



SAN FRANCISCO  
PLANNING  
DEPARTMENT

# ZONING ADMINISTRATOR BULLETIN NO. 5

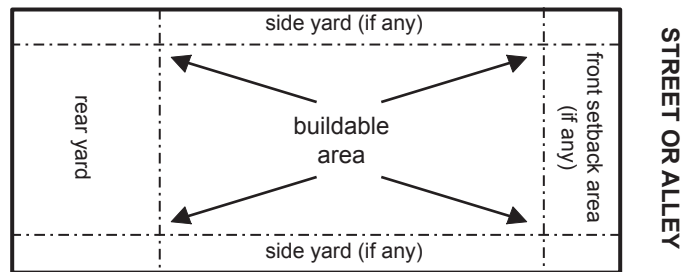
## Buildable Area for Lots in RH, RM, RC, and RTO Districts <sup>1, 2</sup>

Section 307 of the City Planning Code mandates the Zoning Administrator to issue and adopt such rules, regulations and interpretations as are in the Zoning Administrator's opinion, necessary to administer and enforce the provisions of the Planning Code. [Section 7.502 of the San Francisco Charter charges the Zoning Administrator with the responsibility of administering and enforcing the Planning Code.]

Date: <b>APRIL 2005</b>	Relevant Code Sections: <b>132 (Front Setback)</b>	<b>136 (Permitted Obstructions)</b>
Reprinted: <b>OCTOBER 2009</b>	<b>133 (Side Yards)</b>	<b>261 (Special Height Limits)</b>
Formerly known as: Zoning Administrator Bulletin No. 2005-01		

This bulletin is intended to provide a basic instruction on how the Planning Code limits the size and location of structures on residentially zoned lots, i.e. what is the "buildable area" of the lot. The buildable area in residential districts is the entire lot, minus the front setback requirement, if any, and rear yard requirement, plus permitted obstructions. In limited cases, there may also be a side yard requirement. Figure 1 provides an illustration of these front setback, side yard and rear yard requirements. You may click on each of these parameters within the illustration and it will take you to a description of the requirements in the text. Keep in mind that when this discussion refers to the various open areas (front setback and rear yard) it means the open area required by the current Planning Code. It does not mean the conventional description of an open area (rear yard for example) which happens to exist on a given lot and which may be larger or smaller than the current requirement. Since the rules have changed over the years, many existing buildings in the city lawfully intrude into the front setbacks or rear yards required by the current Planning Code.

Figure 1  
Buildable Area



<sup>1</sup> This flyer does not address Special Use District controls such as Bernal Heights or Dolores Heights which impose different rules relative to one or more of the standards presented above. You may call the Planning Department Planning Information Counter (415) 558-6377, or consult the Zoning Maps on the Department's web page <http://www.sfplanning.org> to determine if a site is within a Special Use District.

<sup>2</sup> See Planning Code Sections 206 and 209.1 for a description of the RH, RM, RC, and RTO districts and allowable dwelling density in these districts, respectively.

## Front Setback

Planning Code section 132 (not required in RC districts)

The required front setback is that area at the front of the lot that cannot be built upon except for permitted obstructions listed in the Planning Code (Section 136). This area must extend the full width of the lot. The depth of the front setback requirement in these districts is the average of the existing setbacks of the two adjacent buildings except that the required setback need be no greater than 15 feet or 15% of lot depth, whichever is less. For example, if one adjacent building is set back 10 feet from its front property line and the building on the other adjacent lot is set back 5 feet from its front property line, the required front setback for your lot would be 7.5 feet. In certain areas, there also are separate, mapped setbacks which may impose a greater requirement. See the actual Planning Code provisions (Section 132) for specific situations such as corner lots, vacant adjacent lots, etc.

The front setback may be alternatively averaged under certain circumstances. See Figure 2. Where the two adjacent structures have different depths relative to the subject lot one can extend a structure on the subject lot into the required setback so long as the building extension is adjacent to the structure projecting further forward on the lot and an open area laterally faces the lot whose wall does not extend as far forward. Further, to the extent that the building intrudes into the setback otherwise required by conventional averaging, Area A in Figure 2, there must be an offsetting undeveloped area that would otherwise be permitted by conventional averaging, Area B in Figure 2, that is equal to or greater than the intrusion, i.e. the area of B must be greater than or equal to the area of A.

