

Staff Report

**Garage Door Width Cumulative Restriction to 27 Feet  
Text Amendment Request**

December 12, 2017

**BACKGROUND:**

On September 12, 2017, the City Council referred to staff an email from Shelby Ebel, Chairperson of the Zoning Board of Adjustment, asking for review of the City's 27-foot maximum cumulative width for garage doors design standard. The email included a PowerPoint exhibit describing Ms Ebel concerns and issues with the current standard. The email and PowerPoint are included herein as Attachment 'A'.

**In response to the referral, staff has prepared this report to provide the City Council with background information to assist the Council in determining 1) If the code language should be amended and if so, 2) What options the Council may wish to consider.**

The limitation on garage door widths was last amended in April 2010. The staff report associated with the amendment indicates that garages were previously restricted to three internal parking spaces. According to the report, some of the language was unclear and interpretation of the stall limit was problematic and difficult to enforce. As a result of the concern on unintentionally restricting the number of interior parking spaces, the zoning standard was amended to regulate garage sizes based upon the cumulative width of garage doors rather than the number of parking spaces within the garage. **The approach to regulate total width of garage doors was intended to address aesthetic concerns rather than the number of parking spaces as had been the prior standard.**

**The amended text allowed greater flexibility in the actual size of the garage interior while limiting the garage door width. With a standard garage door size available from suppliers at a width of 9-feet, the amended text allowed a maximum 27-foot dimension. This width allowance retained the ability of a single-family residence to have a three-car garage. Code compliance is easy to determine when reviewing plans with the current standard.** The standard has appeared to be workable for most people over the past seven years, with the exception of two variance requests in the past year.

As mentioned by Ms. Ebel, the current code does have its limitations. All lot sizes and home sizes are subject to the same dimensional restriction for the cumulative garage width, regardless of lot configuration, placement of the garage on the lot, and visibility of the garage from the street frontage. **Although the current standard provided some flexibility for meeting market demands for larger garage interiors, it is still inflexible for addressing**

**larger lots or unique situations where someone desires to have a larger number of garages and width of doors.**

If the City Council is interested in changing the garage door limitation, there are other options available for addressing aesthetics and in some cases permitting large garages or a greater number of garage door accessed parking stalls. Communities that choose to regulate garages usually do so with the intent of keeping the garage visually subordinate to the rest of the residence. This is accomplished through the adoption of design standards. The current limit of 27 feet of garage doors is one way of setting such a standard. More commonly, a garage limit is expressed in the terms of the number of garage doors than width of garage doors.

Many communities also rely on more specific design standards for addressing aesthetics, such as: 1) placement of the garage on the lot and/ and its visibility from the street; and/or 2) percentage of the front façade that can be occupied by a front-loaded garage. Such restrictions are not foreign to the City of Ames, as the City has adopted more stringent standards related to the *placement* of garages in Somerset and in the Single Family Conservation Overlay. Specifically, the Somerset regulations require that the garage be no closer to the street than the rest of the façade. Regulations for the Single Family Conservation Overlay (which is the area between Grand and Duff Avenues, and 7<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> Streets) require that the garage be set back at least 18 feet from the rest of the façade.

**OPTIONS:**

**Option 1- Maintain the current 27-foot of cumulative garge door width standard.**

The basis of the total 27-foot width standard is 9-foot individual garage doors, which is the industry standard for typical single-family construction. The existing code is workable for most residential properties and compliance is easy to determine and enforce. Utility roll up doors of less than eight feet would continue to be exempt from the calculation.

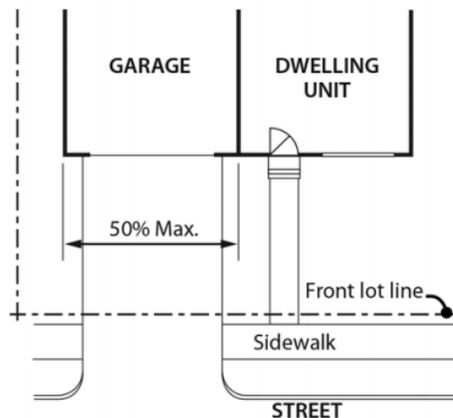
**Option 2- Increase the cumulative dimensional standard from 27-feet to 30-feet.**

If the Council believes that wider doors would be acceptable without negatively affecting the aesthetics of homes, the code could be amended to change the dimensional standard for slightly larger door allowances. An allowance for wider doors would allow more ease in entering and exiting of garages and would better accommodate larger, wider vehicles. However, larger doors would also increase the visual dominance of the garage when doors are visible from the street. Increasing the total to 30 feet would not permit garages with four garage doors, it would only allow for wider three garage door designs. Compliance would be easy to determine and enforce. This option would not allow for additional garage areas that are not visible from the street.

