

SWFLA Today



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How high is high? It's hard to say

Measuring is one of the simplest things we do.

By first grade we're experts with rulers and measuring cups, able to accurately gauge the length of a crayon or an amount of milk.

Why is it so difficult, then, to say how tall the buildings proposed as part of the redevelopment of the Naples Beach Hotel & Golf Club property will be?

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The limit for buildings in the area is 87 feet. To build seven stories of luxury condominiums, the developers, the Athens Group, say they need the buildings to be 98 feet tall, so they're asking for permission to build an additional 11 feet.

In return, they're offering to do things like downzone the neighboring golf course so there's no chance it will be converted to residential use and to maintain public access to the beachside bar and restaurant.

So, suppose the city grants the variance. If you're standing on Gulf Shore Boulevard looking up at the top of the tallest new building, you'd be looking at a spot 98 feet above your shoes, right?

Not exactly. Because when it comes to measuring building heights, your first-grade lessons about measuring things no longer apply.

For starters, building heights aren't measured from the ground.

They're measured from what architects, builders and surveyors loosely refer to as FEMA.

That's the term for a line based on the National Flood Insurance Program administered by the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

Flood maps developed as part of the NFIP predict where floodwaters are likely to rise.

Building heights generally begin above the predicted flood elevation.

Everyone's familiar with the concept of sea level. But even it has become complicated over the years. Now the engineers use National Geodetic Vertical Datum and North American Vertical Datum.

Those standards were developed in 1929 and 1988, respectively, as scientists discovered the sea is not actually level. There are local variations caused by currents, wind, temperature and other factors.

In the city of Naples, the FEMA line is anywhere from 2 to about 18 feet above the NGVD number, which is close to what a layman would call sea level.

At the Beach Club, the number is on the high end of that range.

The Surfside Club condominium, immediately to the north of the Beach Club, was built in 1963, before the flood insurance maps and the building requirements associated with them went into effect.

At the time, the only requirement was that the first floor be at least 18 inches above the crown of the road, according to Christa Carrera, floodplain coordinator for the city of Naples.

If the NGVD number is applied, the Surfside Club would be at about 10, Carrera said.

"If the Surfside Club was destroyed, the new building would have a required lowest living floor elevation of approximately 7 to 9 feet higher than what it is now," she explained.

So, the first inhabitable floor of the tallest building proposed at the Beach Club would be about those same 7 to 9 feet above the first floor of its neighbor to the north.

Since its seaward of what's called the Coastal Construction Control Line, an additional, likely small, adjustment could be added to the requirement, Carrera noted.

The counting toward the 98-foot height (or 87-foot height under current rules) would begin there.

That means the top of the "98-foot" building could be well over 100 feet off the ground. And the city measures "the top" from the mid-point of a sloped roof. If a slope-roof design is used, the tippy top of the building would be above that. Elevator shafts, heating and cooling equipment could go up another 7 feet.

While opponents of the Beach Club plan point out the fact that the actual height would be well above 98 feet, it should be noted that any other building at the site would be subject to the FEMA requirements as well.

Whatever is built there will have a first inhabitable floor that is close to 10 feet higher than the first floor of the Surfside Club, and its "top" will be measured as the midpoint of a sloped roof. The issue at hand is the additional 11 feet.

And even a first-grader knows how to measure that.