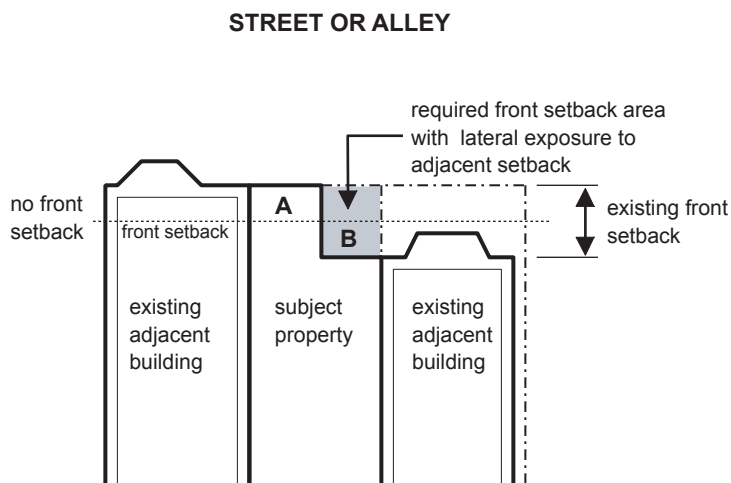


Figure 2  
Alternative Front  
Setback Averaging

## Rear Yard

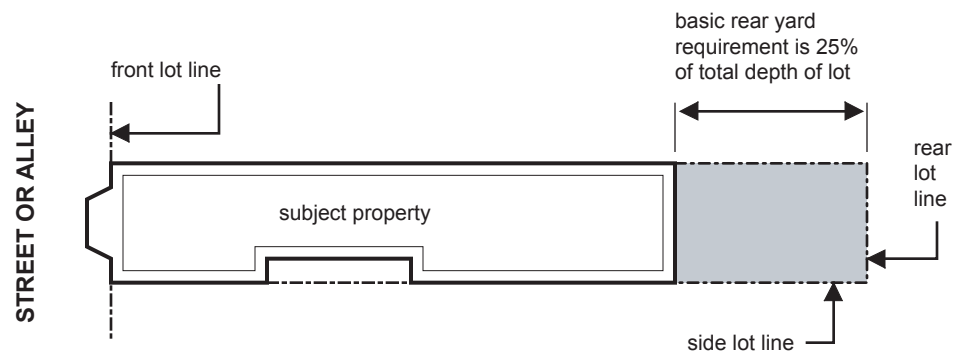
### Planning Code Section 134

The required rear yard is that area at the back of the lot that can't be built upon except for permitted obstructions listed in Section 136 of the the Planning Code. The required rear yard must extend the full width of the lot for the depth indicated below (except in instances of irregular averaging as described below).

#### **RH-1(D), RH-1, RH-1(S), RM-3, RM-4, RC-3, RC-4.**

The rear yard requirements in these districts is straightforward, 25% of lot depth (see Figure 3).

*Figure 3*  
*25% Rear Yard*



#### **RH-2, RH-3, RM-1, RM-2, and RTO Districts**

Generally, the depth of the rear yard requirement in these districts is between 25% and 45% of the depth of the lot with the exact depth dependent upon the depth of the rear walls of the two adjacent buildings. Specifically, the maximum required rear yard depth is 45% of the lot depth. For example, if your lot is 120 feet deep your maximum rear yard depth would be 54 feet ( $120 \times .45 = 54$ ) (see Figure 4). However, if one or both of the existing buildings on the two adjacent lots go back further than that, your rear yard requirement may be reduced. If the average of the locations of the rear walls of these two adjacent buildings is deeper than 45% of your lot's depth, your required rear yard would begin at that location (see Figure 5 and further discussion below regarding what walls may be used for averaging purposes).

