



CITY OF OAKLAND

Objective Design Standards & Project Streamlining Advisory Group Meeting #1

DECEMBER 2022



City of Oakland Objective Design Standards & Project Streamlining Advisory Group Meeting #1

November 14, 2022, 5-6:30 pm

Agenda:

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| 5:30-5:40pm | Introductions – City Staff, Consultants, and Advisory Group |
| 5:40-5:55pm | Brief presentation – Goals and Purpose of the Objective Design Standards and Project Streamlining, Project Timeline, Discussion Questions |
| 5:55-6:10pm | Questions/ Comments from Community Members |
| 6:10-6:55pm | Advisory Group Discussion |
| 6:55-7:00pm | Next Steps |

Participants:

Jeremy Hoffman, Nick Cranmer, Denise Pinkston, Ronnie Turner, Kevin Markarian, Kirk Peterson, June Grant, Phil Erickson, Chris Buckley, and Jim Heilbronner. Several members of the public (not listed) attended. Meeting held on Zoom.

DISCUSSION GUIDE

Process:

- What are the key challenges you have faced in the City project approval process? What is working and is not working or is challenging?

Existing Standards:

- Do standards provide clear direction, and have been helpful?
- What standards have been difficult to implement, or have required variances or exceptions?
- Do existing standards limit design creativity and building outcome? How could they be improved?

Desired Outcomes:

- The standards will provide a pathway for ministerial, or without subjective design review, approval. What would be the most effective ways the City could help address barriers we discussed? What are some suggestions you have that we should keep in mind while drafting the standards?
- How do you think design standards should address specific building components – such as ground floor transparency and building/street relationship, setbacks and stepbacks, tower controls, transitions to lower density neighborhoods?
- How should neighborhood or historic context be reflected?
- How can we best ensure predictability and also foster design creativity?

- Do you have any other suggestions in terms of specific facility types (land uses) or specific building design or housing types?

DISCUSSION SUMMARY

Key Challenges:

- **Permit process length and staff unfamiliarity.** Some participants noted the permitting process is too lengthy, partly because of understaffing and staff inexperience in dealing with design issues, particularly historic context. However, other group members thought the current design review process worked well, especially for CEQA streamlining.
- **Need to balance clarity with creativity.** Participants indicated objective standards should provide a balance of clarity and predictability, without being overly prescriptive. One recommended way to achieve this would be a menu of design options that developers and designers could choose from.
 - San Francisco’s design standards were described as onerous and drive up the cost of projects.
- **Ground floor challenges.** Participants highlighted challenges in ground floor usage requirements – as currently defined, community theaters or galleries can’t occupy retail-designated space. Participants indicated that retail transparency requirements are difficult to meet, especially for tenants on the ground floor. They recommended the City allow for other uses that are pedestrian-friendly, such as doctor’s offices, community spaces, etc.
- **Longevity/adaptability of Objective Design Standards (ODS).** Participants asked how long standards will be in use, and how they might work with city programs and goals for sustainability, general and specific plans, and other City documents. They indicated that new technology and sustainability should be a consideration in standards development and stressed importance of ODS adaptability.

General Recommendations:

- **Residential ODS.** As laws require cities to approve certain housing proposals through ministerial review, participants recommended prioritizing residential standards first over other building types with optional standards.
- **Transparency of SB 35 applications.** Participants spoke of a need for an early and progressive intake scoring system for SB 35 applications that allows transparency into the approval process. Applicants want to be able to review preliminary comments early on and make updates over time, rather than having all comments at the end with a lot of work to do and little time.
- **Office, residential, and retail standards.** One participant noted current office regulations work well but advised against mixing office and residential standards. Others advised that transparency in retail standards must allow for other pedestrian activity uses.
- **Flexibility.** Participants spoke about need for flexibility in modular and mass timber-type buildings, which can be difficult to modify.
- **Loss of units and waiving.** Affordable housing developers noted they don’t have the resources for multiple redesigns. Stepback requirements can be difficult because they lead to a loss of units. One affordable developer noted that their firm waives setback or stepback requirements first (on SB 35 affordable projects) if there is a loss in density. Other common waived requirements include private open space if it cannot fit on the ground floor, in addition to commercial space or storage requirements.

Specific ODS Recommendations/Desired Outcomes:

- **Creating infill and density.** Participants advised revisiting setbacks and front yard requirements, as accommodation of residential setbacks can sometimes lead to the loss of an entire unit or bedroom.
- **More flexibility with height.** One participant recommended that standards based on number of building stories should be used instead of a fixed building height.
- **Articulation.** For building facades, participants advised a focus on “rhythm” of articulation, rather than specific fenestration and articulation requirements. For example, too inflexible of requirements mean a poorly-built stucco façade with certain articulation patterns could meet a specific standard, but a high-performing flat façade may not.
- **Context.** To determine a building’s context, participants recommended two options: 1) consideration five buildings on either side, or 2) 200 feet on either side.
- **Corner Lots.** Participants recommended the City of Alameda’s corner lot objective design standards as a good example.
- **Sustainability.** Participants noted that the Equitable Climate Action Plan’s push for all buildings to be electric may require a greater amount of roof space, particularly for solar panels. They noted that climate change and resilience will influence the future of building design.
- **Oakland Heritage Alliance examples.** One member from the Oakland Heritage Alliance shared visual examples of unappealing design in an existing context. Surrounded by one to two-story historic buildings, the new, taller building example had no height stepdowns and a frontloaded building massing. The participant noted that a better design would push the building massing further inward to maintain a more cohesive overall block frontage and would step down to meet existing surrounding heights.
- **Other recommendations.** Several participants indicated that standards should include front yard setbacks, materials compatibility, and roof shape, among others. However, the team should evaluate and avoid any requirements that could result in fewer units.

