

Solution to McMansion construction problem in ZRR Subtitle D

The danger of McMansion construction in our neighborhoods persists under the terms of the zoning changes proposed by the DC Office of Planning to the Zoning Commission.

There is a rather simple solution to this problem: modifying the confusing “averaging” method for determining height. The averaging method, while well-understood in real estate circles, is both a mystery and a contradiction to most citizens.

The height limit currently proposed by OP is 40 feet, with a limit of three stories. How is it that we might see from the street a legal McMansion approximately 50 feet in height?

Consider an obvious example: a new three-story residence is permitted above a full, finished basement with unfinished attic space within a stick-built roof (as opposed to computer-designed roof trusses that block development of habitable space in the attic). Let’s say that the footprint of the house is maximized on the lot.

First is a finished, habitable level measuring 9 feet floor to ceiling, with 4 feet minus 1 inch projecting above the natural grade of the lot. OP calls this level a cellar, not a basement, because it projects less than 4 feet above grade, even though it has wells for windows and an entry door.

Second, let us allow for the combined elevation of three floors. Stipulate 16 inches for floor trusses, 3/4-inch plywood subfloor, and 3/4-inch hardwood flooring on each floor, plus 1/2-inch drywall ceilings; that allows a total 4 feet for floors alone. Let’s say the headroom on each floor is 8 feet; that’s 24 feet plus 4 feet of additional elevation, for a total of 28 feet.

We have arrived at the top of the wall on the third floor – at the “top plate” or horizontal two-by-four (or –six) that caps the wall studs on the permitted top floor. Thus far, according to OP, we have a “cellar” (actually a finished basement) plus three-stories totaling 32 feet (minus 1 inch) in regulatory height.

Third, we build a triangular roof with dormers that measures 16 feet, 2 inches from the top plate to the peak of the roof. How is that? Because a peaked roof’s “average” height is defined as the distance from the top plate to the roof peak divided by two.

Now we have a house greater than 48 feet in height as seen from the street while OP says the building is only 40 feet tall.

After the house gets its final inspection, the builder or owner illegally finishes the attic. How much headroom is there? Roof rafters and floor joists covered with plywood subtract at most a few feet of elevation. Although the walls are sloped, at least a half-story of 8-foot ceiling, plus lots of closet storage can be finished in the attic.

The final result is a five-story McMansion nearly 50 feet high that towers over neighborhood homes – a McMansion legally constructed within the 40-foot residential height limit articulated by OP in the proposed zoning regulations now before the DC Zoning Commission.

A maximum height limit of 40 feet, together with the three-story residential limit, would do much to prevent construction of McMansions in our neighborhoods.

To accommodate height computation for houses on either flat or sloped lots, the building height measuring point (BHMP) should be established at the midpoint of the building restriction line.

Thus, provisions of Subtitle D appropriate to measurement of principal residential building height should be modified to provide for a maximum of 40 feet measured from the mid-point of the building restriction line (BHMP) to the highest point of the roof or parapet. By the same token, accessory buildings should be limited to a maximum of 20 feet (which, due to “averaging,” is equivalent to the current 16-foot regulatory limit).

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