

Objective Design Standards for Housing Development Projects



ORD24-0007

Board of Supervisors

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Why Objective Design Standards?

Motivations to replace subjective design standards for housing with objective design standards

- State legislation
- Streamlining
- Housing Element Program 12b (Due end of 2025)



Objective	Subjective
No personal interpretation Uniformly verifiable Measurable external benchmark or criterion Knowable to applicants and public officials <u>Example:</u> 6-foot height limit	Discretion needed to assess compliance <u>Example:</u> <i>Harmony</i> of a design with the surrounding site



Objectives

This Ordinance will:

- Establish an initial set of Objective Design Standards (ODS) for multi-unit housing development projects (HDPs) to:
 - Address livability and compatibility
 - Maintain rural character
 - Leave room for design unique to communities

Future phases of ODS (not proposed) will:

- Address standards for community-specific design
- Add standards for SFD + ADU projects in Scenic Resource Combining Districts





Applicable Projects

Proposed ODS will apply to HDPs

- Including:

- ☐ Duplexes, triplexes, fourplexes, multifamily with 5+ units
- ☐ Condominiums, townhomes, planned developments
- ☐ Subdivisions
- ☐ Mixed-use projects (must meet residential square footage requirements)
- ☐ Transitional or supportive housing
- ☐ Farmworker housing

- Excluding:

- ☐ Single-family dwelling + ADU



2+ dwelling units

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Under same application

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Same or different parcels

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Attached or detached

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Market rate or affordable

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Future projects only





Design Standard Categories

Initial ODS are divided into the following categories:

- Structure Design
 - Height
 - Massing Breaks
 - Rooflines
 - Facades
 - Entries
 - Windows and Other Openings
 - Materials, Finishes, and Themes
 - Waste Collection Facilities
 - Utilities and Screening
 - Sound Walls
- Exterior Lighting
- Site Design
 - Parking areas
 - Landscaping
 - Open space
 - Screening for neighborhood compatibility



Discretionary Offramp



Interactions with Existing Standards

ODS are additive to existing objective standards

- Existing objective standards for Historic Districts (HD), Local Guidelines (LG), and area and specific plans shall apply and prevail
 - Landmarks Commission approval still required in HD
- Subjective standards are not enforceable under the HAA without specified findings
- ODS expands enforceable design standards





Planning Commission Recommendation

November 6, 2025, Planning Commission Hearing

- Discussed standards:
 - Sound wall massing breaks
 - Methods of delineations for parking lines
 - Open space requirements
- Unanimous vote recommending:
 - Adoption of proposed code changes with direction to staff to revisit standards for sound wall massing breaks
 - Adoption of CEQA determination





General Plan Consistency & CEQA

Proposed amendments are...

✓ Consistent with the General Plan

- Housing Element
- Open Space and Resource Conservation Element
- Environmental Justice Element
- Water Resources Element
- Public Facilities Element

✓ Categorically exempt from CEQA

- State CEQA Guidelines Section 15061(b)(3): “Common sense exemption”
– obvious the project will not cause a significant adverse change to the environment
- State CEQA Guidelines Section 15308: Actions to protect the environment





Staff Recommendation

Adopt a resolution recommending that the Board of Supervisors:

1. Amend Sonoma County Code Chapter 26 (Zoning Regulations) to establish an initial set of Objective Design Standards (ODS) for multi-unit housing development projects to implement the Sonoma County General Plan Housing Element Policy HE-2c and Program 12b, including the staff-recommended policy option for parking area markings, as shown in Exhibit A; and
2. Find the proposed ordinance categorically exempt from CEQA.



Reference Slides





State Housing Law Overview

Key legislation driving ODS:

- Housing Accountability Act (HAA): Applies to projects with 2+ DU
 - Cannot enforce subjective standards without specific findings
 - Time limit for determining consistency with standards
- Senate Bill 330
 - 5-hearing limit
 - Pre-application or complete application to freeze standards
 - Cannot adopt new subjective design standards
- Other Streamlining Provisions (i.e. SB 35, Housing Element Law, etc.)





Changes to Design Review

Current Practice	With Proposed ODS
Enforceable design standards: - <u>Limited design standards under Article 82</u> - Limited objective design standards from other planning documents * DRC may still make recommendations for consistency with subjective design standards	Enforceable design standards: - <u>All ODS under Article 83</u> - Limited objective design standards from other planning documents * DRC may still make recommendations for consistency with subjective design standards