

MEMORANDUM

TO: Mayor Peggy Wheeler
Vice Mayor John Callaghan
Members of the Town Council

FROM: Leonard G. Rubin, Town Attorney 

RE: Regulation of Architectural Styles for Single-Family Detached Dwellings

DATE: April 21, 2025

CC: Robert Cole, Town Manager
Frank Davila, Planning and Zoning Director
Caitlin Copeland-Rodriguez, Town Clerk

BACKGROUND:

For well over thirty years, the Town has regulated the architectural style of all buildings and structures erected within the Town as part of its site plan and appearance review procedures. Buildings were required to be of an architectural style representative of or reflecting the "Old Florida" style of architecture indigenous to the Town and commonly known and identified as late Victorian (Key West Cracker), Spanish revival (Mediterranean), or a combination thereof. In 2014, the list of architectural styles was expanded to include Modern (early to mid-20th century). All new commercial developments, mixed-use developments, and residential dwellings of two or more units were required to undergo site plan and appearance review, including architectural review. These applications were first considered by the Planning and Zoning Board and presented to the Town Council for final action with the Board's recommendation. However, single-family detached dwellings were subject to site plan and appearance review, including architectural review, only by the Town's Planning and Zoning Department.

During its 2021 session, the Florida Legislature amended Section 163.3202, Florida Statutes, to limit the ability of local governments to regulate "building design elements" for single-family and two-family dwelling units. The term building design elements refers only to the exterior appearance and layout of the structures, not the size or massing, and is defined by statute as follows:

[T]he external building color; the type or style of exterior cladding material; the style of material of roof structures or porches; the exterior nonstructural architectural ornamentation; the location or architectural styling of windows or doors; the location or orientation of the garage; the number and type of rooms; and the interior layout of rooms. **The term does not include the height, bulk, orientation, or location of a dwelling on a zoning lot; or**

the use of buffering or screening to minimize potential adverse physical or visual impacts or to protect the privacy of neighbors.

§163.3202(5)(b)1, Fla. Stat. (2024) (emphasis added). Section 163.3202(5)(a), Florida Statutes, did provide certain exceptions to this limitation on municipal regulation of single-family and two-family dwellings, including, but not limited to, dwellings located in planned unit developments or master planned communities or dwellings located within a jurisdiction of a local government that has a design review board or architectural review board.

As set forth above, prior to 2021, single-family detached dwellings were not considered by either the Planning and Zoning Board or the Town Council and were subject solely to site plan and appearance review and approval by the Planning and Zoning Department. To comply with the statutory amendment and to facilitate the Town's continued regulation of architectural styles for single-family detached dwellings, on October 27, 2021, the Town Council adopted Ordinance No. 745, amending the Town's Zoning Code to designate the Planning and Zoning Board as the Town's appearance review board for single-family detached dwellings. The Board was granted final decision-making authority on site plan and appearance review¹, specifically including architectural review, of detached single-family dwellings not located within an approved planned unit development, thereby invoking the statutory exception outlined above.

However, during its 2023 session, the Florida Legislature amended Section 163.3202 to only allow local governments to continue to regulate building design elements for single-family detached dwellings if the local government had a design review board or architectural review board created before January 1, 2020. As set forth above, the Town did not delegate appearance and architectural review of single-family dwellings to the Planning and Zoning Board until October 27, 2021. Consequently, effective July 1, 2023 (the effective date of the statutory change), the Town ceased regulating building design elements for single-family detached dwellings.

Recently, Councilmember Davis questioned whether the Town could continue to regulate building design elements because the Planning and Zoning Board has historically conducted appearance review, albeit on an advisory basis, of commercial developments, mixed use developments, and residential structures of two or more units. Councilmember Davis presented a letter from Nancy Stroud, a local land use attorney, opining that because the Planning and Zoning Board's duties included appearance review as of January 1, 2020 and because the terms "design review board" and "architectural review board" are not specifically defined by statute, the Town could continue apply its land development regulations relating to building design elements (or architectural styles) to single-family and two-family dwellings.

¹ Through the adoption of Ordinance No. 753 on September 28, 2022, the Town Council removed the site plan review component for single-family detached homes from the Planning and Zoning Board's purview and returned that function to the Planning and Zoning Department, thereby limiting the Board's authority solely to appearance review (including architectural review) only.

QUESTION PRESENTED:

Given the Planning and Zoning Board's historical appearance review duties as a recommending body for commercial developments, multi-family developments, and residential dwellings of two or more units, did the Town have an architectural review board or design review board in place prior to January 1, 2020 to enable the Town to continue to regulate building design elements (or architectural styles) for detached single-family dwellings and two-family dwellings not included within a planned unit development pursuant to Section 163.3203(5)(a), Florida Statutes?

SHORT ANSWER:

Neither the plain language of Section 163.3203(5)(a)7, Florida Statutes, nor the legislative history for the 2023 amendment gives any definitive indication of the Town's ability to continue to regulate architectural styles for detached single-family dwellings and two-family dwellings. Consequently, the Town Council may wish to seek an advisory opinion from the Attorney General. However, because Attorney General opinions are advisory and not legally binding, the Town must proceed to evaluate its options and determine the appropriate course of action based on the potential risks and benefits of each approach, taking into account the best interests of the Town and its residents.

