded by Ms. Tezza. This motion passed unanimously, with a 7-0 vote.

Mr. Millimet asked if someone will still need to apply if they stay low. Chair Winchester and Ms. Tezza stated that all of the other guidelines would still have to be met

Chair Winchester asked if there was any sort of support to change the lot coverage allowances or leave the same. Ms. Perkis said she would like to see the DRB lot coverage discretionary authority removed. Mr. Millimet feels that any time you allow discretion it can lead to problems, why would you increase lot coverage. Mr. Fava said if you are trying to lower homes, you need to allow more lot coverage. Ms. Wilson said it is not increasing lot coverage as there is an island wide limit on coverage, it is just changing the footprint of the house. It was asked if the height of the roof an issue. Chair Winchester said thirty-eight (38) is the maximum height for roofs. He also said that lowering effectively reduces the mass of a home. It was also asked if people could not still build to the maximum height with a spread out first floor. Ms. Bohan said that was out of scale and that she had never seen that. Chair Winchester said it would still have to go to the DRB and they would not approve that. Ms. Bohan said it would go before staff first and that they would not approve it, also that the third story limit. Wurthmann said it was limited to two hundred (200) sf.

## **2. Design Guidelines: Discussion of potentially establishing design guidelines for renovating historic properties and any new construction within historic districts.**

Chair Winchester stated that Ms. Bohan had done a lot of work on this and that the letter from Christine Butler was helpful to make him see that there has to be some transition between the DOI standards that apply to a historic landmark and a residential beach community.

Ms. Bohan stated that this will not change any of the DOI standards, just supplement them. She had researched other beach towns to see what they used a method. She feels that if the application and some verbiage for direction was put on the website, that would be a stop gap to applicants. They could see what they can and can't do. She presented the Mount Pleasant and Old Village narrative, that explains their guidelines. It shows what to do and what not to do, including the materials list and streetscape. The DOI standards would still be followed, but it would be an informative tool for architects. Ms. Bohan stated that she had studied Martha's Vineyard, North Carolina, Massachusetts, Georgia and South Carolina. It would provide a clear distinction between what is appropriate for a new build versus renovating. She strongly suggests that any project must come before the DRB, unless staff feels that it does not.

Chair Winchester asked if she was suggesting that staff maintain discretionary options to deny a project. She said that yes, staff would still do what they do currently. This is just to give the DRB and the public more information.

Chair Winchester said the discussion right now is just whether or not guidelines are a good idea and something that should be pursued, not what should go into them.

Mr. Coish likes the idea, that providing photos is a big help. Ms. Poletti asked if it was known how many projects go to the DRB, as it would be a big increase if all had to go before them. Mr. Fava agreed, and a way to mitigate that is to allow staff to approve some things.

It was asked if the purpose of that would be to make sure everything looks the same, like an homeowner's association (HOA). Chair Winchester said it would be to avoid that. Ms. Perkis



stated that she thought there were design guidelines, to which it was stated that there are. Mr. Fava said they should be revised and re-evaluated. Chair Winchester said that the issues brought up, porches, driveways, materials, would all be in there.

**Motion:** A motion was made by Ms. Tezza to recommend the development of design guidelines for the Town of Sullivan's Island to be utilized by the DRB and staff; seconded by Ms. Geer. This motion passed unanimously, with a 7-0 vote.

### **Discussion**

Mr. Fava wanted to stress that they should be guidelines, not imperatives. Ms. Tezza agreed as there are personal property rights.

Mr. Visser asked if it should be amended to give further guidance to the Planning Commission as to whether it should include materials. He feels the Planning Commission would benefit from further guidance. Ms. Bohan said that DOI standards would still be followed.

Chair Winchester asked what is the benefit of all new construction projects having to go to the DRB. Mr. Fava says it might be a little more difficult for the applicants, but it would serve the community better. He said that he could follow all of the standards and guidelines and still build a very unattractive house. Chair Winchester said it was a big issue to send all construction to the DRB as there are fundamental property rights.

Ms. Bohan felt it would prevent, or at least diminish speculative (spec) houses. She feels that all projects should come to the DRB, except for staff guided repairs or small projects. Chair Winchester asked what a project would come before the DRB for if not to ask for allowances. Ms. Bohan said for neighborhood compatibility.

Ms. Poletti said that is a good idea for the current DRB, but what about ten (10) years down the road and giving too much control to the DRB.

Mr. Daly said that there aren't that many lots left. He also said that spec builders are trying to build the least expensive house, with a cheap architect, essentially building a box.

Mr. Visser asked about the situation if there was a natural disaster and there were a lot of construction projects at once. Then it would be very difficult.

### **D. Discussion of next meeting's agenda items**

Chair Winchester said he would like more data, about how many are staff approved and how many come to the DRB. Ms. Wilson said that on Kiawah Island all projects go to the DRB and it sometimes can take six (6) to eight (8) months to get before them, but that is not necessarily a bad thing.

Chair Winchester said this would be discussed next week, whether all building projects and new construction need to go before the DRB.

Mr. Millimet said that staff approvals could get batch approval by the DRB, meaning that if staff thinks they are ok then the DRB will approve.

Chair Winchester stated that the DRB would need very good design guidelines, so they could turn down bad projects.

Mr. Coish agreed with what Mr. Daly said about there not being that many vacant properties left to build on.

Ms. Tezza said that small homes are being bought that are less than sixty (60) years old and then knocked down to build large homes. They are essentially making empty lots.

Chair Winchester said next week it would be discussed whether all new construction should go before the DRB and also accessory structures.

