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Subject: height exceptions clarification

Hi Rita

I just want to follow up on your question about height exceptions. Under the current planning code, elevator, stair and mechanical penthouses, fire towers, skylights and dormer windows are exempt from the height limits. This exemption is limited to the top 10 feet of such features where the height limit is 65 feet or less, and the top 16 feet of such features where the height limit is more than 65 feet. There are other features exempt as shown in the code (b)(2) below. I've added Section 206 (b) below for your reference. Please let me know if you have any other questions. Thanks!

(b) Exemptions. In addition to other height exceptions permitted by this Code, the features listed in this subsection (b) shall be exempt from the height limits established by this Code, in an amount up to but not exceeding that which is specified.

(1) The following features shall be exempt provided the limitations indicated for each are observed; and provided further that the sum of the horizontal areas of all features listed in this subsection (b)(1) shall not exceed 20% of the horizontal area of the roof above which they are situated, or, in C-3 Districts and in the Rincon Hill Downtown Residential District, where the top of the building has been separated into a number of stepped elements to reduce the bulk of the upper tower, of the total of all roof areas of the upper towers; and provided further that in any R, RC-3, or RC-4 District the sum of the horizontal areas of all such features located within the first 10 feet of depth of the building, as measured from the front wall of the building, shall not exceed 20% of the horizontal area of the roof in such first 10 feet of depth.

As an alternative, the sum of the horizontal areas of all features listed in this subsection (b)(1) may be equal to but not exceed 20% of the horizontal area permitted for buildings and structures under any bulk limitations in Section 270 of this Code applicable to the subject property.

Any such sum of 20% heretofore described may be increased to 30% by unroofed screening designed either to obscure the features listed under (A) and (B) below or to provide a more balanced and graceful silhouette for the top of the building or structure.

(A) Mechanical equipment and appurtenances necessary to the of all elevator penthouses in Residential Districts shall be consistent with the "Residential Design Guidelines" as adopted and operation or maintenance of the building or structure itself, including chimneys, ventilators, plumbing vent stacks, cooling towers, water tanks, panels or devices for the collection of solar or wind energy, and window-washing equipment, together with visual screening for any such features. This exemption shall be limited to the top 10 feet of such features where the height limit is 65 feet or less, and the top 16 feet of such features where the height limit is more than 65 feet.

(B) Elevator, stair and mechanical penthouses, fire towers, skylights and dormer windows. This exemption shall be limited to the top 10 feet of such features where the height limit is 65 feet or less, and the top 16 feet of such features where the height limit is more than 65 feet. However, for elevator penthouses, the exemption shall be limited to the top 16 feet and limited to the footprint of the elevator shaft, regardless of the height limit of the building. The design periodically amended for specific areas or conditions by the City Planning Commission.

The Zoning Administrator may, after conducting a public hearing, grant a further height exemption for an elevator penthouse for a building with a height limit of more than 65 feet but only to the extent that the Zoning Administrator determines that such an exemption is required to meet state or federal laws or regulations. All requests for height exemptions for elevator penthouses located in Residential or Neighborhood Commercial Districts shall be subject to the neighborhood notification requirements of Sections [311](#) and [312](#) of this Code.

(C) Stage and scenery lofts.

(D) Ornamental and symbolic features of public and religious buildings and structures, including towers, spires, cupolas, belfries and domes, where such features are not used for human occupancy.

(E) In any C-3 District ~~the~~ CMUO District, and any MUR or MUG District within the Central SoMa Special Use District, enclosed space related to the recreational use of the roof, not to exceed 16 feet in height.

(F) Rooftop enclosures and screening for features listed in subsections (b)(1)(A) and (B) above that add additional building volume in any C-3 District except as otherwise allowed in the S-2 Bulk district according to subsection (M) below or the Eastern Neighborhoods Mixed Use Districts. The rooftop enclosure or screen creating the added volume:

- (i) shall not be subject to the percentage coverage limitations otherwise applicable to this Section [260](#) (b) but shall meet the requirements of Section [141](#);
- (ii) shall not exceed 20 feet in height, measured as provided in subsection (a) above;
- (iii) may have a volume, measured in cubic feet, not to exceed three-fourths of the horizontal area of all upper tower roof areas multiplied by the maximum permitted height of the enclosure or screen;
- (iv) shall not be permitted within the setbacks required by Sections [132.1](#), [132.2](#), and [132.3](#);
- (v) shall not be permitted within any setback required to meet the sun access plane requirements of Section [146](#); and
- (vi) shall not be permitted within any setback required by Section [261.1](#).

