

ABOUT DESIGN REVIEW

This explains 1) what "design review" is, 2) how it fits into our efforts to shape our community, and 3) how you can participate in the design review decision-making process.

What is Design Review?

Cities and counties shape our community in many ways. One way is to say what kinds of uses go where. This occurs through general plans and zoning codes.

Another is to regulate the design of structures and other elements on property. Design review standards are a tool to help buildings "fit in" a neighborhood. These standards reflect the community's vision for how an area should look. Design standards are often part of the city or county's zoning code. Such standards apply when someone proposes to make a change on his or her property.

Kinds of Standards

Sometimes design standards will say that buildings must be a certain architectural style and/or be in certain colors. Design standards can also regulate the size, location and scale of buildings. The relationship of new or changed buildings to neighboring buildings can be a concern. Other areas of concern can be outside lighting, landscaping and signs.

Design standards can apply throughout the community. They also can apply just in certain areas, for example, in historic areas. Design standards sometimes apply to certain kinds of uses (for example, multi-family developments of a certain size or more).

The Decision-Making Process

Some cities and counties assign the task of design review to a design review body. Others ask the planning commission to look at proposed project designs. Individuals with expertise in design issues, as well as members of the public, usually serve on these bodies. These bodies review a proposed project in light of the community's adopted design standards.

Professional planning staff also reviews projects for design quality. Staff typically provides a report and recommendations for decision-makers' consideration.

Decision-makers want to hear from those who have opinions about whether a project satisfies the community's design standards. Suggestions on what changes might help it to meet those standards also are welcome. If you want to share your thoughts, see "Preparing for Public Hearings" on the back of this sheet for some tips.

To Learn More

- *The Planning Commissioner's Handbook*, League of California Cities, 2005, Chapter 4: The Planning Framework (www.ca-ilg.org/pch4)
- *Curtin's California Land Use and Planning Law* addresses design review issues, available from Solano Press (www.solano.com)

PREPARING FOR PUBLIC HEARINGS

Opportunities for Input: Meetings and Letters

There are a number of ways to share your views with decision-makers. One is to participate in public hearings or other kinds of gatherings during which public input is sought. Another is to send letters and other written materials in advance of a meeting.

General Communications Tips

- Focus Your Message

You may have lots of concerns. See if they can be grouped into categories or themes. Choose two or three of your most important themes or concerns to emphasize. Otherwise, you risk overloading your listeners and possibly diminishing your effectiveness. It's not how much you say, it's how well you say it.

Start with your basic position (for example, "I support the proposed specific plan"). Then explain your connection to the issue (for example, "I live in the neighborhood covered by the plan"). Then explain the reasons for your position. It can be persuasive to think about the values underlying these reasons. ("I believe the plan fairly balances the need for affordable housing with the need for urban open space.") Tie your position to larger community interests. ("For our businesses to thrive, we need workforce housing.")

- Organize Supporting Materials

You may have written materials you want to share with decision-makers. Make sure that you have at least enough copies for each member of the decision-making body plus one for staff.

If you have a lot of documentation, think about submitting it in advance. A page explaining what a larger packet contains can be helpful.

To Participate in a Meeting

- Get the Agenda and Other Information

The meeting agenda explains what issues are up for discussion and provides other useful information. Agendas usually are prepared three days (72 hours) in advance of a meeting. Many agencies post agendas on their websites. Another option is to ask that an agenda be sent to you. You can also pick up a copy. Staff reports are another helpful source of information.

A Note about Civility

Your goal is to persuade decision-makers to see the issue your way. Focus on the merits of your position. Even if you disagree about what's best for the community in this situation, it doesn't mean someone is a bad person. Questioning others' motives or intelligence, being hostile, engaging in name-calling or making threats will not reflect well on you or the position you are urging.

No matter how passionate you are about an issue, conduct yourself in a way that will add to your credibility and standing as a thoughtful member of your community.

Staff may be able to tell you at what point public input will be sought at the meeting and what you need to do to be recognized to speak. Be prepared to wait until the item you are interested in is called.

- Indicate You Want to Speak

The presiding official will generally ask for people who want to speak to come forward. Some agencies use a speakers list to help the presiding official manage the meeting better (for example, if lots of people want to speak, there may be time limits for each speaker).

- Make Smart Use of Your Time

Listen carefully to what others say. Try to find common interests and values. Try to not repeat their comments (although you may want say if you agree what someone else said). If you are part of a group, coordinate your remarks to avoid repeating each other.

- Be Prepared for Questions

Answer as best as you can. It's okay to say that you don't know or that a given question would be a good one to research.

About Public Hearings

A public hearing is a relatively formal proceeding. A typical one involves:

- A report to decision-makers, given by a staff member or consultant who has been working on the item;
- A statement by the project applicant or proponent (the person asking for the decision); and
- Statements from members of the public who may 1) support the proposed action, 2) have concerns that they would like decision-makers to address, and 3) oppose the action under any circumstances.

The decision-making body will then decide what to do by voting. If it needs more time to get more information or think about the issues raised at the hearing, the body may postpone a decision until another meeting.