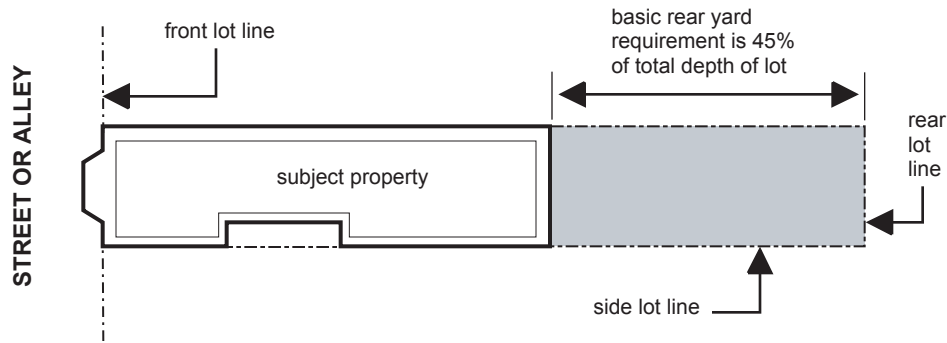


Figure 4  
 Base Rear Yard, RH-2,  
 RH-3, RM-1, RM-2, RTO  
 Districts

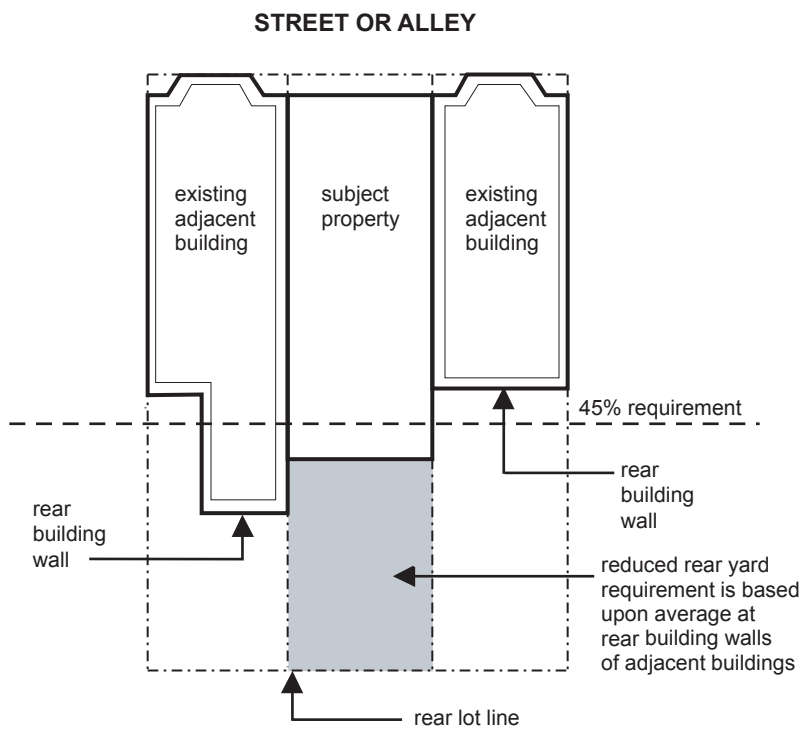
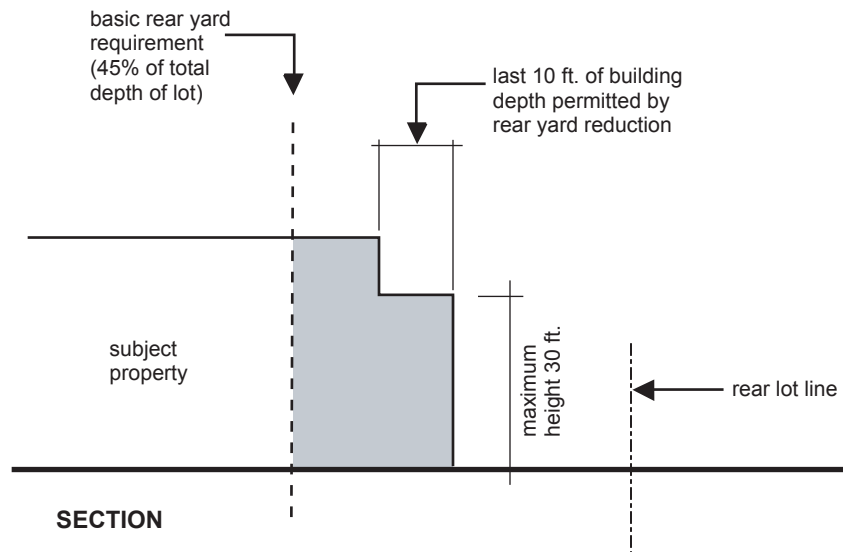