**Option 3- Create an exemption to the 27-foot maximum cumulative width, whereby garage doors which are not parallel to the street and viewable from the street are allowed to exceed the existing maximum dimension.**

This option retains the existing requirement, while allowing some flexibility for larger sites that utilize alternative configurations. It would solve the issue of detached garages behind the primary structure or other issues where the garage is not visible from the street. It would also give relief to side-loading garages where garage doors do not face the street. This allowance would likely lead to larger total garage sizes and potentially to four and five car garage door designs which could be visually dominating. Within this option the City could define an allowance for additional width and limit the total garage size to address overall size when attached to or in front of a home. Working through the details on this option may take some additional time to review the effects of garage layouts on typical lots in the City.

**Option 4- Remove the 27-foot maximum cumulative width restriction and instead create a maximum percentage of the front façade that can be occupied with garage doors.** Generally, communities that put a percentage restriction in place, limit the maximum percentage of the garage doors to 40 or 50 percent of the main floor length of the front façade. Setback of garage faces could also be included in this option. Side-loaded garages, rear-loaded garages, or garages located in rear yards not visible from the street would be exempt from any restriction on garage door width unless Council desires to provide guidance on the extent of the exception.



**The visual impact of garages is more an issue of garage placement and/or percentage of the residence's street façade, rather than the width of the garage doors.** This option restricts the percentage of the garage along the street frontage, while allowing additional garage elsewhere. It has the greatest potential of reducing the visual dominance of garages on the street facing façade, but would also be a major change from the current code and involve outreach to builders in the community on their opinion on the change. It would solve the issue of detached garages behind the primary structure or other issues where the garage is not visible from the street, and it would also give relief to side-loading garages where garage doors do not face the street. This option would require more time in building permit plan check to verify consistency with the percentage limitations. Given that this option is a major deviation from what is currently in place, outreach to home builders would be desirable as part of the process.

**STAFF COMMENTS:**

The current standard, although inflexible, does meet the typical homeowner's needs and based upon the industry standard for parking stall widths. In the event City Council has an interest in modifying the standard, City Council could choose an option that allows some flexibility in configuring a garage as described above. **If City Council is interested in additional research and outreach on new standards it should consider the priority of this text amendment request with other Council priorities for the Planning Division Work Plan and provide direction on the timing of undertaking this task. A text amendment limited to dimensional standards changes likely would not be considered a major issue and could be accommodated over the next few months.**

## Attachment 'A' Email Request & PowerPoint

To: [bobanncamp@aol.com](mailto:bobanncamp@aol.com), [gartinforames@gmail.com](mailto:gartinforames@gmail.com), [bronwynforames@gmail.com](mailto:bronwynforames@gmail.com), [gloriabetcherward1@gmail.com](mailto:gloriabetcherward1@gmail.com), [nelson.ames@outlook.com](mailto:nelson.ames@outlook.com), [pforazem@gmail.com](mailto:pforazem@gmail.com), [amber.corrieri@gmail.com](mailto:amber.corrieri@gmail.com)

From: Shelby Chamberlain Ebel <[shelby.ebel@gmail.com](mailto:shelby.ebel@gmail.com)>

Date: 08/24/2017 09:56PM

Cc: Kelly Diekmann <[kdiekmann@city.ames.ia.us](mailto:kdiekmann@city.ames.ia.us)>

Subject: City of Ames Zoning Board of Adjustment- Variance Applications

*(See attached file: Garage\_Door\_Zoning\_Ordinance.pdf)*

Mayor Campbell and Councilmembers-

I have been on the Zoning Board of Adjustment for nearly five years now and am currently serving my 3rd term as Chair of the ZBA. In that time, I hope that I have helped Ames develop in a desirable manner and that I have helped the people of Ames with their various development/use requests. It hasn't always been easy and sometimes I've had to tell people "no" for things when I really wish I could have told them "yes" which is what brings me to writing to you now. The ZBA has had two requests in the last year or so for variances from the 27' garage door restriction for single family homes. In each case, common sense would absolutely tell you that their requests were fine and should be allowed. However, variances have high standards that are hard to meet and the findings could not be made so the requests were accordingly denied. I've attached a pdf of a PowerPoint file that I created with some more information on the two requests, how the requirement doesn't fit well for many properties, and how I would propose the limitation on garage doors to be written.

In my professional life, I was a city planner in Fresno, CA for 7+ years and work as a planner now with the Iowa Department of Transportation. I have my AICP certification from the American Planning Association. I'm also working part time on a masters in city and regional planning at ISU. I have a lot of interest and experience in planning and I understand that a restriction on garage doors is not a big deal in the scheme things. I totally get that and can't believe that in all this time, this is what I'm writing to you for. But there have been the two instances now which really just don't sit right with me and I felt that need to speak up. I would ask each of you to please take a look at this issue and consider making a change.

