



Community Open House: SPR Regulations

Commissioners' Direction

The Commissioners expressed concerns with the increasing size of homes in the unincorporated county, the rate at which sizes are increasing, sustainability, and affordability. Staff were directed to focus on:

- Reducing the current compatible size from 125% of the median to the median;
- Changing what is currently a size presumption to a size limitation;
- Clarifying the regulations and creating more certainty for applicants.

Brief History of Site Plan Review (SPR)

1993: Boulder County adopts SPR in mountainous areas

1998: Criteria added to address development impacts and neighbor concerns

1994: SPR expanded to plains

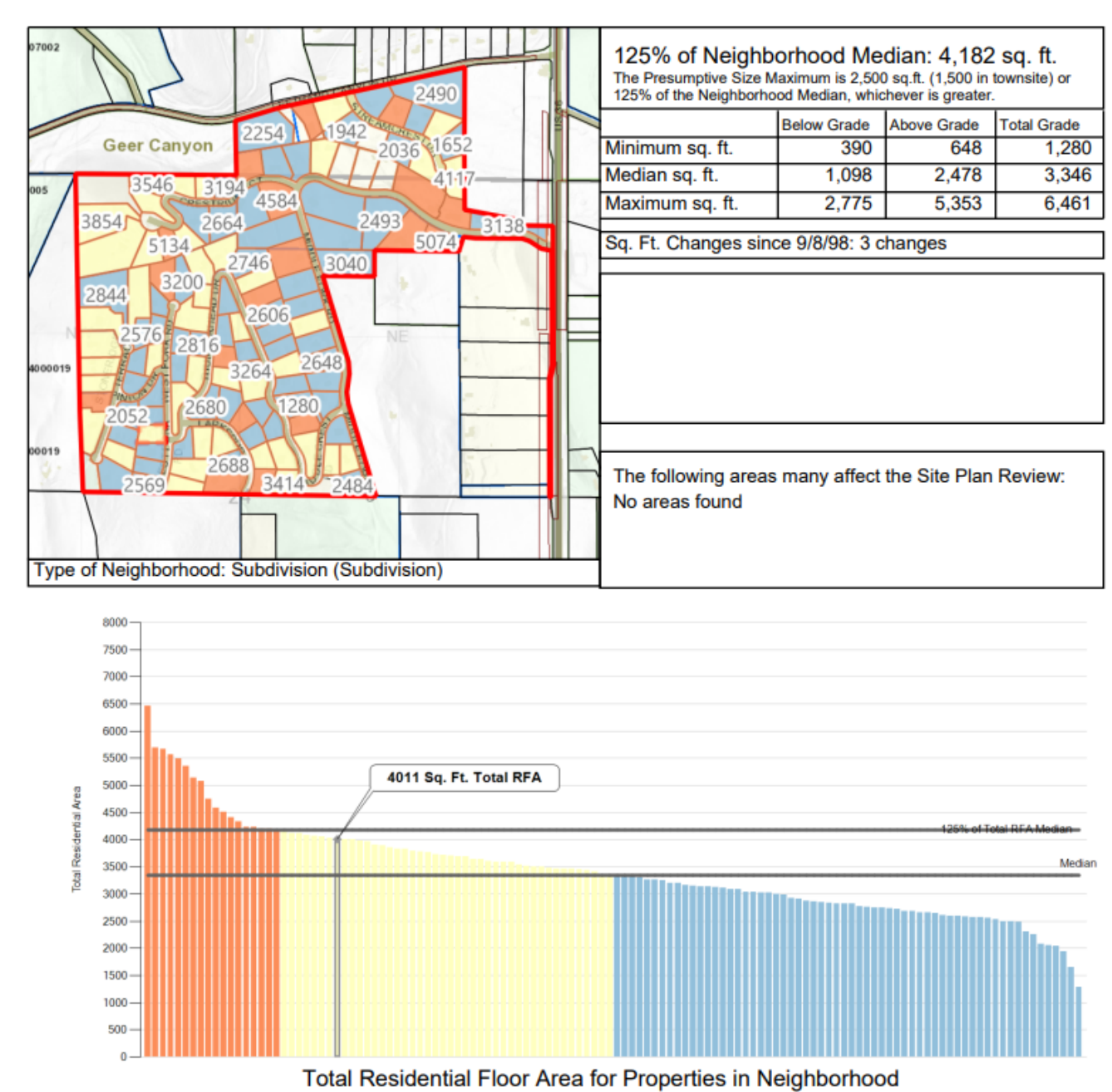
2008: Regulations updated to include a size presumption (125% of neighborhood median).



