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Building Up or Out? The Paradox of a Maximum Height Ordinance in

Tallahassee's CollegeTown

By: Chloe Kauffman

CollegeTown is a popular, high-traffic neighborhood for college students in the Tallahassee area, with its growth spurred by a greater demand for students to live closer to the main campuses of Florida State University and Florida A&M University.

CollegeTown is a revitalized warehouse district. Located next to a major railroad corridor, merchants would ship and receive goods destined for the Big Bend region of North Florida. By the 1970s, however, goods shipments had largely shifted to highways and trucks, leaving blocks of vacant warehouses on prime real estate better suited to meeting the needs of the growing urban universities.

Currently, a large part of CollegeTown is zoned as part of the University Urban Village Zoning District (UV). This district extends from Doak Campbell Stadium on the western edge founded by Stadium Drive to the eastern edge marked by the 17-story Florida Department of Education building in downtown Tallahassee.

The Western Segment (UV West) of this district, within which CollegeTown is located, is bound by a maximum height limit of five stories. A maximum height limit of seven stories is in place for the district's Eastern Segment (UV East) (Figure 1).

The City of Tallahassee's goal is to maintain the “urban fabric” of this specific zoning area. But given such variation in height limits, how is urban fabric defined?

The zoning code for UV defines the area as “[a high-intensity] urban activity

corridor,” but why should residential development be limited to five or seven stories if demand exists for building above the height limit?

Currently, CollegeTown includes some of the most expensive student housing in the city. Moreover, housing affordability is an important component in ranking the quality of college towns.

Building height caps limit the financial incentives for developers to create new housing, resulting in higher rental prices and less housing availability. Additionally, there is a possibility of sprawl into other neighborhoods as the area continues to grow and the remaining land for development decreases. In an online page about height ordinances in CollegeTown, the City of Tallahassee highlighted a priority to protect “the City’s established residential neighborhoods,” Thus, the city of Tallahassee should pay greater attention to increasing the full development potential of dense urban areas such as CollegeTown. Height restriction revisions could provide many benefits.

