

White Paper: On The Utility of Tracking Available Density/Dwelling Units

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Introduction

In a 2/4/24 email sent to the City Council, former City Councilor and Planning Board Chairperson Dr. William Trotter described watching several recent Planning Board meetings where a Board member asked for a tally of the current amount of available density in different areas of our City. The response from staff was that such a tally was not available.

He went on to describe that during his tenure on the City Council and Planning Board (from 2004 to 2016) this data was tracked on a regular basis with detailed charts by zoning area reviewed on a periodic basis. According to Dr. Trotter, the purpose of this was to help track and manage overall density consistent with density control goals. He requested that the City Council direct City Staff to reinstate this procedure.

After presenting this request to the City Council at the 2/5/24 meeting I was directed by my fellow Councilors to take the lead on investigating this and report back to them. I reviewed the available City of Marco Island documents related to the issue and interviewed Dan Smith Director of Growth Management, Mike McNees, City Manager, Jason Bailey, Chairperson Planning Board and several residents regarding my task. This White Paper is a review of my investigation.

Some Definitions

Density - Measurement of the number of people or residential units allowed per unit of land, such as residents or employees per acre as defined by §163.3164, Fla.Stat (Marco Island Planning Board, 2021a)

Density- Density, residential means the number of residential dwelling units permitted per gross acre of land and determined by dividing the number of units by the total area of residential land within the boundaries of a lot or parcel (Marco Island Department of Growth Management, 2023a).

Maximum Density - The maximum number of dwellings within the City of Marco Island is limited to 22,775, or an overall density of 3.37 dwelling units per acre.

Available Density – There is no definition in any official city documents of this term. It is falsely assumed by many that if you subtract the number of developed commercial and residential dwelling units from the total allowable units within a zone or the city as a whole, one would get a measure of the “available density”. From a practical standpoint, the concept of available density only applies on a parcel-by-parcel basis since dwelling/density units are not transferrable

Intensity - A measure of the extent to which land may be developed or used, including the consumption or use of the space above, on, or below ground; the measurement of the use of or demand on natural resources; and the measurement of the use of or demand on facilities and services as defined in §163.3164, Fla. Stat ((Marco Island Planning Board, 2021b)

Intensity- Intensity means an objective measurement of the extent to which land may be developed or used, including the consumption or use of the space above, on, or below ground; the measurement of the use of or demand on natural resources; or the measurement of the use of or demand on facilities and services. (Marco Island Department of Growth management, 2023b)

Zoning - the act or process of partitioning a city, town, or borough into zones reserved for different purposes (such as residence or business). (Mirriam Webster Online Dictionary, 2024)

Findings

One of the primary concerns expressed by the City Council regarding this issue was the utility of assigning this task to the staff. In other words, what would the City Council or staff do with the data? The Council wanted the purpose and utility of keeping a running tabulation of available density/dwelling units clarified.

From a common-sense perspective it would seem that there would be some intrinsic value in having a running tab of “available dwelling/commercial units” in order to manage future growth in specific zones. Specifically, it would seem that when new residential and commercial projects were proposed it would be easy for planners to see how these projects would impact the density (and therefore the intensity) of that specific zone. It would also seem that this knowledge would help planners prevent zones from being overdeveloped (more residential or commercial units proposed than allowed in a specific zone).

In reality, there is little additional regulatory value in this information since the limits of development per parcel of land are already defined and the Planning Board or City Council cannot say no to a project that meets the zoning requirements regardless of what the city’s overall “available density” is. This information would however inform the Planning Board and City Council in the event of a rezone request.

A second finding I uncovered was that there is a certain level of misunderstanding of density and how it is limited, assigned, and measured. Any calculation of *available* density must start with a clear understanding of overall density in general and zone-by-zone designations.

Overall density for Marco Island was determined by our founding mothers and fathers to be limited to 22,775 total dwelling units. Dividing that number by our total acreage that comes out to 3.37 dwelling units/acre. According to Mary Holden, Planning Manager, “The maximum number of dwelling units was estimated by our founders to protect the small-town character, quality of life and health, safety and welfare on the island (Naples News 2023).”

For residents who have lived here since our city was incorporated, the *perception* of density has changed, as the 22,775 total dwelling units have gotten closer and closer to buildout. The 3.37units/acre formula hasn't changed, but the perception of it that residents have has evolved as the empty lots on their streets has disappeared, their views of the water have been crowded out, and the number of cars on their streets has increased. This is the *reality* of living in what was a mostly undeveloped *small town* and watching it grow into a *medium sized coastal resort city*.

In other words, *experiencing density* and the intensity that goes along with it is different *from estimating the effects of a bunch of numbers* and hoping that the vision they create matches the future reality that evolves. No one can predict the future or what it will feel like for those living through it. Elected officials like our founding mothers and fathers do their best regarding estimating allowable density and hope for the rest.

The third finding I uncovered is a problem with our current definitions of density. As defined in both of the city documents referenced earlier in this paper, density is a *ratio* obtained by dividing the number of *residential* dwelling units permitted by law by a unit of land (on Marco Island we use 1 acre). In neither definition is there any inclusion of the term *commercial density or commercial units*. Both documents only refer to residential units or residential dwelling units.

The omission of commercial units adds to the confusion many residents have about density. It also makes it difficult to provide a running tally of *available density* because under the current definitions such a measure would not include *commercial units*. The omission of the words commercial density or commercial units from the official definitions included in our city documents also leaves one wondering how many of the 22,775 total allowable units are something other than residential in nature.

This brings us to the final finding, the lack of an agreed-upon methodology for obtaining an accurate tally of available density. In order to obtain a comprehensive measure of available density one would have to go zone by zone and tally the maximum number of commercial and residential dwelling units allowed by our Future Land Use Map in the Comprehensive Plan and then subtract the occupied number of commercial and residential units from it. This could be done using computerized searches or actual door-to-door field counts. In addition, it would involve searching variances and other allowed changes to the use of individual properties.

Once this initial count is obtained the database could be added to as commercial or residential units are added or deleted.

Conclusions

While the research for this paper was originally intended to assess the utility of providing an ongoing tally of available density/dwelling units, it has uncovered problems with the way density is actually defined in our Code of Ordinances and our Comprehensive Plan. If density is really a ratio that combines residential and commercial units divided by a unit of acreage, we need to

define it as such. How does one come up with an accurate tally of *available* density units without having an accurate tally of total allowable residential *and* commercial units?

Desired Action

Motion to have staff develop a strategy or keeping a running tally of available commercial and residentially density units.

References

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