What is the size presumed to be compatible?

The size presumed to be compatible with a defined neighborhood—or size presumption—is a way for staff to measure how compatible the proposed size of new residential structures might be with the existing neighborhood. The size presumption varies depending on the defined neighborhood.

- The size presumption is 1,500 square feet of Residential Floor Area (RFA) in mapped townsites.
- In the rest of the unincorporated county, the size presumption is either 125% of the median RFA for a defined neighborhood or 2,500 square feet, whichever is larger.

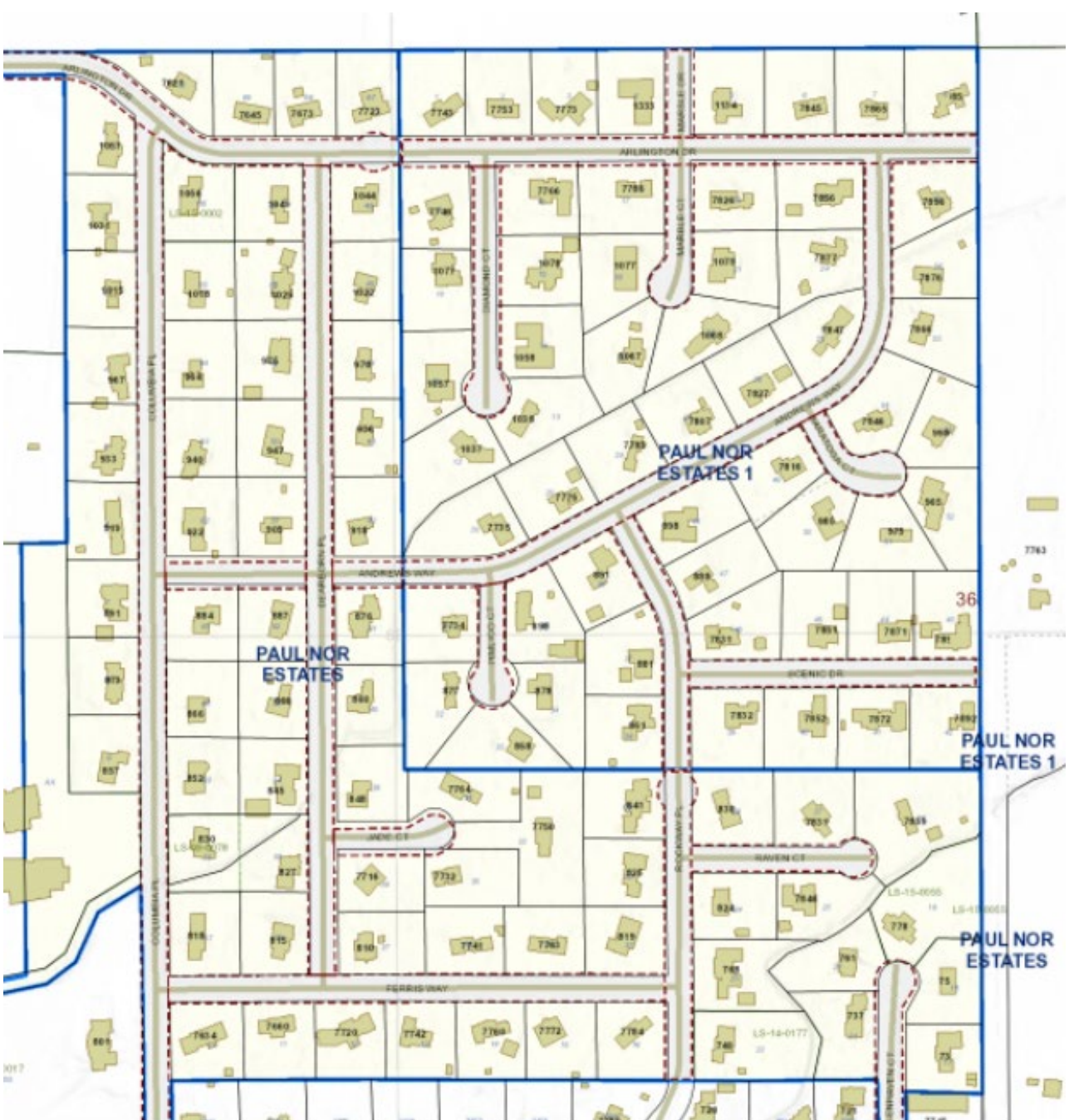


What is Residential Floor Area (RFA)?

Residential Floor Area (RFA) includes all attached and detached floor area on a parcel and includes principal (i.e., a home) and accessory structures (e.g., shed, detached garage, pool house, etc.) used, or customarily used, for residential purposes. There is an exemption of up to 400 square feet for certain structures (e.g., gazebos, detached greenhouses, carports, etc.)

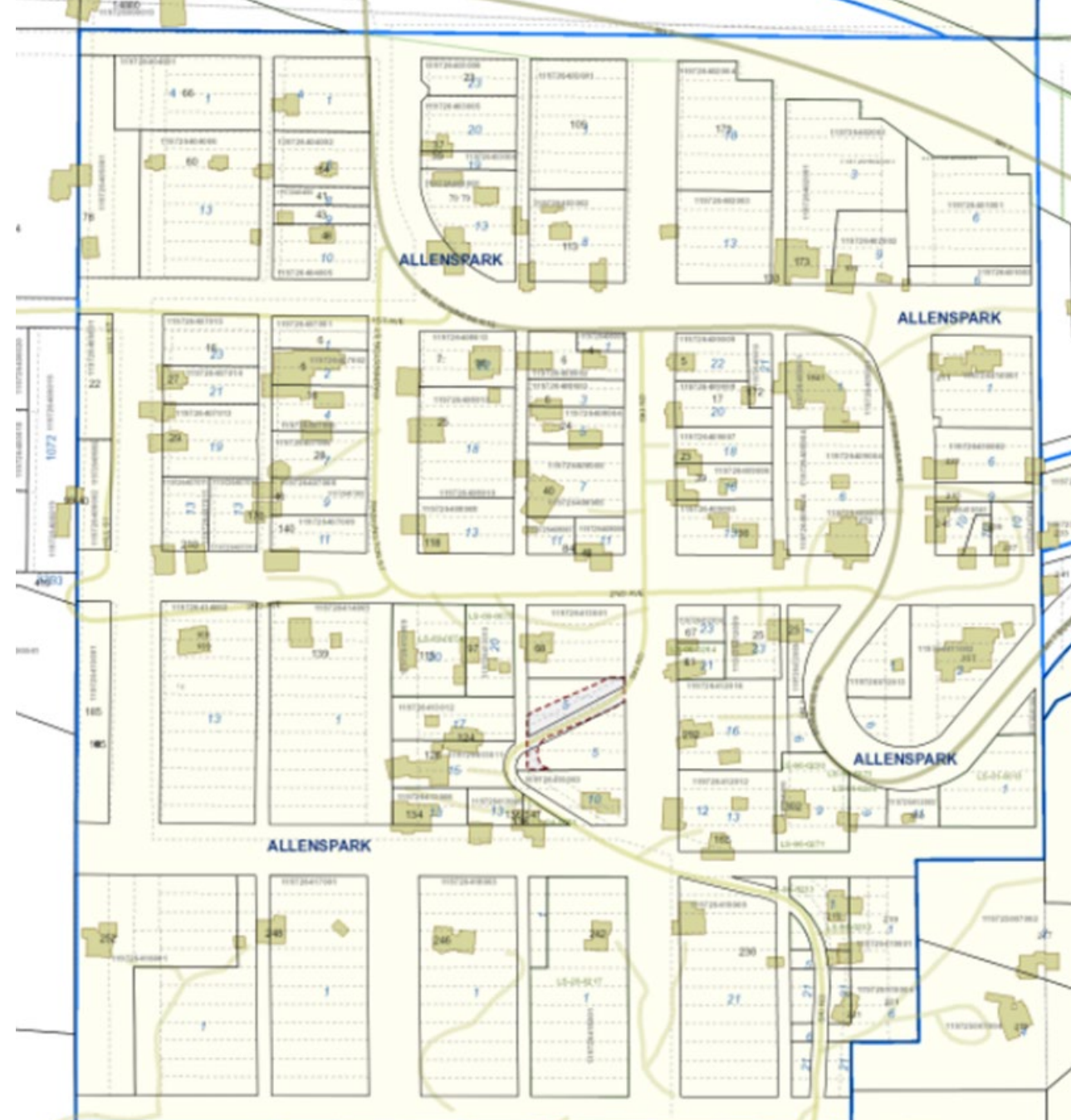
How is a neighborhood defined?

