

Height Restrictions and Variances

This position paper was produced by TEAM Punta Gorda in 2005. It serves as a reminder that the conversation on LDR's is not new. Nor is TEAM's position.

Recent public debate and Charlotte Sun news articles about building height restrictions and variances to those restrictions in Punta Gorda has led TEAM Punta Gorda to offer its position on these matters. We consider each building adding a unique contribution to the community. That contribution can be defined by several factors. Evaluating a new building strictly by height overlooks other equally significant factors.

Citizens Master Plan 2005 identifies a clear preference for buildings of varying heights to create an “articulated” skyline in Punta Gorda, i.e., a skyline that varies in height. Specific Land Development Regulations (LDRs) must be adopted to protect the expectations of citizens who want to retain their small-town atmosphere. At the same time, LDRs establish a set of construction requirements so developers can achieve an acceptable profit within the limits of those LDRs, i.e., height, width, green-space, proximity to lot lines, etc. TEAM Punta Gorda generally supports the LDRs currently in place and are sensitive to the fact that in creating rigid height limits, we are essentially encouraging developers to build “to the limit”. By saying that the maximum standard building height in the downtown area is 50 ft., we may be encouraging every developer to build to that level. This is unattractive and not the intent of the code.

We hope that in applying LDRs to future construction in Punta Gorda, City officials will look at each project individually and, through persuasion and negotiation, help each developer agree on the most appealing as well as a building height that is financially acceptable. In our view, some buildings should be limited to two or three stories to compliment the size and scale of streets and existing nearby structures. It may be appropriate for some buildings to exceed 40, 50, or even 60 feet. If variances are to be considered, they must still fit the overall scale of the community around each project. Not by applying arbitrary numbers but by using proven formulas that would determine proper scale. When each proposed building is looked at as part of our total potential skyline, and if City planners and others value articulation in that skyline, then an eye-appealing variety in building heights will become an asset to our new Punta Gorda.

On what should decisions be based? First and foremost is location. Some locations are more height sensitive than others and we want to make sure that Punta Gorda, especially historic downtown, does not become overtly vertical. Second is structure size. TEAM Punta Gorda will encourage the City to study the appropriate proportions for the kind of building heights that we deserve. Third, what is the total impact on the desired small-town atmosphere when all buildings are looked at as a whole? And finally, because taller buildings generally create greater density of people, density issues must be addressed separate from height – i.e., a taller building on a small footprint to allow for more green-space or public walkways may be preferable to a short building built out to the side lot-lines with no greenspace, providing planned population density does not change! There are many other considerations in determining proper building height, but these four are among the primary issues outlined in Citizens Master Plan 2005.

In any case, TEAM Punta Gorda intends to apply this “individual” logic to height restrictions and other variances for each project presented to us to ensure each new building will make a significant contribution to our new city. We will continue our support to the City of Punta Gorda managers, planners, plan reviewers and City Council members as they make individual decisions on each project that comes before them. We will continue to gather information on each project, negotiate with developers to ensure Citizens Master Plan 2005 concepts are included, and we will make all this information freely available to our partners in reconstruction, the citizens, and the City of Punta Gorda, because Together Everyone Achieves More!