**E. General public input and questions.**

Ms. Tezza stated that she will not be able to attend the final meeting and asked if the Study Group will be able to see the final report before it is sent to Town Council.

Chair Winchester said he will discuss with everyone their thoughts and that he and Ms. Geer would draft it.

**F. Adjourn.**

There being no further public discussion and no new business, the meeting adjourned at approximately 6:06pm.

**Motion:** A motion was made to adjourn by Ms. Tezza; this motion passed unanimously with a 7-0 vote.

Respectfully submitted,

Pamela Otto,

Historic Preservation and Design Study Group staff member

\*Correspondence received by the Study Group attached



**Creating a Design Guideline Document: Suggestions for Sullivan's Island DRB Processes**  
**Prepared by Christina R. Butler, member of the Sullivan's Island Preservation and Design**  
**Study Group**

**9 May 2022**

John Winchester, Committee Chair of the Sullivan's Island Preservation and Design Study Group and Beverly Bohan, Vice Chair of the Sullivan's Island Design Review Board, have noted applicant complaints about the length and complexity of the DRB application process. Other applicants have voiced frustration at the uncertainties between preservation standards and zoning realities. While some ambiguity in the application process is unavoidable because each existing building, and the contextual setting for each proposed new building, is unique, certain resources can be created to both streamline the permit application and help applicants navigate the design process. First, a Sullivan's Island Design Guidelines document can be created that will give applicants a greater frame of reference for what types of buildings and materials are appropriate to Sullivan's Island and help them prepare for the application process.<sup>1</sup> The application form can then be then streamlined and shortened. Lastly, an updated architectural inventory of the island should be created, considering post-Hurricane Hugo changes and recent development.

Based on successful existing design guidelines and recent problematic projects on the island, the following should be included in the proposed Sullivan's Island document:

- Common architectural characteristics based on subtropical coastal setting: porches, shutters, t-shaped floor plans to increase breezes and cross ventilation, transom and gallery doors, etc.
- Prevalent historic stylistic features: Victorian, folk/vernacular cottage, carpenter Gothic
- Appropriate materials and limiting use of modern/composite materials on historic houses
- Appropriate size, massing, and lot placement
- Dos and Don'ts. Provide successful examples and articulate what went wrong with unsuccessful ones.
  - o Do use neighboring historic buildings' style, scale, and set back to guide your design
  - o Do Remember that zoning deals mostly with height scale mass and use, while the DRB also addresses aesthetics
  - o Do use Sullivan's Island architectural character to inform your designs
  - o Don't design additions that are jarring and do not 'mesh' with the character of the island.
- The Dept. of Interior Secretary Standards as applied to Sullivan's Island.<sup>2</sup>
- Clearer distinction of what is appropriate for a new build versus renovating or adding onto a historic structure

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<sup>1</sup> Town of Mount Pleasant and Beaufort County have created 30-40 page design guideline documents that can used as a frame of reference to create a Sullivan's Island guide. Similar, the City of Charleston creates area character appraisals to guide preservation work in unique areas of the city.

<sup>2</sup> See appendix

The following sources are helpful existing documents that should inform an updated inventory or character appraisal:

- “Historic Resources of Sullivan’s Island” multiple property documentation form compiled by Schneider Historic Preservation LLC in 2007. <https://sullivansisland.sc.gov/sites/default/files/Documents/Historic%20Preservation/National%20Register%20Historic%20Places%20Nomination%20Documents.pdf>
- “A Study of the vernacular beach cottage typologies of Sullivan’s Island” by Amelia Millar. (Clemson MSHP Thesis, 2010).
- “Historical and Architectural Survey of Charleston County” by Preservation Consultants, Inc., 1992

## **Appendix: The Standards**

The DOI Secretary of Interior Standards for Rehabilitation are intended as general suggestions to guide work to existing historic buildings. Rehabilitation is defined as “the act or process of making possible a compatible use for a property through repair, alterations, and additions while preserving those portions or features which convey its historical, cultural, or architectural values.” This approach is used broadly and includes both residential and commercial buildings and often incorporates an adaptive use, such as converting a church to a dwelling. There are broad type of building uses and sizes that rehabilitation might be applied to, but on Sullivan’s Island the term generally applies to renovating and often adding onto an existing historic residence. Given the narrow scope of rehabilitation on the island, some of the DOI Standards are more applicable than others. Similarly, while there are different approaches to adding onto a building (matching, compatible, and contrasting), some communities and their DRBs or Board of Architectural Reviews prefer certain approaches to others.

It is necessary, therefore, for the proposed Sullivan’s Island design guidelines document to give a clear interpretation of the Standards. Standard 9 reads as follows: “9. New, additions, exterior alterations, or related new construction will not destroy historic materials, features, and spatial relationships that characterize the property. *The new work will be differentiated from the old and will be compatible with the historic materials, features, size, scale, and proportion, and massing to protect the integrity of the property and its environment.*” \*\*note that the Standard does not give favor to now recommend contrasting additions. Differentiation does not need to mean a different or modern style, or a juxtaposition of materials. Sullivan’s DRB might interpret differentiation to mean differing in size to the original building, creating some sort of visual break like a hyphen or orienting siding materials differently, or using more or less ornamentation than the existing historic building. For example, a successful addition to a one and a half story, 1,500 square foot wood frame Victorian cottage could include a stick framed addition of similar height, recessed behind the main house to defer to the initial mass, and using traditional material like wood siding or Cementous board with a wood profile, but using less “gingerbread” on the eaves of the addition to demonstrate that the addition is not original (ie, not a matching addition, but not contrasting.) Again, “good” and “bad” examples and visuals would be helpful.