

MEMORANDUM

COUNTY OF SAN MATEO PLANNING AND BUILDING DEPARTMENT

DATE: July 20, 2015
TO: Development Review Center Staff
FROM: Lisa Aozasa, Acting Community Development Director
SUBJECT: Criteria for Attic and Basement Area Exemption from Building Floor Area Calculations (*Supersedes Policy dated August 24, 2012*)

The intention of the Building Floor Area standard contained in the County's Residential Zoning District Regulations is to limit the bulk and mass of buildings. As such, **attic and basement areas will not count toward Building Floor Area if all of the criteria listed below are met and, in the opinion of the Community Development Director, if the areas do not contribute to the visual bulk and mass of the building.** This policy is intended to supplement and clarify the definitions of Building Floor Area, Uninhabitable Attic, and Uninhabitable Basement, contained in the Zoning Regulations, and to prohibit the conversion of non-habitable space that does not comply with the Zoning Regulations to habitable space.

A. ATTICS

In order to be excluded from the calculation of building floor area, **ATTIC AREAS**, defined as the area located between the ceiling joists of the top floor and the roof rafters immediately above, must meet all of the following:

1. The attic area must be left "unfinished" as follows:
 - a. No drywall covering is allowed on walls or ceilings.
 - b. No heating, rough, or finished plumbing is allowed.
 - c. No insulation is allowed on the roof/ceiling or walls.
 - d. Electricity to the attic area is limited to only one receptacle outlet for the entire area and one light fixture per 200 sq. ft.
 - e. Attic area floors may only be covered with an unfinished floor surface, e.g., plywood.
2. Access to the attic area may only be:
 - a. From the inside of the structure; no exterior access is allowed.

- b. From the floor below the attic area floor level via stairs or ladder, i.e., no direct access is allowed into the attic area from habitable floor space that counts toward floor area on the same level.
3. Ceiling height or maximum vertical clearance may not exceed 6 ft. 6 in. measured between the ceiling joists of the floor level below and the roof or ceiling joists, whichever is lower, of the attic space. Ceiling joists that do not serve a structural purpose will be disregarded in determining maximum vertical clearance.
4. Attic areas may not share a wall with habitable space; i.e., attic areas that do not count toward building floor area may not be on the same floor level as habitable space (see also no. 2b above).
5. No dormers are allowed. Skylights are allowed, but limited in number to no more than one per 200 sq. ft. of attic area.
6. Windows are limited in number to no more than one per 200 sq. ft. of attic area and are limited in size to a maximum of 4 sq. ft. Ventilation and exhaust fans are allowed.

B. BASEMENTS

In order to be excluded from the calculation of building floor area, **BASEMENT AREAS**, defined as the area located below the lowest floor at grade, must meet all of the following:

1. The basement area is not more than 3 feet above natural or finished grade, whichever is lower, at any point. The basement area may not be on the same floor level as habitable floor space that counts toward floor area; it must be completely below grade.
2. The basement area may cover no more than 50% of the first floor area.
3. Basements must meet required rear, side, and front yard setbacks. Light wells and stairwells, when required for light/ventilation or egress by the Building Code, are allowed and may encroach into setbacks in accordance with Section 6406(b) and (c).

ADDITIONAL NOTES:

1. For the purposes of building height calculation in districts where building height is taken from the lowest floor, a basement that meets the criteria of this policy shall not be considered a "floor." Likewise, in districts where there is a limit on the number of stories, basements or attics that meet the criteria of this policy shall not be considered a "story."
2. Counter planners should add a "Final by Planning" action to the Building Permit to check for compliance with these criteria prior to Final by the Building Inspection Section.
3. All areas of improved attics 5 feet in height or greater shall be included in floor area calculations.

LLA:jlh – LAAW0609_WJO.DOCX