ANALYSIS:

As set forth above, the Planning and Zoning Board has historically, and most certainly prior to January 1, 2020, acted as a recommending body for site plan and appearance review for commercial developments, mixed-use developments, and residential dwellings of two or more units. As set forth in Section 34-116(3)(b) of the Town Code, architectural style is a component of appearance review. The central question is whether given this appearance review function, the Town's Planning and Zoning Board satisfies the statutory requirement of an "architectural review board" or "design review board."

As pointed out in Ms. Stroud's letter, Section 163.3202(5)(a), Florida Statutes, does not define the terms "architectural review board" or "design review board." When attempting to discern the application of a statute, the first rule of statutory construction or interpretation is to give the statute its plain and ordinary meaning. *Weber v. Dobbins*, 616 So. 2d 956 (Fla. 1993). However, when a word or term is not defined and the statutory language is unclear or ambiguous, courts apply rules of statutory construction and explore legislative history to determine legislative intent. *Nicarry v. Eslinger*, 990 So. 2d 661 (Fla. 5th DCA 2008). See also *Longval v. State*, 914 So. 2d 1098 (Fla. 4th DCA 2005) (to discern legislative intent, courts must apply a "common-sense approach" which requires consideration of, among other things, legislative history). A statute is ambiguous when its language is subject to more than one reasonable interpretation and may permit more than one outcome. *Hess v. Walton*, 898 So. 2d 1046 (Fla. 2d DCA 2005).

Initially, it appeared that the Legislature's 2023 amendment to Section 163.3202(5)(a), Florida Statutes, preempted the Town's ability to review building design elements for detached single-family dwellings because prior to October 27, 2021, architectural review

was conducted solely by the Planning and Zoning Department and not by a board with design review or architectural review functions. However, upon closer examination, the statute does explicitly state that the Town was required to have a design review board or architectural review board actively reviewing such applications prior to January 1, 2020. The statute only requires that the "dwelling be located within a jurisdiction of a local government that has a design review board or an architectural review board created before January 1, 2020." §163.3202(5)(a)7, Fla. Stat. (2024). As fully set forth above, the Planning and Zoning Board has historically conducted appearance review and architectural review of development applications as a recommending body and was in place long before January 1, 2020. Because the statutory language is subject to more than one interpretation, the next step in the analysis would be to explore the legislative history of the 2023 revision to Section 163.3202(5)(a), Florida Statutes.

While the legislative history, like the statute itself, does not provide any specific definitions, the Florida Legislature's April 27, 2023 Bill Analysis and Fiscal Impact Statement for the 2023 revision to Section 163.3202(5)(a), Florida Statutes, does, in a footnote, give two examples of the types of local government architectural review boards or design review boards to which it was referring, namely, the Village of Wellington Architectural Review Board and the City of St. Petersburg Development Review Committee, which also functions as the City's Design Review Board. However, a deeper analysis of the roles of these two example boards or committees yields no additional clarity.

The stated duties of the Village of Wellington Architectural Review Board ("ARB") are to: (1) adopt by resolution various schedules of approved materials, designs, and charts of approved colors; (2) hear and decide appeals of administrative decisions of the planning, zoning and building department pertaining to approved materials, designs, and charts of approved colors; (3) hear and approve alternatives to the development and design criteria established by ordinance or resolution; and (4) review and approve plans for multifamily and non-residential development. Appointments to the Architectural Review Board are "based on experience or interest in the businesses and professions involved in building and development." The powers and duties of the Wellington ARB include adopting schedules of approved materials, designs, and colors and go far beyond mere recommendations regarding appearance review. The Wellington ARB conducts traditional architectural or design review in the same manner as many other local government boards that review the architectural elements of single-family homes, such as the Town of Bay Harbor Islands Design Review Board, the City of Miami Beach Design Review Board, and the City of Naples Design Review Board. Each of these municipalities has extensive design and/or architectural guidelines in place that are administered by a board whose members have specific expertise relating to architecture, engineering, and/or land use.

The City of St. Petersburg, on the other hand, has a Development Review Commission ("DRC") with duties very similar to a traditional planning board like the Town's Planning and Zoning Board. In appointing members to the DRC, Section 18.80.020.2(B) of the City Code requires that, where possible, the City Council should include members "qualified and experienced in the fields of architecture, planning, landscape architecture,

engineering, construction, and land use law and real estate.” While the City has developed very detailed architectural guidelines for its traditional neighborhoods, the architectural review of single-family homes is conducted by members of City Staff, with the St. Petersburg DRC’s role generally limited to reviewing architectural details and materials when a property owner is seeking a variance. In fact, a representative of the City Attorney’s Office confirmed that the City of St. Petersburg specifically added design review to the Commission’s duties after the 2021 amendment to Section 162.3202(5)(a), Florida Statutes, to ensure continued regulation of building design elements or architectural styles for detached single-family homes. The City’s approach to the 2021 legislation was very similar to Town’s approach; however, the City continued to regulate architecture after 2023 amendment, relying on the fact that the Development Review Commission was in existence prior to January 1, 2020.

