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McMANSIONS

SUPERSIZED HOUSES, SUPERSIZED REGULATIONS

By JENNIFER EVANS-COWLEY



While one legendary fast food chain is getting rid of its “supersize” menu, homebuilders are continuing to build extra-large houses to meet buyers’ demands.

A 2002 study by the National Association of Home Builders (NAHB) found that home sizes have been growing in the United States. In 1987, the size of the average new home was 1,900 square feet; by 2001, this had increased by 20 percent to an average of 2,300 square feet.

The percentage of new homes larger than 3,000 square feet has almost doubled, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. In 1988, 11 percent of new homes constructed exceeded 3,000 square feet; by 2003, this number had grown to 20 percent. Pulte Homes reports that its average new home is growing by 150 to 200 square feet every few years.

While house sizes have been increasing, household size has been decreasing. Average household size is down from 3.11 in 1970 to 2.59 in 2000, according to the Census Bureau. The average square footage of home per person is significantly increasing.

While homebuyers are demanding larger houses, lot sizes have been shrinking. Between 1987 and 2002, the average lot size decreased 6.5 percent to 16,454 square feet, according to NAHB. In suburban areas, large homes on small lots are increasing in popularity. Many developers and city planners are promoting smaller lot sizes to save costs in infrastructure and to encourage more efficient use of land.

A variety of terms are used to describe supersized homes including “McMansion,” “monster house,” “starter castle” and “megahome.” Similarly creative terms such as “garage Mahal”

describe the three- or four-car (or more) attached garages. There are two types of McMansions: mass-built houses in suburban areas and those built in existing neighborhoods of smaller homes.

Conflicts sometimes arise when a large new home does not fit in with the older, smaller existing homes in a neighborhood. Concerned neighbors have lobbied local governments for regulations to prevent or minimize perceived negative effects of replacing torn-down houses with larger ones.

Proponents see McMansions as a benefit to communities. They emphasize that infill development uses existing infrastructure, reduces sprawl and revitalizes suburbs. Some assert McMansions promote reinvestment in older suburbs and replace obsolete housing.

McMansions also meet the demands of homebuyers who are looking for features new homes offer but prefer to live in established neighborhoods close to the central city. According to a study by Robert Lang of Virginia Tech University and Karen Danielson of NAHB, "the new 'supersized American dream' includes fully loaded SUVs and, yes, monster houses." The McMansion is not just a place to live, they say, but an assertion of the American sense of identity and a statement of prosperity.

Opponents argue that extra-large homes do not represent smart growth. This form of housing, they assert, increases property values and makes communities less affordable. Given the relatively small portion of the population that can afford McMansions, opponents argue that cities should be focused on providing housing for the typical resident instead.

Mark Hinshaw of LMN Architects argues that "inflicting massively oversized structures on neighborhoods that have an established pattern of small houses on small lots is the epitome of public rudeness. . . . Communities should not be catering to this kind of nouveau riche excess."

Regulating 'Monster' Homes

McMansion opponents have proposed a variety of regulatory approaches. For example, the governor of New Jersey has



PROPONENTS ASSERT
that McMansions revitalize communities by replacing obsolete housing and maximizing use of in-place infrastructure.

proposed a McMansion tax that would require homebuyers to pay a 1 percent tax on newly constructed homes valued at \$1 million or more.

In Texas, regulations are focused on controlling infill development to ensure fit with existing neighborhoods. Austin, Dallas and University Park have all adopted regulations to protect neighborhoods as infill occurs.

Austin

Austin has experienced both infill and suburban McMansion development. Because single-family homes were being demolished and replaced by large duplexes, in 2003 the city adopted an ordinance limiting duplexes to 4,000 square feet of gross floor area or six bedrooms on a 10,000-or-less square-foot lot.

For lots larger than 10,000 square feet, a floor area ratio (building area divided by land area) of 0.57 is in place. Duplex height is limited to 30 feet and two stories.

Dallas

Dallas has the most detailed McMansions regulations. In 2002, the city adopted a zoning overlay called the M Streets Conservation District.

The new zoning district covers 175 acres in the area between McCommas Boulevard, Greenville Avenue, Goodwin Avenue and U.S. 75. The neighborhood is made up primarily of middle-class Tudor homes built in the 1920s and 1930s.

The Dallas regulations are intended to protect the existing architectural and cultural attributes of the neighborhood and to ensure that new construction and remodeling is compatible with the neighborhood's original architectural styles.

The ordinance limits roof slope, height, setbacks, driveways and windows and other features. All new homes are required to be built in the High Tudor style and constructed of brick, stone or both, unless they are replacing Craftsman, Neoclassical or Spanish Revival homes.

The ordinance limits the height of new houses to 30 feet. Original homes in the neighborhood average 22 feet high.

Each new house must incorporate four of eight architectural features, such as stucco, arched doorways, cast-stone front porch columns and wood gables.

Anyone who wishes to change the exterior of a house in the area is required to obtain a conservation district permit. For more information on Dallas' ordinance, visit http://www.dallascityhall.com/dallas/eng/html/conservation_districts.html.

University Park

University Park is a Dallas suburb with 23,000 residents. The city has 8,600 homes and is the home of Southern Methodist University. Older



NEIGHBORHOOD INTEGRITY

is an issue often raised when McMansions are discussed by local governments. University Park, home to Southern Methodist University, regulates height and setback on residential construction to make new homes compatible with existing ones.

homes in this affluent area are often demolished and replaced with new homes.

The city ensures the compatibility of new construction through a variety of regulations. For example, the front setback for a house is based on the average setback along that residential block.

The city adopted a series of zoning code changes in 2001 to address development of large three-story houses. Code now limits total third-floor area to no more than 50 percent of the second-floor area.

University Park also adopted regulations governing gables on a third story. The regulations limit the size based on the width of the lot with a maximum of 180 square feet of gables. Total

window area on the third floor is limited to ten square feet on each side of the house.

For more information on University Park ordinances, visit <http://www.uptexas.com>.

Infill development in the form of McMansions can be a positive addition to neighborhoods. However, as housing sizes continue to increase and demand for town lots grows, licensees should be aware of increasing regulations governing construction of extra-large homes and of sensitive community integrity issues as well. 📍

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