



Frequently Asked Questions about Venice Unites' Petition to Repeal Venice Land Regulations

What is Venice Unites asking for?

We are a group of concerned citizens collecting signatures on a petition that asks City Council to reconsider parts of the Land Development Regulations, which were passed in July. City Council ignored the overwhelming majority of public comments when they approved the LDRs and this effort is the only way to get the LDRs reconsidered.

What happens if you collect signatures from 10 percent of Venice voters?

Once we submit the petition to City Hall with 10 percent of Venice voters' signatures, the new LDRs are paused from taking effect. City Council will then have to consider what the petitioners want changed or the issue will go to a citizens' referendum, probably in November 2023.

What does Venice Unites want changed?

The public made it very clear during more than 2 years of public meetings and workshops with the Planning Commission and City Council that they didn't want downtown building heights increased and that they wanted Venice's historic charm protected.

Downtown building heights: Unfortunately, City Council approved raising building heights downtown, which could incentivize teardowns of historic buildings and change the scale of our classic small-town streetscape. *Venice Unites wants the building heights kept at 35 feet.*

Downtown Edge District: Height limits in many Venice neighborhoods are now 75 feet, which is 6 stories. This includes a new Downtown Edge District that covers areas surrounding the historic downtown. This district includes parts of the 200 blocks of Pensacola, Milan and Ponce de Leon between Nokomis and Nassau streets, where some of the last Nolen-era 1920s homes exist. In this district, developers could seek approval for 6-story buildings in a residential neighborhood of one- and two-story homes across from Venice Cultural Campus and Jervey Library. *Venice Unites wants these 3 blocks, along with the old Hotel Venice on Nassau Street near the KMI building, removed from the Downtown Edge District and the height on those lots limited to 35 feet.*

Commercial development in planned communities: Under the new LDRs, residential planned unit developments (PUDs) are facing the real possibility of outsized commercial development of a scale that is clearly not envisioned by the City's 2017 Master Plan, and should only be permitted in areas zoned for commercial use. Rather than limiting commercial development to a scale that serves the PUD itself, shopping centers that serve the surrounding region would also be allowed. *Venice Unites wants the LDRs to revert to allowing only neighborhood-scale development inside planned communities.*

Historic districts: The new LDRs originally included, and then removed before passage, language about how to designate a neighborhood as a local historic district. Designating historic districts is a traditional part of municipal planning as a way to protect a city's historic assets. In a city that gets its charming and

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cohesive streetscapes, pocket parks and walkable neighborhoods from the visionary 1920s John Nolen Plan, we think the city should have this tool in its planning toolbox. ***Venice Unites wants the city to have a process included in the LDR for how the city might designate a local historic district in neighborhoods where the majority of property owners are supportive.***

Wildlife habitat protection: The new LDRs laudably include a requirement that building projects on lots over 5 acres have a wildlife and habitat protection assessment done beforehand to survey for protected species like gopher tortoises. But the Planning Commission exempted building lots under 5 acres, which leaves a massive loophole for developers to avoid taking steps to mitigate impacts on protected species on their lots. ***Venice Unites wants undeveloped building lots of any size to require a wildlife and habitat protection assessment.***

City Council says they lowered downtown building heights, but you say they raised them?

City Council changed the way the city measures downtown building heights now and that change is what causes the confusion. But the short answer is that buildings downtown can now be taller because of this creative measuring.

Detailed answer: Under the old LDRs, downtown buildings could be 35 feet tall -- measured to the top of the roof. Builders could request City Council approval for another 10 feet of height, something that hadn't been approved in decades. In addition, decorative additions like towers and cupolas (called "appurtenances") could be added and had no height limits.

These height restrictions give our downtown the appealing small-town feel that makes it so popular, have protected the historic buildings from development pressure and contribute to Venice having higher property values than overbuilt Florida beach towns.

Under the new LDRs, City Council kept the 35-foot height limit but changed the way it's measured. (Now, the 35 feet starts halfway to the midline of a sloped or peaked roof, meaning a building could be higher than 35 feet but still be considered 35 feet.) They also kept the possibility of 10 feet additional height with approval, plus 20 percent of that total for appurtenances. Because City Council put a cap on the height of decorative items like cupolas, they claim they have lowered building heights downtown. We disagree.

Why didn't you start a petition just on the specific changes you wanted?

Venice Unites is using the only viable alternative to us under the Venice City Charter and that is to ask for City Council to "reconsider and repeal" the LDRs. If after collecting signatures from 10 percent of Venice's registered voters, City Council declines to change the issues the voters object to, then a citizens' referendum will be put on the ballot. There is no viable way to challenge specific sections of the LDR individually.

The City says it held dozens of meetings and public hearings where the public could have shared their concerns and had input.

That is true, and Venice Unites members participated in those meetings, workshops and public hearings. Hundreds of other members of the public did as well. Hundreds more wrote to City Council. More than 1,400 signed a petition calling on a freeze of height limits downtown.

The public's concerns were ignored, to the point that many members of City Council now say they don't even know what those concerns are; some have acknowledged publicly that they aren't even familiar with everything they approved in the LDRs. It's disheartening that our elected officials didn't listen to their constituents or take the time to ensure the process was careful and methodical.

City Council approved the LDRs in July, 5-0, while the mayor was out of town. A month before that, a group of local civic organizations -- ranging from neighborhood associations to the Venice Audubon Society to the Sarasota Alliance for Historic Preservation -- formally requested that City Council slow the process down and allow time for additional dialogue with voters. City Council members ignored this formal request.

This petition process is the only way to have the voters' voices heard.