Figure 5  
 Rear Yard Averaging

Note that one must consider the adjacent rear walls relative to the subject lot rather than to their own. ( Since adjacent lots may not have the same depth as the subject lot, the size of their rear yards may vary. However, the relevant measurement is not the adjacent rear yards but the location of adjacent rear building walls.) In no case can the required rear yard be less than 25% of the lot depth or 15 feet, whichever is greater. (For example, 25% of a lot with a depth of only 50 feet would be 12.5 feet but the minimum rear yard requirement in any case is 15 feet). The rearmost 10 feet of the buildable area that extends into the rear 45% of the lot has a height limit of no more than 30 feet. (See Figure 6 below, see the Planning Code Section 102.12 to find how height limits are measured.

*Figure 6  
30-Foot Height Limit for  
Averaging (last 10 feet  
gained by Averaging)*



In order to be counted for purposes of determining your rear yard depth, the two adjacent rear walls need to extend at least 1/2 the width of their respective lots and be 2 stories or 20 feet high. If a rear wall does not meet these criteria, the deepest cross section of the adjacent building that does meet these criteria is counted. See the actual Planning Code provisions (Section 134) or check with the staff of the Planning Department for different situations such as corner lots, vacant adjacent lots, etc. (Note also, if an otherwise qualifying wall fits the dimensions of a permitted obstruction it cannot be counted for averaging purposes, see Section 136 of the Planning Code and the following section of this bulletin).

As with front setbacks, the Planning Code allows for an extension into the rear yard as shown in Figure 5 below. The same basic rule described above for front setbacks would apply. Where the two adjacent structures have different depths relative to the subject lot one can extend a structure on the subject lot into the required rear yard so long as the building extension is adjacent to the structure deeper on the lot and an open area laterally faces the lot whose wall does not extend as far into the rear (see Figure 7). Further, to the extent that the building intrudes into the rear yard otherwise required by conventional averaging, Area A in Figure 7, there must be an offsetting undeveloped area that would otherwise be permitted by conventional averaging, Area B in Figure 7, that is equal to or greater than the intrusion, i.e. the area of B must be greater than or equal to the area of A.