(G) In any C-3 District except as otherwise allowed in the S-2 Bulk district according to subsection (M) below, vertical extensions to buildings, such as spires, which enhance the visual appearance of the structure and are not used for human occupancy may be allowed, pursuant to the provisions of Section [309](#), up to 75 feet above the height otherwise allowed. The extension shall not be subject to the percentage coverage limitations otherwise applicable to this subsection, provided that the extension is less than 100 square feet in cross-section and 18 feet in diagonal dimension.

(H) In the Rincon Hill Downtown Residential District, enclosed space related to the recreational use of the roof, not to exceed 16 feet in height.

(I) In the Rincon Hill Downtown Residential District, additional building volume used to enclose or screen from view the features listed under Subsections (b)(1)(A) and (b)(1)(B) above. The rooftop form created by the added volume shall not be subject to the percentage coverage limitations otherwise applicable to this subsection but shall meet the requirements of Section [141](#), shall not exceed 10 percent of the total height of any building taller than 105 feet, shall have a horizontal area not more than 85 percent of the total area of the highest occupied floor, and shall contain no space for human occupancy. The features described in (b)(1)(B) shall not be limited to 16 feet for buildings taller than 160 feet, but shall be limited by the permissible height of any additional rooftop volume allowed by this Subsection.

(J) In the Van Ness Special Use District, additional building volume used to enclose or screen from view the features listed under Subsections (b)(1)(A) and (b)(1)(B) above and to provide additional visual interest to the roof of the structure. The rooftop form created by the added volume shall not be subject to the percentage coverage limitations otherwise applicable to this Subsection, but shall meet the requirements of Section [141](#) and shall not exceed 10 feet in height where the height limit is 65 feet or less or 16 feet where the height limit is more than 65 feet, measured as provided in Subsection (a) above, and may not exceed a total volume, including the volume of the features being enclosed, equal to $\frac{3}{4}$ of the horizontal area of all upper tower roof areas of the building measured before the addition of any exempt features times 10 where the height limit is 65 feet or less or times 16 where the height limit is more than 65 feet.

(K) In the Northeast China Basin Special Use District, light standards for the purpose of lighting the ballpark.

(L)² In the C-3-G District, on sites fronting on Van Ness Avenue in the 120-X height district, additional building volume used to enclose or screen from view the features listed under subsections (b)(1)(A) and (b)(1)(B) above, to allow increased roof height for performance and common space, and to provide additional visual interest to the roof of the structure. The rooftop form created by the added volume shall not be subject to the percentage coverage limitations otherwise applicable to this subsection (b)(1)(L), but shall meet the requirements of Section [141](#) and shall not exceed 16 feet in height, measured as provided in subsection (a) above. Buildings that are eligible for this exemption are also eligible for exceptions to any quantitative standards set forth in [Article 1.2](#) of this Code through Section [309](#) of this Code.

(L)² In the Central SoMa Special Use District, additional building volume used to enclose or screen from

view the features listed in subsections (b)(1)(A) and (b)(1)(B) above. The rooftop form created by the added volume shall not be subject to the percentage coverage limitations otherwise applicable to the building, but shall meet the requirements of Section [141](#); shall not exceed 10 percent of the total height of any building taller than 200 feet; shall have a horizontal area not more than 100 percent of the total area of the highest occupied floor; and shall contain no space for human occupancy. The features described in subsection (b)(1)(B) shall not be limited to 16 feet for buildings taller than 200 feet, but shall be limited by the permissible height of any additional rooftop volume allowed by this subsection (L).²

(M) In any S-2 Bulk District for any building which exceeds 550 feet in height, unoccupied building features including mechanical and elevator penthouses, enclosed and unenclosed rooftop screening, and unenclosed architectural features not containing occupied space that extend above the height limit, only as permitted by the Planning Commission according to the procedures of Section [309](#) and meeting all of the following criteria:

