BOARD OF ALDERMEN

ITEM NO. (1)

AGENDA ITEM ABSTRACT

MEETING DATE: April 11, 2006

TITLE: **Worksession on possible revisions to Vernacular Architectural Standards**

DEPARTMENT: **PLANNING**	PUBLIC HEARING: **YES __ NO _X_**
ATTACHMENTS: **A. Resolution** **B. VAS Review Subcommittee Recommendation** **C. Excerpt of Minutes from October 11, 2005 meeting** **D. Table of Possible Revisions to VAS Review – recommended General Design Standards**	FOR INFORMATION CONTACT: Patricia McGuire **– 918-7327**

PURPOSE

The Board of Aldermen requested that town staff bring back language to make the general design standards that are proposed as one part of revisions to the vernacular architectural standards more specific. The Board also requested that a worksession be scheduled to discuss where the standards should apply.

INFORMATION

Background. On September 20, 2005, staff provided a report that evaluates and make recommendations regarding implementation for the Board of Aldermen, as was requested on March 8, 2005, revisions to the Vernacular Architectural Standards (VAS) that have been recommended by the VAS Review Committee following several years of consideration (*Attachment B*). The committee has recommended that the Town modify its existing vernacular architecture provisions by:

1) requiring major subdivisions to comply with general site design and architectural standards;
2) establishing an exemption for housing developed by nonprofit organizations intended for first-time homebuyers earning less than 80 percent of the area's median income;
3) adding General Design Standards (GDS) that address landscaping, context and building design;
4) modifying some of the particular Vernacular Architectural Standard requirements, including the porch, garage, and chimney provisions; and

5) allowing applicants to choose to submit a detailed narrative on compliance with the GDS and their own Alternative Design Standards, rather than the VAS.

On October 11, 2005, the Board of Aldermen reviewed the staff comments and the committee recommendations (*Attachment C*). Staff had noted that the VAS Review committee recommendations are typical of architectural 'guidelines,' rather than standards. Many of the proposed standards are open-ended statements that will result in subjective review, a point that is reflected in the committee's recommendations. The Board requested that staff prepare more specific general design standards and that a worksession be held to discuss where the standards should apply. The Board of Aldermen also discussed whether it would be possible to include two approaches, either of which would enable a project to satisfy the vernacular architectural standards. The first was described as a combination of the General Design Standards and the Alternative Architectural Standards. The second was described as the Vernacular Architectural Standards only.

The GDS proposed by the VAS Review subcommittee address landscaping, context, and building design, and include approximately 20 bulleted descriptive statements. Staff has prepared more specific descriptions of possible architectural requirements that address eleven of the GDS, noting where in the development review process the standards would be applied (*Attachment D*).

Issues. In nearly every instance, these provisions will necessitate additional site plan submittal requirements. Currently, illustrations and plans of all homes are not needed for subdivision approval, although illustrations of typical homes are usually provided for architecturally-integrated subdivisions. It will be necessary for elevations of all homes to be submitted in order to evaluate compliance with a number of the recommended standards. The addition of this requirement would add time, complexity, and cost to the subdivision review process. These subdivision-review level requirements will present some difficulty. Additional decision-making and information will be needed to prepare an application. This would add a new requirement to the developer who is simply selling lots and is not also constructing homes. Carrboro, with its high standards for development and relatively small land area, is served by a limited number of property developers. These requirements may further reduce the number and diversity of developers, leaving primarily larger developers who have the capacity to handle both subdivision development and new home construction. The requirements may also prove problematic to homeowners' associations, subsequent home builders and owners if modifications, including alternative designs and future additions, are later desired. Approximately half of the standards must be approved as part of the land use permit. Changes would necessitate modifications to the land use permit by the permit-issuing authority.

Applicability and Affordability. The VAS currently applies to Village Mixed Use developments and to the affordable <u>bonus</u> units provided via Section 15-182.4 of the Land use Ordinance. The VAS are recommended for use in major residential subdivisions, per Section 15-177. As written, the changes to the VAS standards are a tool

that would apply to the major subdivisions. The Board of Aldermen has discussed whether the VAS should apply to affordable housing units. Staff has reported that the need for architectural standards to apply to affordable housing was specified during the Facilitated Small Area Plan process and the proposal to exempt affordable housing appears to run counter to the original intent of establishing such standards. As expressed by Randall Arendt during the facilitation of the NSA Plan, architectural standards are especially important for affordable housing so that it will fit into existing and new neighborhoods in a manner that is harmonious and acceptable to the community. It is usually expected that affordable housing will be integrated throughout a residential development. Should the Board establish subdivision-wide "Context" and "Building Design Components" as are recommended in the GDS, it may be counterproductive to provide an exception for affordable housing units.

A recent report from the US Department of Housing and Urban Development on housing affordability has noted that housing cost increases can be correlated to increasing complexity of regulations and site design requirements. During the October 11th discussion of the VAS, Robert Dowling, Executive Director of Orange Community Housing and Land Trust "stated that he was concerned about the added cost on affordable housing, and would not be in favor of mandated standards. He also stated that the Land Trust does not believe affordable housing should look like affordable housing." This information suggests that architectural and site design requirements may add additional cost to all housing development.

Review/Modification Process. The proposed revisions have been considered in regular public meetings. There has been no special public notice of any possible changes to the VAS. To date, an ordinance that would amend the Land Use Ordinance to incorporate any of the revisions that have been proposed has not been drafted. Should the Board of Aldermen be interested in amending the Land Use Ordinance to revise the VAS in any way, the following actions must occur: a draft ordinance prepared, a public hearing set, the Planning Board and Orange County provided an opportunity to review the draft ordinance, public notice of the possible change, and a public hearing held.

As a general comment, the VAS are intended to ensure the quality of design in new housing developments. However, there may be similar concerns with the redevelopment of existing lots throughout the Town and planning jurisdiction, especially those that were developed without restrictive covenants or where such covenants are no longer enforced.

Action Options. The following represent possible next steps. The list attempts to be comprehensive, but is not exhaustive.
1) Provide feedback to staff regarding the more specific alternative standards to changes recommended by the VAS Review committee and where the standards should apply.
2) Leave the VAS as they are, pending any inconsistencies or errors that may be identified during the comprehensive Land Use Ordinance revisions.
3) Accept the proposed revisions to the VAS as non-binding policies for residential site planning and architectural design.

4) Specify particular site design and/or architectural features that are undesirable and should be prohibited.
5) If the Board of Aldermen seeks to establish mandatory architectural and site design standards for major subdivisions and other residential development, staff would suggest that an optional voluntary procedure also be established, similar to that included within the draft ordinance for the Downtown Architectural standards currently under review. The review committee's recommendations for an Alternative Architectural standard could serve as guidelines for this optional process.

FISCAL IMPACT

Administrative and advertising/notice costs would accrue if the Board of Aldermen chooses to proceed with preparation and adoption of an amendment to the Land Use Ordinance related to the VAS. If standards, i.e. architectural requirements, are adopted as proposed, we should expect additional permit application preparation and processing costs on the part of the applicant and review costs on the part of the Town (Appearance Commission and staff, and possibly a consulting architect). Cost impacts are expected to be passed on to occupants, either renters or owners, through increases in the cost of housing.

RECOMMENDATION

Since the Board requested a worksession to examine more specific language for the proposed General Design Standards, staff is not anticipating that any action will be taken. Should the Board wish to take any action, adoption of the resolution that accepts action option 2, leaving the VAS as they are, understanding that any inconsistencies or errors identified during the comprehensive Land Use Ordinance revisions may result in amendments to the VAS, is recommended.