

UNDERSTANDING THE BASICS OF LAND USE AND PLANNING:

The Nuts and Bolts of Project Review

Project review is at the center of the process of local planning. Most planning decisions are made in response to project applications submitted by individual business owners, residents, property owners, and developers.

As local officials review project applications – whether they are acting as an elected official, an appointed commissioner, or a staff member – they evaluate the project’s design and fit with the surrounding community. As they do so, they must grapple with some common questions:

- What should the community look like?
- Are there community needs that are not being met?
- How does the project relate to its surrounding environment?
- Does the proposed use enhance the community both today and in the future?

The challenge is to incorporate big-picture concepts into the weekly or monthly act of ruling on individual project applications. Long-term community goals must also be balanced against economic, legal, safety, and other public policy concerns. For example, residents may suggest a narrower street design to reduce traffic hazards and create a more compact feel in a planned neighborhood, only to find that the fire marshal believes that extra-wide streets are needed to assure that emergency vehicles can get through in any situation. All of these are valid concerns that make the role of local officials challenging. Yet it is the sum of these incremental decisions, the ones made day after day, that will ultimately shape the future of the community.

The Typical Application

The typical development application comes in many forms. Planning officials may review general plan and zoning amendments, tentative or parcel maps, planned unit developments, building permits, conditional use permits, certain types of variances, design review permits, development agreements, environmental documents and other types of applications.

The agenda for any given meeting may require local officials to review an addition to a single-family residence one minute and a complex mixed-use or multifamily development the next. Even the smallest project may raise a few unique issues. The job of elected officials, appointed commissioners, and professional staff is to ensure that those issues are considered and addressed.

City council members and county supervisors are not generally responsible for assessing all of the technical merits of a development project. They will usually receive advice from advisory bodies such as the planning commission or design review board. Staff will summarize the most important technical points in the staff report. Although elected officials or appointed commissioners may not see (or need to see) all the information received by their planning staff, it may be helpful to know what type of information they use to evaluate a project.

CHECKLIST FOR REVIEWING AN APPLICATION

- ✓ Compare to the general plan and the zoning ordinance
- ✓ Compare the vicinity map and the site plan
- ✓ Check the scale of the plans
- ✓ Determine if there are public views worth protecting
- ✓ Review existing and proposed contours and the grading plan
- ✓ Check the circulation pattern
- ✓ Locate landscaped areas
- ✓ Check the materials and architectural elements
- ✓ Review conservation practices
- ✓ Check the parking layout
- ✓ Think about the future

How to Review an Application

A reviewer can get a basic understanding of a project by going through the following steps.

Compare to the General Plan and the Zoning Ordinance. Is the project consistent with the general plan and the zoning ordinance? Look at the range of permitted uses, density, housing needs, structure heights, circulation, environmental issues like habitat preservation and open space protection, etc. If the applicant seeks a zone change or general plan amendment, the project's benefits should justify the change and be consistent with surrounding planned uses.

Compare the Vicinity Map and the Site Plan. How does the proposed project fit in with the existing community? Is it compatible with surrounding properties and the street? Is there any relationship between the adjacent buildings (both on and off the project site), such as pedestrian walks, window-to-window visual contact, noisy areas adjacent to quiet areas, or shadows cast over plaza areas? Can changes in the design address potential conflicts?

Check the Scale of the Plans. Understanding scale will help decision makers get a feel for the actual size of the project. A good way to interpret plans on a human scale is to judge them in five- to six-foot increments to see how the scale matches the size of a typical person. A typical parking stall is 20 feet long, also a good reference point for scale.

Determine If There Are Public Views Worth Protecting. Would the project obstruct the public view of a landscape or landmark? Is there a public view of a feature on the site itself that should be protected? If so, do the site plan and architecture take these public views into account?

Review Existing and Proposed Contours and the Grading Plan. An outline of the building should be drawn on a topographical map. Do slopes threaten adjoining properties or detrimentally change the visual character of the area? Will floor elevations and parking facilities be graded to levels that are consistent with the landscaping plan and are not so high that buffers such as landscaping would be ineffective? Is drainage addressed so as to minimize the impacts of erosion on-site and prevent off-site erosion?

Check the Circulation Pattern. How easily can people reach the site by various modes of transportation? Check circulation aspects for transit riders, cars, delivery vehicles, pedestrians, and bicycles. Are there points of conflict, such as walkways that would lead pedestrians through traffic or between cars?

BASIC PROJECT APPLICATION INFORMATION

Each local agency maintains a detailed list of all the information needed from a project applicant, although most require the same basic information, including:

- Signed Application
- Vicinity Map
- Existing Facilities Map
- Site Plan
- Grading Plan
- Architectural Elevations
- Materials Board
- Landscape Plan
- Environmental Questionnaire

Additional information may be provided depending on the nature of the application. Examples include traffic analyses, biological studies, utility reports, lighting and signage plans, and phasing plans for large projects.

Locate Landscaped Areas. Does the proposed landscape reflect the available water and can it be irrigated with reclaimed water? Are native or natural landscapes protected? Do landscaped areas soften buildings, breaking up parking areas and long, blank portions of wall? Are there areas for special landscape and hardscape treatment? Will existing trees be removed or should they be saved? Is the selection of plants and trees appropriate for the climate?

Check the Materials and Architectural Elements. Review the materials and architectural elements of the project. Do they incorporate features that are consistent throughout the neighborhood or district? Do they create visual interest? Do they match existing design guidelines or policies in the general plan or specific plan?

Review Conservation Practices. Recycled and energy-efficient materials can reduce a project's impact on the environment. Is the building sited to reduce energy consumption and does it respond to the solar orientation of the site? Does the builder intend to use recycled materials? Is the project designed to minimize runoff (particularly from parking areas and other paved or impervious areas such as roofs)? Are energy-efficient materials—like windows and heating and cooling systems—included in the plan? Are trees and landscaping used to minimize energy consumption and heat generation?

Check the Parking Layout. Does the parking layout and development reduce the 'heat island' effect of large, unshaded parking lots? Do the aisles relate well to entry and exit points? Is there a logical pattern for cars to follow? Is there sufficient landscaping to screen parking from view or to break up expanses of asphalt? If the project site fronts a pedestrian area, is the parking tucked behind the building to create a more vibrant streetscape? Are there adequate pedestrian routes and disabled access accommodations in the parking lot?

Think About the Future. What is likely to happen on adjacent undeveloped or potentially redevelopable property? Does the project anticipate likely changes or is it adaptable? For phased projects, make sure that the first phase will stand by itself in case the next phase is never constructed.

RESOURCES FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

The Institute offers several publications on land use topics, including guides in the *Understanding the Basics of Land Use* series and a set of plain-language, one-page descriptions of common land use actions. For more information and resources on planning and land use topics, visit ILG's Land Use and Environment Program at www.ca-ilg.org/landuse.

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Its mission is to promote good government at the local level.

The Institute's current program areas include:

- Climate Change
- Collaborative Governance Initiative
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