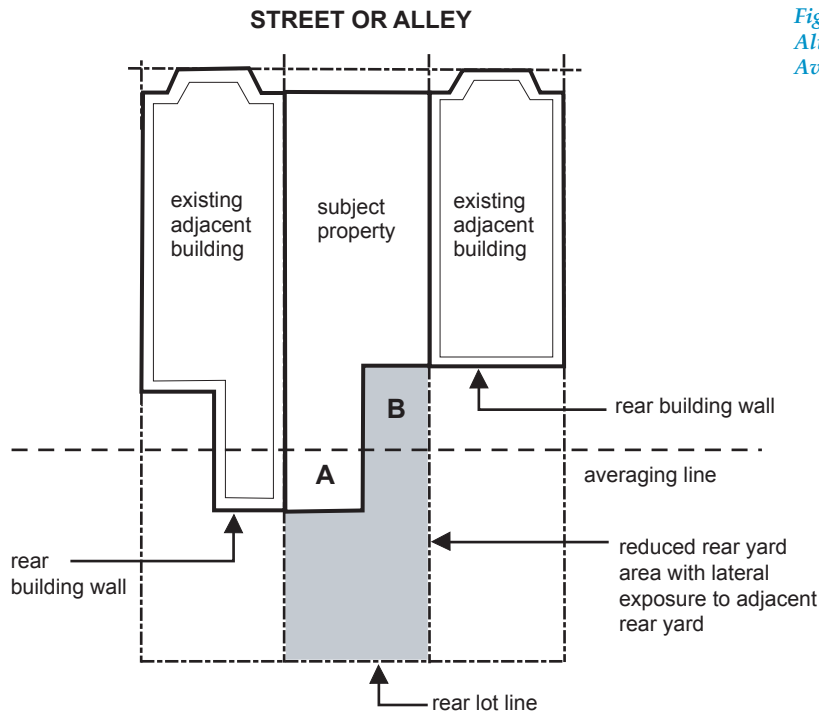


Figure 7  
Alternative Rear Yard  
Averaging

## Permitted Obstructions

A permitted obstruction is an item or building feature allowed to exist in or extend into a required open area. These include things like stairs, bay windows etc., of specified dimensions. One of the most significant of these is a 12-foot deck or extension of the building into the rear yard that does not go into the rear 25% or 15 feet of the lot (the “12-foot pop-out”). (Since it cannot project into this last 25%/15 foot increment, it is applicable only in those districts requiring a 45% rear yard, i.e. RH-2, RH-3, RM-1 and RM-2 Districts.) This 12-foot extension can cover the full width of the lot if it is no higher than 10 feet above grade. It may be as high as the floor level of the second floor of occupancy not counting the ground floor if there is a 5 foot distance completely clear of obstructions between the extension and both side property lines (see Figures 8 and 9). Remember that this feature can extend 12 feet into the required rear yard. Therefore if your house already extends 2 feet into the rear yard required under the current rules as stated above, this feature would only be allowed to extend 10 feet from your existing house. Alternatively, if your house does not extend to the point where the rear yard requirement begins, you could extend your house at the height limit to that point, then extend it further with this feature. However, this feature could not extend a full 12 feet if it would then enter the rear 25% or 15 feet of the lot. Remember also, that as a permitted obstruction, it already protrudes into the rear yard. Therefore, other permitted obstructions cannot be appended to the 12-foot extension and measured as projections into the rear yard from that point. Each permitted obstruction’s allowable extension is measured from the rear yard line. You may consult Planning Code Section 136 to find other obstructions that are permitted in the rear yard and front setback.

Figure 8  
12-Foot "Pop-Out"  
(Single story -  
maximum height of  
10 feet above grade)