Because the legislative history provides two divergent examples of the types of boards that would fall within the exception allowing local governments to continue to regulate building design elements, it provides no additional clarification of the Legislature’s intent.

Neither the plain language of the statute nor the legislative history provides clear direction as to whether the Town can continue to conduct architectural review of detached single-family homes. While the Town will not have a definitive answer until a court of competent jurisdiction rules on this issue or the Florida Legislature further clarifies the statutory language, the Town could, as interim step, request an advisory opinion from the Florida Attorney General. Attorney General Opinions serve to provide legal advice on questions of statutory interpretation. Attorney General opinions are advisory only and not law; however, they are persuasive and could provide additional guidance to the Town.

Irrespective of whether the Town Council seeks an Attorney General Opinion, the Town Council’s decision as to whether to continue to regulate architecture for single-family detached homes² ultimately hinges upon the Town Council’s risk tolerance and an evaluation of the potential benefits and consequences of each approach.

Option A – No regulation of architectural styles for detached single-family dwellings.

The first approach is to take a more conservative, restrictive interpretation of the statute and continue along the current path of not regulating building design elements or architectural styles of single-family detached dwellings. While this approach prevents the Town from requiring specific architectural styles for single-family detached dwellings, the Town can continue to address neighborhood compatibility issues through the application of other components of the appearance review process, such as harmony, or through the adoption of additional regulatory criteria, such as maximum floor area ratios. As explained above, Section 163.3202(5)(b)1, Florida Statutes, does not address size or massing and specifically excludes “bulk” from the definition of building design elements.

Additionally, the Town Council delegated final authority for appearance review of single-family detached homes to the Planning and Zoning Board for the sole purpose of allowing

² Whatever course of action the Town Council takes for single-family detached dwellings would also apply to two-family dwellings.

continued architectural review for these types of dwellings in response to the statutory amendment. However, the Board is not comprised of persons with specific qualifications or experience in the fields of architecture, design, engineering, or land planning, and some of the Boardmembers have expressed reluctance in applying appearance review criteria, some of which are inherently subjective in nature, to pending appearance review applications. If the Town is no longer regulating architectural review for single-family detached dwellings, the Town Council could delegate the appearance review function back to the members of the Planning and Zoning Staff, who do have the requisite expertise in the fields of architecture and land planning. Under this approach, if an applicant disagreed with Town Staff's application of the architectural styles or appearance review criteria, including harmony, that decision could be appealed to the Town Council sitting as the Zoning Board of Adjustment and Appeals, thereby vesting the Town Council with final decision-making authority over certain applications.

Option B – Reactivate regulation of architectural styles for detached single-family dwellings.

The second approach is to follow the lead of the City of St. Petersburg and take a more liberal interpretation of the statute, thereby reactivating the Town's regulation of building design elements or architectural styles for detached single-family homes in the same manner as the Town conducted such review prior to July 1, 2023. This option would expand the Planning and Zoning Board's review to include all aspects of appearance review, including harmony and architectural styles. The Board would continue to have final decision-making authority, and any person seeking to challenge the Board's determination would be required to file a Petition for Writ of Certiorari in the circuit court, without any potential for Town Council involvement in the process.

The potential risk associated with this approach is that applicants who are denied appearance review based on architectural style could raise the provisions of Section 162.3202(5)(a), Florida Statutes, as a basis for reversal of the Board's decision and the Town would be required to defend such an action. While there are various statutory provisions that allow for the recovery of attorney's fees for violations of a statutory preemption, these provisions are only generally applicable to challenges to ordinances and would not apply to an appeal of the denial of a development order application for appearance review. Furthermore, because the Town adopted the architectural review requirement prior to May 11, 1995, no cause of action would generally exist under the Bert J. Harris Private Property Rights Protection Act for enforcing mandated architectural styles. §70.001(12), Fla. Stat. (2024).

The Town Council could also consider returning both appearance review and architectural review of detached single-family dwellings to Planning and Zoning Staff. However, because a review board or architectural committee would not be performing this function, this approach would be more difficult to defend in the event of a challenge to the Town's authority to regulate building design elements (or architectural styles) based on Section 163.3202(5)(a), Florida Statutes.

CONCLUSION:

As fully discussed above, applying the rules of statutory construction does not lead to any definitive conclusion regarding the Town's ability to regulate architectural styles for detached single-family (and two-family) dwellings. Neither the plain language of the statute nor the legislative history gives any clear indication as to whether the Planning and Zoning Board's historical duties as an appearance review board satisfies the statutory criteria for the continued regulation of building design elements or architectural styles for detached single-family dwellings as set forth in Section 163.5202(5)(a), Florida Statutes. The Town Council could request an advisory opinion from the Attorney General seeking additional guidance regarding the statutory interpretation. However, even if the Attorney General issues such an opinion, it is advisory only. Consequently, it is ultimately up to the Town Council to assess the importance of architectural review of single-family (and two-family) dwellings and determine the appropriate course of action based on the potential risks and benefits of each approach.