Thank you so much for your time,  
Shelby Ebel

Attachments:

Garage\_Door\_Zoning\_Ordinance.pdf

# GARAGE DOOR REQUIREMENTS

In Single Family Residential Areas

## Current Zoning Ordinance

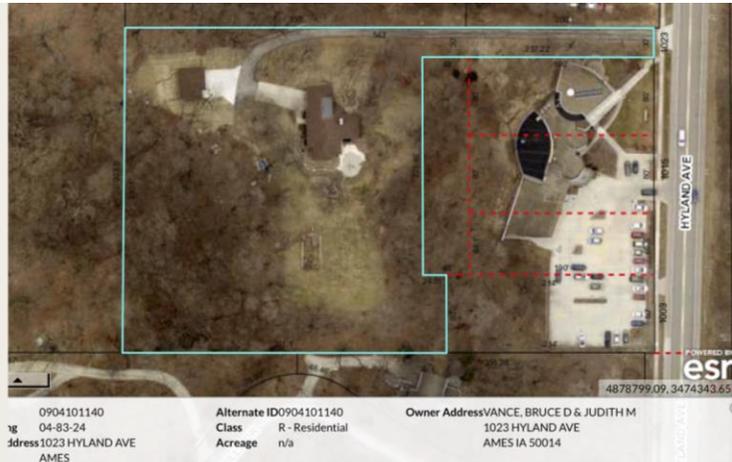
- Chapter 29, Section 29.408(7)(iii)(c) states that “[i]n any Agricultural or Residential district the cumulative garage door width shall not exceed twenty-seven (27) feet for a Single Family Dwelling or eighteen (18) feet per dwelling unit for a Two Family Dwelling.”
- According to staff’s presentation at the Zoning Board of Adjustment meeting last night, this standards was established mainly for aesthetic reasons and to ensure that the garage is clearly the accessory use and secondary to the residential structure/use
- And yet, townhouses like the ones below are allowed and constructed all over town which do not meet either of the goals that are imposed on single family residences



# Variations at the ZBA

- There have been two requests at the ZBA in the last year or so for relief from this requirement. The properties are located at 1023 Hyland Avenue and 1602 Ada Hayden Road.
- Both requests were denied because they did not meet the findings to grant the variance. One of the findings for a variance says that there must be a hardship- or basically without approval of the variance, there is no way you can do anything with your property. It is a difficult standard to meet for any request and is unlikely (probably even impossible) to be met for a change to the garage door development standard.
- The restriction, when applied to these two situations, makes no sense. The standard is poorly written and results in an unfair restriction on homeowners.

## 1023 Hyland



- Property is a flag lot with the residence obscured from view from street (Hyland)
- There is an existing single family residence with an attached two-car garage. In 2016, the property owners were requesting approval of a variance to construct a detached garage at the rear of the lot, with a garage door that would exceed allowed linear feet
- Approval of the variance would not have conflicted with the goals of garage being the accessory use and no one besides the property owners would see the garage door so aesthetic goals are also met
- Detached garage was built (as you can see above) but with smaller door than what owners wanted

# 1602 Ada Hayden Road



*New home under construction at the subject location*

- Request at ZBA meeting on 8/23/17 for 3 garage doors, each 10' wide, to accommodate larger vehicles that the owners often drive
- Two of the garage stalls are side loading and are difficult to see from street view
- Approval of the variance would have still met the aesthetic goals of the zoning ordinance as well as being the secondary use to the residence. Looking at the plans above and using common sense, there is nothing objectionable about it.
- But the findings of a variance are incredibly difficult to make and the request was denied

## Where the Requirement Goes Wrong

- This requirement does not fit well in the following instances, with regard to single family residences:
  - *corner lots,*
  - *side load garage,*
  - *large homes,*
  - *flag lots (or other lots where view from street is blocked/obscured), and*
  - *detached garages located behind the dwelling*

## A Text Amendment Is Needed

- Language in Zoning Ordinance needs to be amended so that the restrictions apply only to the exterior elevation that is parallel to and viewable from the street and total feet of garage doors should be a percentage of the elevation because 27 feet of garage doors is a lot for some houses but not so much for others
  - *This would solve issue with detached garages behind the primary structure or other instances where it is not visible from the street*
  - *Furthermore, it would also give relief for side loading garages where garage doors do not face the street*

## Parking Requirements, Generally Speaking, Need Help

- The standard width for a parking stall is 9 feet, for parking lots, ramps, etc., and I assume that is how the 27' standard (a multiple of 9) for garage doors was developed.
- Many of the larger vehicles on the road today are nearly 9 feet wide which leaves no room to exit or enter the vehicle. Many people in Iowa drive large trucks and SUVs and that is unlikely to change.
- I think many people would prefer a 10' garage door or parking stall and would encourage the Council to look at that issue as well. On a personal note, my husband drove a Chevy Silverado crew cab truck for two years but ended up trading it in for something smaller simply because it was such a pain to park. And he has a CDL and knows how to drive and park a large vehicle.