Missing Middle Working Group Engineering Meeting – Public Synopsis from the September 30, 2026

The Missing Middle Working Group reconvened on September 30th for a focused discussion on Engineering and Stormwater-related technical issues affecting small-scale housing in Charlottesville. Building on the August 20th Utilities meeting, members and staff examined how local thresholds, standards, and on-the-ground interpretation shape feasibility for Missing Middle projects, and identified practical updates that could reduce barriers while maintaining safety and environmental intent.

Understanding Engineering Realities

Participants discussed the prevalence of detailed technical comments during reviews and the challenge of resolving conflicts between standards or interpretations, including cases where two requirements cannot both be satisfied physically. City engineering leaders emphasized meeting the purpose and intent of code sections to reach the "best feasible" solution, with a cooperative, problem-solving posture across departments.

Stormwater Thresholds and Proposed Changes

A central theme was raising the local stormwater quality threshold from 6,000 to 10,000 square feet to align with state limits, while creating lighter-touch requirements for small sites—such as silt fence for erosion control and a menu of small on-site practices (rain barrels, rain gardens, permeable pavers)—so more projects contribute to Citywide water quality without prohibitive costs. Staff referenced an implementation horizon of approximately 8–12 months, noting the stormwater work proceeds within—but somewhat separately from—the broader Environmental review effort.

Conflicts, Engineering Judgment, and Consistency

Developers and designers shared examples where standards conflict—for instance, roadway grade versus ADA crossing—and asked how decisions are made. City engineers underscored applying professional judgment to meet purposes and intents when perfect compliance is impossible, and participants highlighted the importance of staff who can work collaboratively across departments to resolve impasses without relying on individual personalities.

Streetscape, Alleys, and Shared Streets

Members discussed required Streetscape improvements, paper streets, and alley policy. Recent practice—including administrative waivers or in-lieu contributions—has reduced barriers for small projects. The group noted that local street typologies in existing guidance can be mismatched to Missing Middle contexts and expressed interest in formalizing

alternatives such as yield/shared streets for low-volume access, paired with clear criteria and documentation.

Fire Access and Alley Realities
Participants reiterated that 10-foot alleys are not fire access; fire operations still require access from a street or hose-drag distances (e.g., 150 feet, or longer where residential sprinklers are provided). This constraint can eliminate some Missing Middle layouts unless the City elects to widen certain alleys or provide alternative access solutions.

HOAs vs. Shared Maintenance Agreements
For very small projects, formal homeowners' associations can be costly and unwieldy. The group discussed recorded shared maintenance agreements as a practical alternative when there is no commonly owned property—ensuring that any homeowner can act on an issue and recover costs proportionally from others.

Pain Points and Uncertainties
Participants cited unforeseen conditions, third-party constraints (e.g., sidewalk replacements tied to utility work), and review-cycle delays tied to highly technical comments. They emphasized the value of upfront clarity: clear checklists, examples, and predictable pathways can shorten due-diligence windows and prevent small projects from being abandoned early.

Shared Themes from the Discussion

- Applying **engineering judgment** to reconcile conflicting standards is essential; codified purpose-and-intent language can guide consistent decisions.
- **Right-sizing stormwater** for small sites—paired with alignment to state thresholds—can broaden participation in citywide water-quality goals.
- **Administrative waivers** and **in-lieu contributions** help tailor streetscape expectations for small infill; formal alternative street forms would add predictability.
- **Fire access** must be addressed explicitly in Missing Middle layouts; alleys alone are not sufficient.
- For small projects, recorded **shared maintenance agreements** can be more practical than establishing HOAs.
- Early, clear guidance and examples reduce risk and uncertainty during due diligence and review.

What Comes Next

The group plans an October/November site-visit session to examine real projects and constraints, followed by a pause through the end of the year. The next formal meeting will bring Building and Fire together to address overlapping code considerations and access requirements.