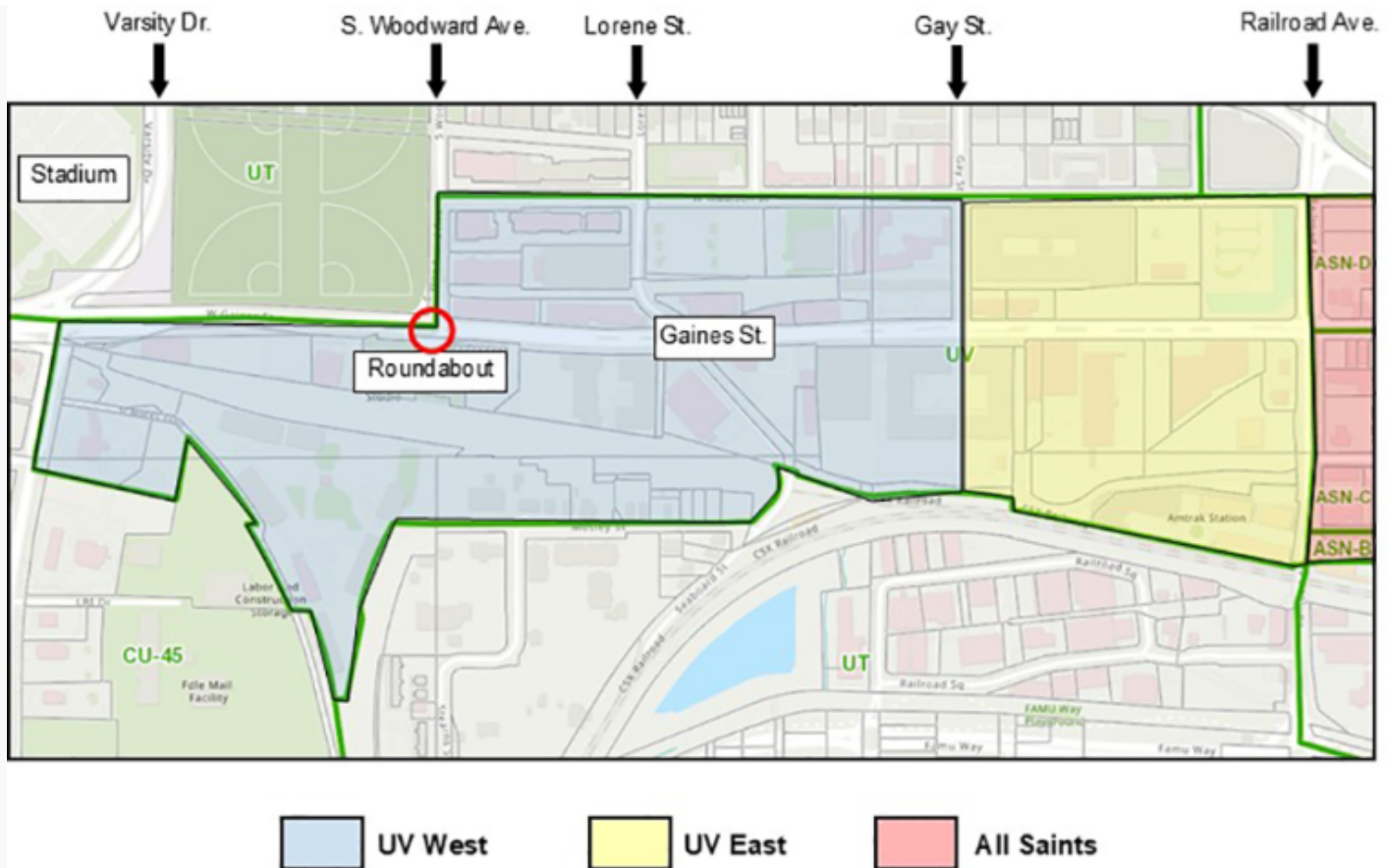


Figure 1, Zoning areas in the University Village zoning district (City of Tallahassee Growth Management Department)

In fact, a **survey** of 10 student housing developments in seven college towns across the country conducted by the City of Tallahassee found a median height of 12 stories.

Table 2 shows a summary of **major ongoing and proposed developments** in the University Urban Village District provided online by the City of Tallahassee and Leon County. This highlights a key part of the building process for developers in which they submit building proposals to the city, which are either approved or rejected. All of the buildings have proposed or approved building heights that are at the maximum or above the height allowed in their given zoning area, indicating a demand to build higher.

Two of the developments, Park Place and Perla, proposed a deviation from the height maximum, requesting to build above the maximum in UV West. This suggests demand exists to build even higher. Moreover, the city has already approved Perla for development at seven stories, two stories above the legal maximum of five. Thus, higher demand for high-density housing appears very strong in CollegeTown, and the district would benefit from a change in the maximum building height. Naturally, with such requests to deviate occurring, and one of them being approved by the city, the City of Tallahassee should change the zoning code to avoid requiring deviances in the future.

Area	Height Maximum	Building Height	Proposed Development	Project Status	At maximum
UV West	5 Stories	5 Stories	Railyard Lofts	Approved	Yes
UV West	5 Stories	8 Stories	Park Place Tallahassee	Pre- Application	Deviation
UV West	5 Stories	5 Stories	Viridian One	Approved	Yes
UV West	5 Stories	7 Stories	Perla	Approved	Deviation
UV East	7 Stories	7 Stories	908 Gaines South	Approved	Yes

Table 2, 2023 Online Review of Proposed Housing Developments in CollegeTown

The case of CollegeTown in Tallahassee illustrates a larger issue playing out across the country. Restrictive density laws, like height ordinances, limit a given area's potential housing supply. The [Bipartisan Policy Center](#), a think tank in Washington, D.C., notes that changing zoning laws regarding density caps is an essential move “[towards providing affordable housing](#).”

Research conducted by the DeVoe L. Moore Center on density regulations and [published by the Florida Policy Project](#) suggests Florida cities could create thousands of new housing units by meeting current market demand by reducing density caps.

Building off the Bipartisan Policy Center's findings, [the Cowles Foundation at Yale University](#) emphasized that a “[market-led supply response](#)” is a key part of creating housing affordability. One way to trigger a market-led response in CollegeTown would be to ease zoning restrictions such as an overly restrictive height ordinance.

Without such a change, the housing supply may never meet the full demand for housing in the area, limiting the potential for affordable housing and increasing the chances of sprawl. If height restrictions are eased, development should boom within existing neighborhoods rather than push out to outer neighborhoods.

Communities face tradeoffs when they consider land use reforms that allow high-density districts like CollegeTown and the redevelopment of former warehouse districts to build up rather than build out.

The City of Tallahassee changed its zoning for CollegeTown to emerge as a high-density urban neighborhood. But the city may not have gone far enough. UV is not the only Tallahassee zoning district limited by height restrictions. As Tallahassee

continues to grow, redevelopment districts should revise height maximums to allow development to meet housing demands and avoid future deviation requests.

For now, CollegeTown is limited in its ability to grow because of maximum height limits. The city can either prioritize the building up of the area or the possible expansion of the area into already existing neighborhoods. Regardless, a revision of the height maximum should receive greater consideration.



Chloe Kauffman is a researcher at the DeVoe L. Moore Center, pursuing an M.S. in Applied Economics at Florida State University. Recently, she received her Bachelor's in Economics from Florida State University.

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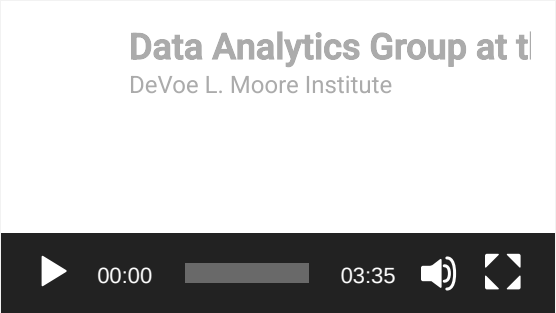
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