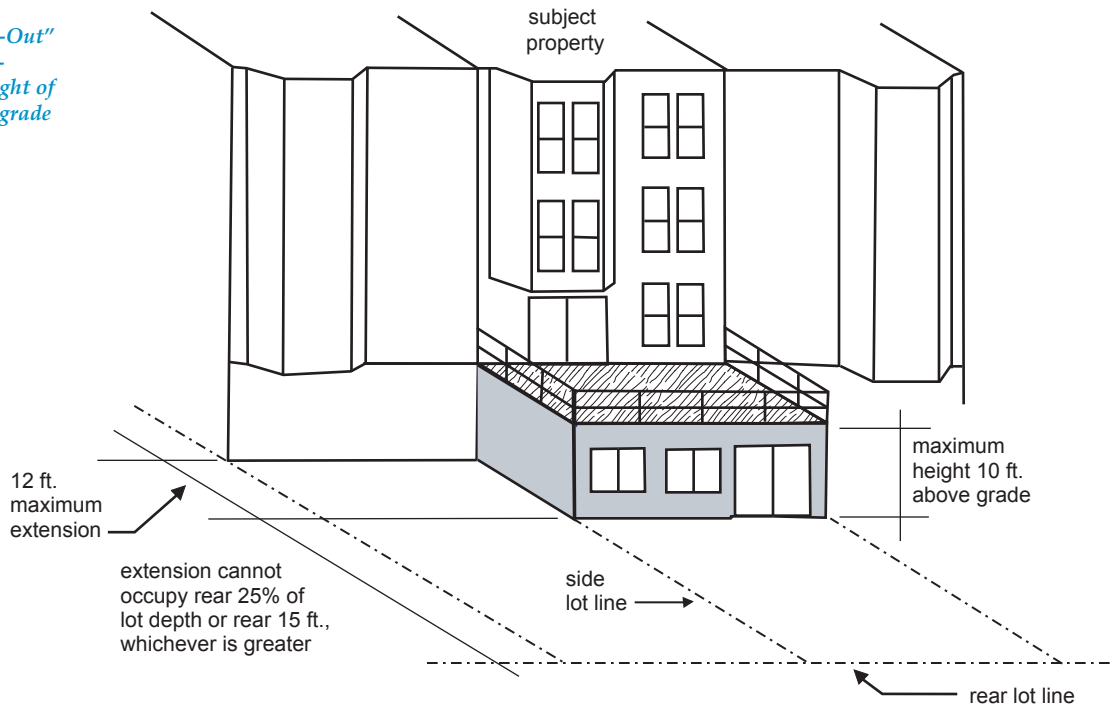
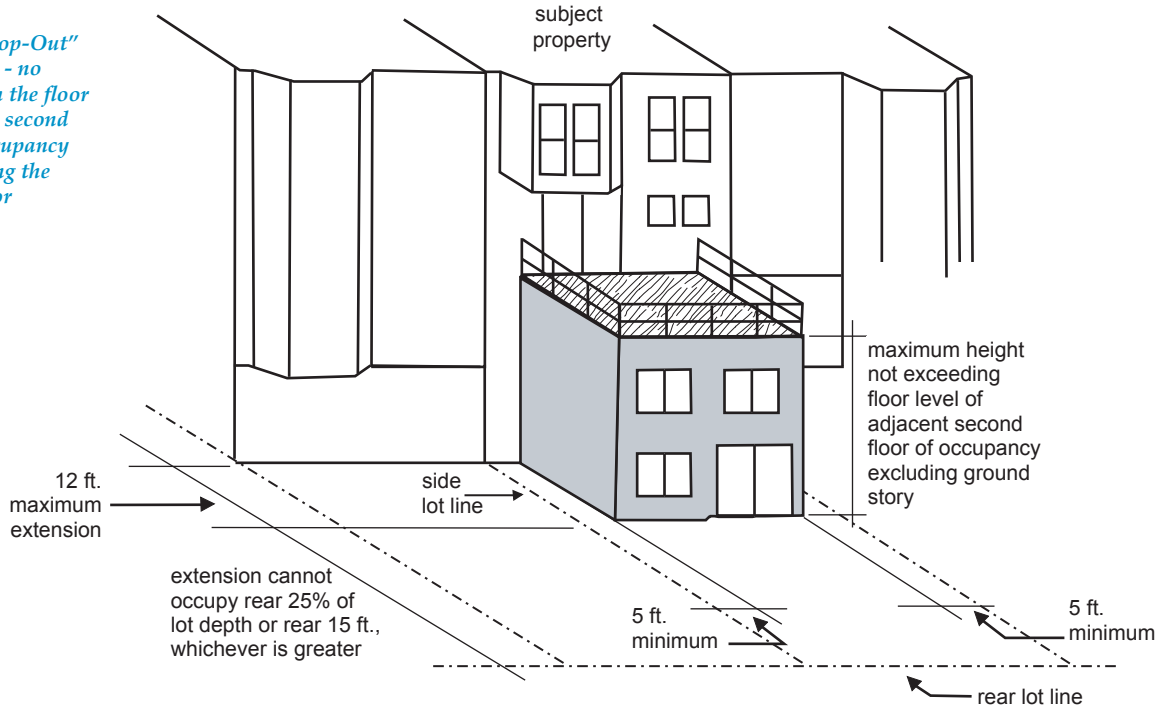


Figure 9  
12-Foot "Pop-Out"  
(Two story - no  
higher than the floor  
level of the second  
floor of occupancy  
not counting the  
ground floor)



## Side Yards

Planning Code Section 133

Side yards are required only in RH-1(D) (Single-Family, Detached) districts. The extent of the side yard requirement depends on lot width. (Section 133). Lots of 28 feet in width or less have no requirement. For lots with a width of 28 feet or more but less than 31 feet: one side yard equal to the amount by which the lot width exceeds 25 feet, or the same total amount in the form of two side yards, one of which shall be at least three feet; for lots with a width of 31 feet or more but less than 40 feet: two side yards each of three feet; for lots with a width of 40 feet or more but less than 50 feet: two side yards each of four feet; and for lots with a width of 50 feet or more: two side yards each of five feet. There are alternative configurations to these side yards allowed in the Code in certain situations. Please consult Section 133.

## Special Height Limits - R Districts

Planning Code Section 261

All parcels have a height limit proscribed by the Zoning Map. For most RH districts the mapped height limit is 40 feet, though in limited cases it might be different. However, regardless of the mapped height limit there are additional height limits that apply in certain residential districts.

