

New home design standards poised for approval

Reduced height and lot coverage limits in store for new Highland, Mac-Grove homes

By JANE McCLURE

New residential design standards meant to reduce the height and mass of new homes constructed in Highland Park and Macalester-Groveland are expected to be adopted by the St. Paul City Council on July 22. The council's approval will cap months of debate over ways to stem the increasing incidence in those neighborhoods of the teardown of more modest and perhaps more architecturally interesting homes from the early to mid-20th century and their replacement with larger suburban-style homes that can overwhelm a city lot and

rob neighboring residents of natural light and a sense of openness.

However, several local groups, including Save Our St. Paul Neighborhoods, do not think the new design standards will be enough. These groups say they will continue to pursue other changes, including a moratorium on teardowns, a revision in how the city defines home teardowns and replacements versus home remodeling, and the establishment of new conservation districts as a means of preserving the character of neighborhoods.

The new design standards would reduce the maximum height of new houses from 30 feet at the top of the sidewall to 26, 24 or 22 feet, depending on the type of residential zoning for the property. The maximum lot coverage for new homes or homes with new additions would be changed from 35 percent for the principal structure to a total of 45 percent for the principal

structure and any accessory buildings. Also, any sidewalls on the house that are longer than 35 feet would have to be broken up with recesses, bays or other architectural features that are at least 1 foot deep and 6 feet long.

Also slated for adoption are new citywide design standards that would require any home additions of 120 or more square feet that are visible from the street to have doors and windows that take up at least 10 percent of each side of the addition. (This provision currently applies only to the sides of new homes that face the street.) Home additions that are not visible from the street would have to be as large as 250 square feet before the 10 percent minimum for doors and windows applies.

A St. Paul Planning Commission report showed that at the end of 2013 the average

1◀ RESIDENTIAL DESIGN

single-family home in Macalester-Groveland and Highland Park had 1,590 finished square feet. However, the average finished square feet of homes in those neighborhoods built between 2005 and 2013 was 2,673—an increase of 68 percent.

The teardown and replacement of homes is not just a problem in Highland and Macalester-Groveland, according to City Council member Chris Tolbert, whose Ward 3 includes those neighborhoods. It is causing controversy in other neighborhoods as well, he said. Though he will vote to approve the new design standards, Tolbert said he will continue to work on other measures. “The hardest part is that there is no silver bullet for this,” he said.

Ward 5 City Council member Amy Brendmoen said she is hearing concerns about new residential construction in the Como Park and North End neighborhoods, especially building additions that are out of scale. She said the city needs to strike a balance, allowing people

to improve their homes so they will continue to want to live in St. Paul but without infringing on the rights of their neighbors.

Testifying in favor of the new residential design standards at a July 15 public hearing were three St. Paul residents.

Ramsey Hill resident and developer Lou Sudheimer told the City Council that the new design standards will add control and “common sense” to the issue. “I’m chagrined to see other developers abusing the rules,” he said. Sudheimer urged the council to continue working on the issue. According to him, homes in the city need to look like they belong in the city, with front porches instead of rear decks and a size and scale that fits neighborhoods. “We need to protect what we have,” he said.

Tom Dodder of Macalester-Groveland agreed. “Most of the new houses I’ve seen that replaced houses that were torn down are too large compared to nearby houses,” he wrote to the City Council. “Some of the houses are so large there is al-



With the proposed new limits on height and lot coverage and requirements for architectural details on sidewalls, this new home under construction in the 1600 block of James Avenue may have needed variances.

PHOTO BY BRAD STAUFFER

most no back yard.”

Macalester-Groveland resident Karen Jeffords-Brown said she came to the hearing to put a face on the issue and speak as a person affected by teardowns and large new homes in her neighborhood. “I don’t want

to see huge swaths of Ward 3 taken out for larger homes,” she said.

Neighbors have been told that the families moving in are demanding larger homes, Jeffords-Brown said, but those large new homes are going unsold for long periods. “We’re

not buying that explanation,” she said. While there will always be a need for new homes to be built and for deteriorated homes to be torn down, she said, those new homes need to fit the character of the neighborhood.