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Board of Supervisors – Land Use and Transportation Committee
City and County of San Francisco
City Hall, Room 244
1 Dr. Carlton B. Goodlett Place
San Francisco, CA 94102

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RE: Planning Code – Four-Unit Density Exception for Residential Districts | File #210866

We present the following as part of an ongoing collaboration between San Francisco-based design professionals represented by AIA San Francisco (AIASF) and the jurisdiction authorities. The AIASF Board of Directors endorses the content of this letter on behalf of the membership.

Throughout San Francisco residential neighborhoods, existing zoning laws are limiting the capacity for SF to meet increased Regional Housing Needs Allocation (RHNA) goals in the upcoming 2023–2031 Housing Element cycle. Rafael Mandelman’s proposed Planning Code – Four-Unit Density Exception for Residential Districts takes two steps that would provide a viable path to increase housing density in districts where one- and two-family buildings are dominant. By eliminating RH-1 zoning, the proposal legislates higher-density development where only single-family homes can currently be built. The proposal goes further by offering a density exception, allowing developers of new housing to build four units on corner lots previously designated for single-family and duplex buildings. The legislation introduces an incremental but meaningful change to such districts through these measures, increasing the housing supply without disrupting neighborhood character. We support this legislation and recommend additional incentives to strengthen its conformance.

A four-unit building on a corner lot should be permitted to reach the height and bulk limits permitted under the Planning Code, exempt from the RDG overlay.

Production of housing has been inadequate to meet the demand. We believe that strengthening the incentives for project sponsors to maximize density would result in a greater supply of high-quality housing units that families and individuals will want to inhabit for the long term. Such incentives must go beyond the simple exemption to the density limit and eliminate restrictive rules limiting options for independent entrances and adequate natural light in multi-tenant buildings built on typical city lots.

High-quality housing contributes to the neighborhood.

Allowing developers to build to the zoned height and bulk limitations makes good economic sense. That flexibility encourages the development of a wider variety of unit types and strengthens rather than disrupts the neighborhood by catering to a diversity of lifestyles and living arrangements.

The most effective means to reduce the cost of new housing is to allow approvals through Ministerial Review.

Developers of new, high-density units can produce housing more quickly—therefore less expensive—if the criteria for approval are clear. Such density-enhanced proposals can be cleared through ministerial review. The laborious process of repeated public comment and review adds years, uncertainty, and inflated costs to

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new housing production. Any proposal that allows more units but keeps the same rigid process in place will perpetuate the chronic shortage and high cost of housing for families and the middle class in San Francisco.

Up-zoning is the key to adding density to RH districts. This legislation is a significant step towards providing density by weaving it into the existing fabric at the corners as a traditionally accepted urban solution. We hope to see this as a first step toward a more equitable housing landscape in San Francisco.

Thank you for your consideration. AIA San Francisco is committed to enhancing the quality of life in our city by promoting excellence in architecture, design, and the built environment. We aim to pursue these goals through an open and earnest exchange with the authorities whose roles are relevant to the issues at hand.

Respectfully submitted,

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2022 Chair, AIASF Public Policy Committee

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cc: San Francisco Board of Supervisors
cc: Judson True, Director of Housing Delivery at Office of San Francisco Mayor London Breed