In RH-1 districts, regardless of the mapped height limit, the maximum allowable height is 35 feet.

In RH-1 and RH-2 districts there is an additional height limit that applies at the front of the property. The height limit is 30 feet at the front lot line or, where the lot is subject to a legislated setback line or required front setback as described above, at the setback. The height limit then increases at an angle of 45 degrees from the horizontal toward the rear of the lot until the maximum height limit is reached (typically 35 feet in RH-1 and 40 feet in RH-2). See Figure 10.

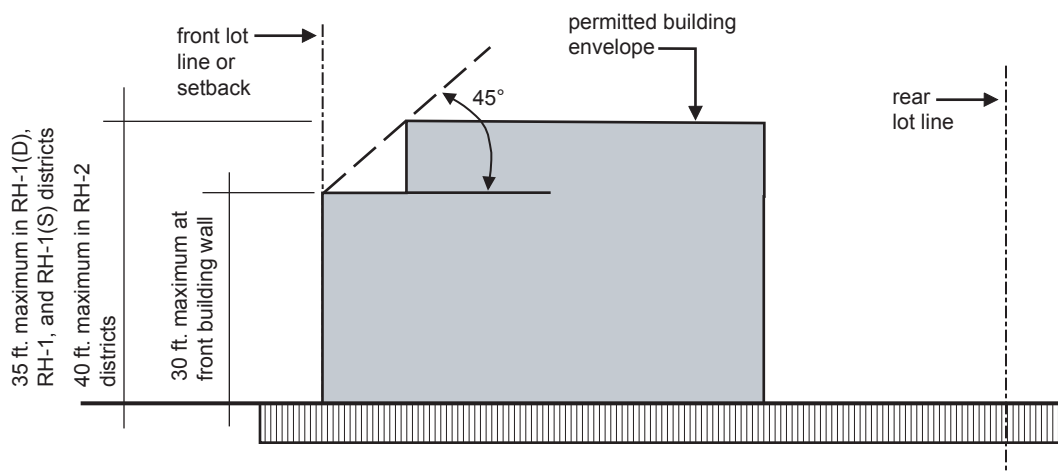


Figure 10  
Front Height Limit



This height restriction may be reduced based on the height of the immediately adjacent buildings, i.e. if that average exceeds the limit, the subject property may also, up to the maximum height limits applicable in the district.

Last, there are height limits that apply in certain districts where lots are significantly sloped up or down. The 35 height limit in RH-1 districts may be increased to 40 feet where the average ground elevation at the rear line of the lot is higher by 20 or more feet than at the front. The height limit in these districts is reduced to 30 feet where the average ground elevation at the rear line of the lot is lower by 20 or more feet than at the front line reduced to 25 feet where the average ground elevation at the rear line of the lot is lower by 40 or more feet than at the front.

In RH-2 Districts, no dwelling is permitted to exceed a height of 40 feet, and the height limit is further reduced to 35 feet where the average ground elevation at the rear line of the lot is lower by 20 or more feet than at the front.

#### NOTE:

This summary of certain provisions of the Planning Code is current at the date indicated above and is written in common terms to help the public understand the legal requirements of the Planning Code. Therefore, it may not be as precise as the actual Planning Code language. If there is any discrepancy between this and the actual code language, the latter would govern. One may verify the current applicability of this summary by reading the actual code language in the San Francisco Planning Code available for viewing online from the preceding link in this sentence and from the Planning Department's home page. It is also available in public libraries or for purchase in technical bookstores. One also may contact the Department of City Planning. The applicability of these rules may change over time or may be modified by moratoria, interim controls, special use districts or by governmental bodies with authority to exercise discretion over building permits.



**SAN FRANCISCO  
PLANNING  
DEPARTMENT**

**FOR MORE INFORMATION:  
Call or visit the San Francisco Planning Department**

**Central Reception**

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FAX: **415.558.6409**

WEB: **<http://www.sfplanning.org>**

**Planning Information Center (PIC)**

1660 Mission Street, First Floor  
San Francisco CA 94103-2479

TEL: **415.558.6377**

*Planning staff are available by phone and at the PIC counter.  
No appointment is necessary.*