

Salt Spring Exchange - November 21, 2025

## **FAR – An Urban Strategy For The Gulf Islands**

By Frants Atorp, Salt Spring Island resident

As the controversy over the rewrite of our Official Community Plan heats up, a very significant detail is being lost in the political rhetoric: a mathematical formula that could reshape Salt Spring and other Gulf Islands. It's called floor area ratio, commonly known as FAR.

FAR, which would allow for much higher densities, has now become a main driver of Salt Spring's OCP "update." Proponents see FAR as "a creative way" to provide more housing—even in the absence of housing agreements. Opponents, meanwhile, see FAR as an urban concept that risks destroying everything that makes the islands special, and are instead calling for affordable housing protected from the market forces that cause surging rents and costs.

Right now a typical lot on Salt Spring is allowed one house no larger than 5000 sq feet (500 sq metres). Without stringent restrictions, FAR could, for example, allow five dwellings of 1000 sq feet on a vast number of lots. That would dramatically increase the island's population. Density must be counted in number of dwellings, not square feet: it is people who need drinking water, sewers, roads, shops, goods, doctors, hospital beds, ferry trips, policing, and all other services.

Unregulated FAR is much worse than Bylaw 530, our trustees' recent failed attempt to double density across most of the island. It would set off a runaway train of development that could rapidly overwhelm the very attributes the Islands Trust is meant to protect: forests, watersheds, natural amenities, and our rural way of life.

Nevertheless, widespread application of the strategy, especially the redefinition of density, is essential to recommendations in two housing reports now guiding Salt Spring's OCP update. They include everything from Accessory Dwelling Units in all residential zones, to "ecovillages," new strata developments, and major densification of small acreages, all in the name of housing and conservation.

The FAR strategy has already been built into the draft new Policy Statement which will direct official community plans on all the islands. To allow for implementation, the existing policy requiring trustees to respect local density limits has been removed.

At a virtual town hall regarding the Policy Statement on September 10, a Trust Senior Policy Advisor responded to my FAR concerns: "Hold on to your hat, Frants, I think you are correct. I think as we move this document forward, we may want to consider whether floor area ratio is an appropriate density metric in the Islands Trust area at least outside of village cores.... It doesn't really make a great deal of sense on larger rural lots or even rural lots or even anywhere outside of a dense urban core where it serves a particular purpose which is creating different potential higher density building configurations to ensure a variety of different building types in an urban context. So I take what you say and we'll bring that forward for the consideration of Trust Council as we move forward."

The FAR initiative stems from months of private meetings on Salt Spring in 2020. It is now set to become Trust-wide policy with almost no discussion. We have to ask why the glossy "Islands 2050" brochure recently sent to all households makes no mention of FAR.

The danger in the long run is that, as trustees with various political agendas—including the take-down of the Islands Trust—come and go, FAR could be severely abused. There are huge profits to be made by increasing densities. From one of many real estate investment sites: "When purchasing land, carefully check the floor area ratio and identify optimal utilization methods, as this is key to enhancing real estate value."

FAR demands extensive community consultation. Unfortunately, no discussion opportunities were afforded during the visioning phase of the OCP public engagement which ended last month. Although that phase has now been extended until March, drafting of our new OCP will begin before Christmas. How does that work? Please send your comments to [ssiinfo@islandstrust.bc.ca](mailto:ssiinfo@islandstrust.bc.ca).