Platted Subdivision



The platted subdivision is the defined neighborhood.

Historic Townsite



The mapped historic townsite is the defined neighborhood.

All Other Applications



The area within 1,500 ft. of the parcel (excluding subdivisions, townsites, and municipalities).

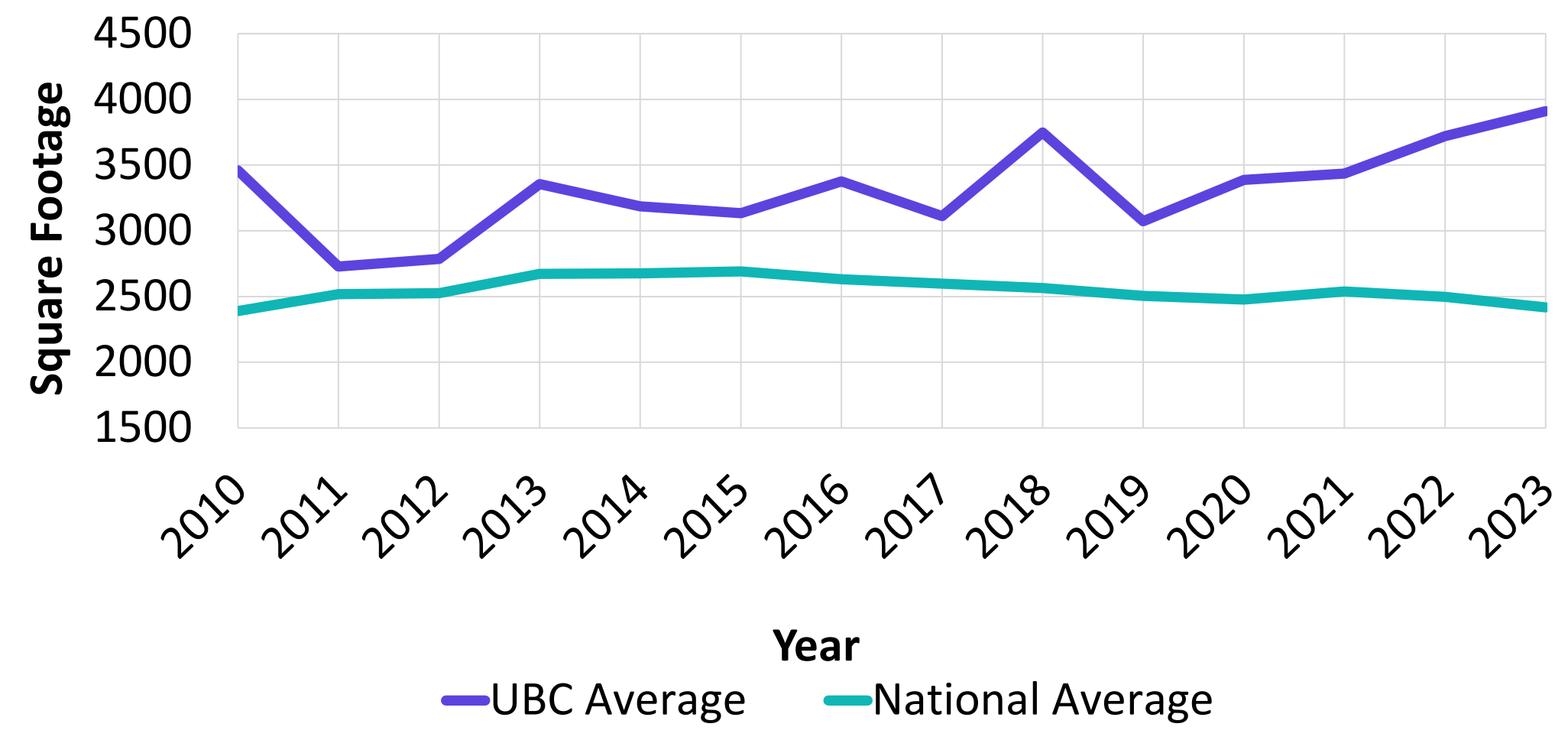


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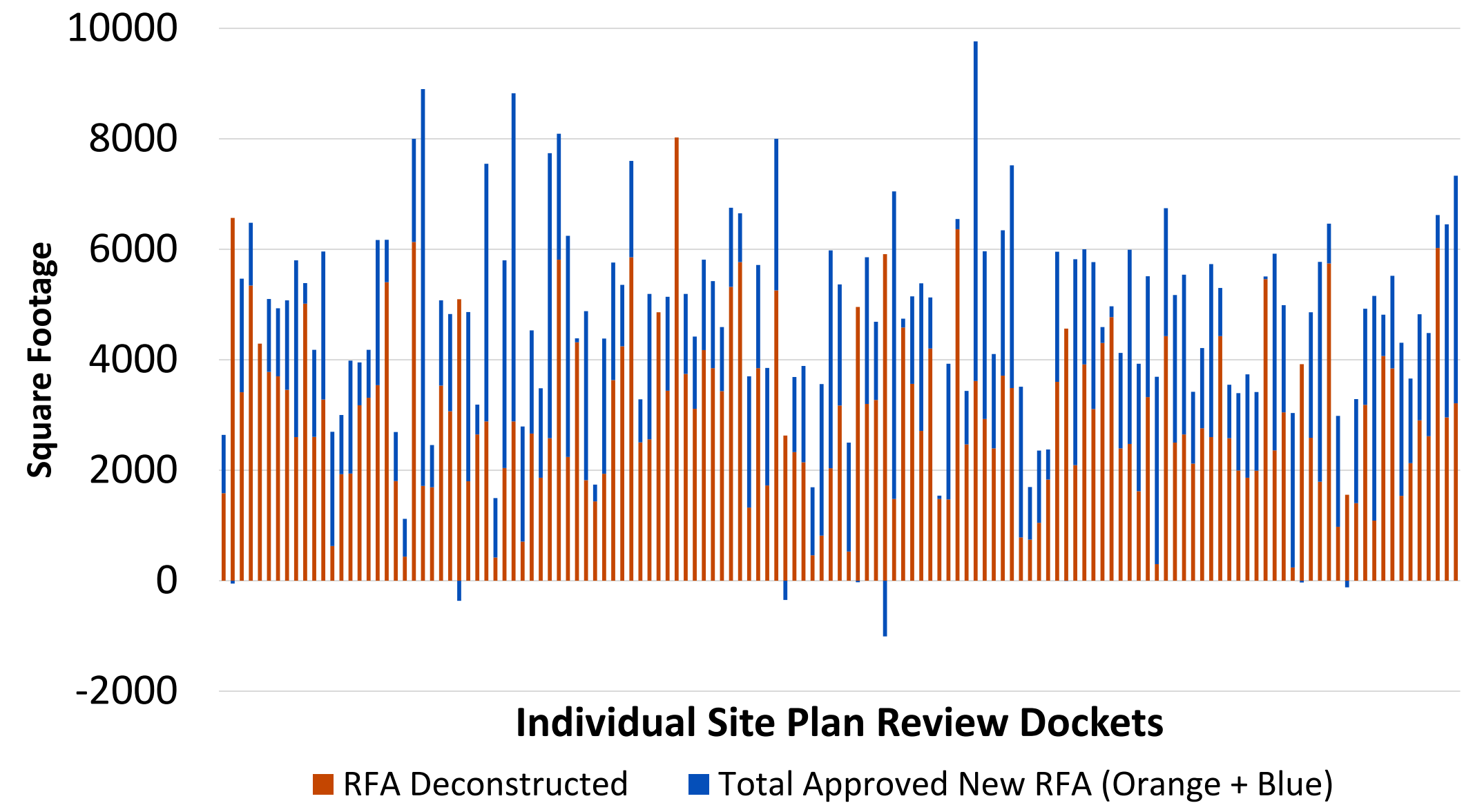
Staff reviewed data from the U.S. Census and the county’s building permit records to compare the average size of new homes being constructed in the unincorporated county to those being constructed nationwide. To normalize these numbers staff only counted finished floor area and excluded garages, unfinished basements, etc. We determined that:

- On average, new homes in unincorporated Boulder County (purple line) are larger than the average new home nationwide (teal line).
- The average size of new homes in unincorporated Boulder County has been increasing.

Average Square Footage of New Homes in Unincorporated Boulder County (UBC) Compared to New Homes in the United States (2010-2023)



SPR Applications: RFA Deconstructed and Total New Approved RFA (2010-2023)