(i) such elements are demonstrated to not add more than insignificant amounts of additional shadow compared to the same building without such additional elements on any public open spaces as deemed acceptable by the Planning Commission; and

(ii) such elements are limited to a maximum additional height equivalent to 7.5 percent of the height of the building to the roof of the highest occupied floor, except that in the case of a building in the 1,000-foot height district such elements are not limited in height, and any building regardless of building height or height district may feature a single spire or flagpole with a diagonal in cross-section of less than 18 feet and up to 50 feet in height in addition to elements allowed according to this subsection (M); and

(iii) such elements are designed as integral components of the building design, enhance both the overall silhouette of the building and the City skyline as viewed from distant public vantage points by producing an elegant and unique building top, and achieve overall design excellence.

(2) The following features shall be exempt, without regard to their horizontal area, provided the limitations indicated for each are observed:

(A) Railings, parapets and catwalks, with a maximum height of four feet.

(B) Open railings, catwalks and fire escapes required by law, wherever situated.

(C) Unroofed recreation facilities with open fencing, including tennis and basketball courts at roof level, swimming pools with a maximum height of four feet and play equipment with a maximum height of 10 feet.

(D) Unenclosed seating areas limited to tables, chairs and benches, and related windscreens, lattices and sunshades with a maximum height of 10 feet.

(E) Landscaping, with a maximum height of four feet for all features other than plant materials.

(F) Short-term parking of passenger automobiles, without additional structures or equipment other than trellises or similar overhead screening for such automobiles with a maximum height of eight feet.

(G) Amusement parks, carnivals and circuses, where otherwise permitted as temporary uses.

(H) Flagpoles and flags, clothes poles and clotheslines, and weathervanes.

(I) Wireless Telecommunications Services Facilities and other antennas, dishes, and towers and related screening elements, subject to any other applicable Planning Code provisions, including but not limited to applicable design review criteria and Planning Code Section 295.

(J) Warning and navigation signals and beacons, light standards and similar devices, not including any sign regulated by this Code.

(K) Public monuments owned by government agencies.

(L) Cranes, scaffolding and batch plants erected temporarily at active construction sites.

(M) Structures and equipment necessary for the operation of industrial plants, transportation facilities, public utilities and government installations, where otherwise permitted by this Code and where such structures and equipment do not contain separate floors, not including towers and antennae for transmission, reception, or relay of radio, television, or other electronic signals where permitted as principal or conditional uses by this Code.

(N) Buildings, structures and equipment of the San Francisco Port Commission, where not subject to this Code due to provisions of the San Francisco Charter or State law.

(O) Enclosed recreational facilities up to a height of 10 feet above the otherwise applicable height limit when located within a 65-U Height and Bulk District and an MUO District, and only then when authorized by the Planning Commission as a Conditional Use pursuant to Section 303 of this Code, provided that the project is

designed in such a way as to reduce the apparent mass of the structure above a base 50-foot building height.

(P) Historic Signs and Vintage Signs permitted pursuant to Article 6 of this Code.

(Q) In the Eastern Neighborhoods Mixed Use Districts, enclosed utility sheds of not more than 100 square feet, exclusively for the storage of landscaping and gardening equipment for adjacent rooftop landscaping, with a maximum height of 8 feet above the otherwise applicable height limit.

(R) Hospitals, as defined in this Code, that are legal non-complying structures with regard to height, may add additional mechanical equipment so long as the new mechanical equipment 1) is not higher than the highest point of the existing rooftop enclosure, excluding antennas; 2) has minimal visual impact and maximum architectural integration; 3) is necessary for the function of the building; and 4) no other feasible alternatives exist. Any existing rooftop equipment that is out of service or otherwise abandoned shall be removed prior to installation of new rooftop equipment.

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The Planning Department is open for business during the Stay Safe at Home Order. Most of our staff are working from home and we're [available by e-mail](#). Our [Public Portal](#), where you can file new applications, and our [Property Information Map](#) are available 24/7. The Planning and Historic Preservation Commissions are convening remotely and [the public is encouraged to participate](#). The Board of Appeals, Board of Supervisors, and Planning Commission are [accepting appeals](#) via e-mail despite office closures. All of our in-person services at 1650 and 1660 Mission Street are suspended until further notice. [Click here for more information](#).