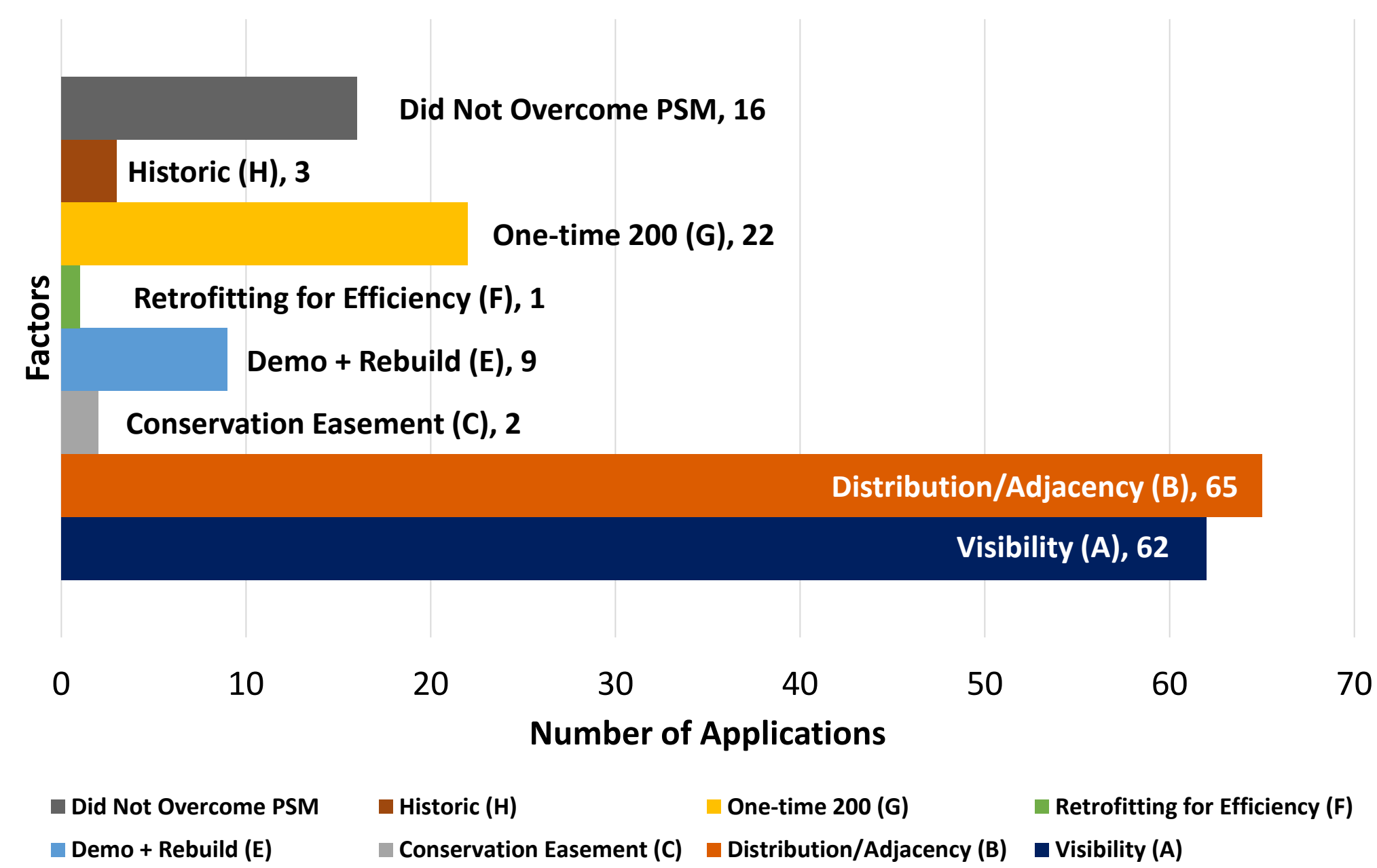


Staff reviewed SPR applications (between 2010 and 2023) where the applicant proposed deconstructing the existing residence and replacing it with a new residence to better understand how the Residential Floor Area (RFA) changes on a parcel in these proposals. We learned that in almost all cases, when RFA is scraped—or completely removed from a parcel—it is replaced with more RFA, which generally results in larger structures. The graph to the left demonstrates these changes. The orange bars represent the RFA deconstructed on a specific parcel, while the blue bars represent the new total RFA approved on the site.

We also reviewed SPR applications between 2019 and 2023 to learn when, and how, applicants were overcoming the size presumed to be compatible with a defined neighborhood. Staff located 604 SPR applications for this time period:

- There were 317 proposals to modify the RFA on a parcel.
- 52% of these applications were requests to build more RFA than what was presumed to be compatible with the neighborhood. These requests were approved more than 90% of the time.
- In most cases applicants relied on distribution/adjacency and visibility to overcome the size presumption.

Factors Used to Overcome the Compatible Size (2019 - 2023)



A great deal of academic research has been conducted regarding sustainability, energy consumption, and construction. This research provides some important insights that staff have been considering throughout this process and will continue to consider—along with your input and feedback—as we begin drafting regulations. We identified the following key takeaways from various academic articles and publications:

- Residential energy use accounts for roughly 24% of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions in Boulder County.
- Although we have energy efficiency requirements—focused on energy usage in larger homes—we are not currently accounting for the carbon emissions associated with the materials used to build homes. **Generally, it takes 23 years for a typical home’s cumulative operational emissions (energy usage over time) to equal the emissions associated with the materials used to build a home.**
- Homes in colder climate zones tend to have larger quantities of embodied energy—the total energy consumed (materials, processing, transportation, etc.) to build the home—than similar sized homes in warmer climates. **New homes constructed in unincorporated Boulder County likely consist of greater embodied energy.**
- For the United States to meet the targets outlined in the Paris Agreement—an international treaty on climate change—the residential sector will require deep energy retrofits, a transition to low-carbon energy sources, as well as **reducing per capita floor space and zoning denser settlement patterns.**
- Despite variations in climates, grid mixes, and building characteristics, income positively correlates with both per capita residential energy use and related GHG emissions. **The tendency for affluence—or wealth—and floor area per capita to increase together is a key emissions driver for wealthier households.**



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The permit and land use review data clearly shows that the average size of a home in unincorporated Boulder County is trending upwards. As homes grow larger, so do their impacts to neighborhood character, sustainability, and affordability.

When considering **neighborhood character**, staff are primarily focused on the physical attributes of structures and how they compare to the existing structures in a neighborhood.

- Through SPR staff work to mitigate the impacts larger homes can have on a parcel, as well as surrounding properties and land uses. Large additions to existing homes, the construction of new, larger homes, and the removal and replacement of smaller homes all contribute to these physical changes in neighborhood character.
- Staff are concerned that the current size presumed to be compatible with the defined neighborhood—which is 125% of the neighborhood median—might be enabling the size of residential structures to increase faster than what was intended. Furthermore, the factors that currently allow an applicant to overcome the size presumption may not be meeting the intent of our regulations.

Sustainability can mean different things to different people, but the Boulder County Comprehensive Plan defines it as “the use, development and protection of all our resources in a manner that does not deplete them while enabling the residents of Boulder County to meet their current needs and maintain a fulfilling quality of life without compromising or foregoing the ability of, and opportunity for, future residents to do the same.”

- Based on our research, we can conclude that larger homes are generally less sustainable than smaller homes built to the same specifications. Larger homes tend to require more energy to operate and generally contain higher amounts of embodied carbon due to volume of materials used to construct them.
- If we want to achieve our own sustainability objectives, specifically as they relate to carbon emissions, then we must consider the overall size of homes in the unincorporated county and the resources consumed to construct or enlarge them.

Finally, we know that larger homes can impact affordability.

- Larger homes impact more than the physical character of the neighborhood—they cost more money. As much of our developed housing stock continues to age, and newer homes (which are often larger) replace smaller homes, costs may continue to increase. This drives up the cost of housing and the overall affordability of homes in general.
- By law, Boulder County is required to use a market approach when assessing and valuing residential property. This approach predicts the prices a property would bring on the open market.
- Building a new home, expanding a home, or tearing down a smaller, older home and replacing it with a new, larger home, can impact these valuations. Due to the way assessments work the impacts are not just limited to the parcel where the work has occurred—the value of nearby or adjacent parcels can change as well, leading to higher tax bills for property owners who may not have made any changes or improvements.

What do you think?

Use a question/comment card to share your thoughts about the update to the SPR regulations. We’re interested in any relevant comments you may have, but here are some questions for your consideration:

- What are your thoughts on house sizes in the unincorporated county?
- Is your neighborhood changing? What impacts—positive or negative—are you seeing?
- What do you think about reducing the compatible size from 125% of the median to the median?
- How can we make the process clearer for applicants?
- How can we make our regulations more equitable?
- What else should we consider?

What happens next?

Staff will consider the feedback that you have provided. Over the following weeks, we will begin drafting proposed updates to the regulations. Once a draft is finalized it will be posted online for public comment and feedback. If you would like to stay involved in this process, please visit boco.org/dc-24-0003.