



Staff Report

File #: 25-741, Version: 1

Item #: PH-2.

PC - PUBLIC HEARING: Consideration of Citywide Residential and Mixed Use Objective Design Standards and associated City-Initiated Zoning Code Amendment (P2024-0310-ZCA) and exemption from CEQA (Project)

Meeting Date: February 12, 2025

Contact Person/Dept: Jose Mendivil, Associate Planner
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Fiscal Impact: Yes [] No [X] **General Fund:** Yes [] No [X]

Public Hearing: [X] **Action Item:** [] **Attachments:** [X]

City Council Action Required: Yes [] No [X] **Date:** N/A

Public Notification: (Email) Public Notifications - Planning Commission (01/23/25), Meetings and Agendas - Planning Commission (02/06/25), Interested Parties (01/24/25); (Posted) City website (01/23/25), Social Media (01/23/25); (Published) Culver City News (01/23/25)

Department Approval: Mark E. Muenzer, Planning and Development Director (2/4/25)

RECOMMENDATION

Staff recommends that the Planning Commission adopt Resolution No. 2025-P003, recommending the City Council adopt an exemption under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) pursuant to Section 15061 (b)(3) and 15168(c)(2), and approve the Citywide Residential and Mixed Use Objective Design Standards and associated Zoning Code Amendment to incorporate the standards by reference and ensure consistency with the Zoning Code.

PROCEDURES

1. Chair calls on staff for a report and the Planning Commission poses questions to staff.
2. Chair opens the public hearing, providing the public the opportunity to speak.
3. Chair seeks a motion to close the public hearing after all testimony has been presented.
4. Planning Commission discusses the matter and arrives at its decision.

BACKGROUND

Since 2017, the California legislature has adopted and amended several housing and land use laws to

address the state's housing crisis. A few have significantly changed traditional planning and approval processes. Specifically, Senate Bill (SB) 35, SB 167, SB 330, and SB 8, are aimed at streamlining land use entitlements for housing development projects.

Streamlining is generally used to define local control and discretion, thus providing developers with more certainty in timing and outcomes for residential and mixed-use developments. SB 35 and SB 330 require the approval of housing developments on the basis of only "objective standards", and other qualifying criteria, and within specified timeframes.

On October 10, 2022, the City's 2021-2029 Housing Element was certified by the California Department of Housing and Community Development (HCD), and included programs aimed at facilitating additional housing, such as developing objective design standards (ODS) to comply with SB 330 (Policy 6.J, and Measure 4.H).

The City's General Plan Update (GPU) and related Zoning Code Update (ZCU) became effective October 9, 2024. The Land Use and Community Design Element of the GPU also included the following relevant policy goals and implementation action:

- LU-13.2: Multifamily design. Maintain multifamily objective design standards that transition in scale between areas planned for multifamily housing and areas planned for single-unit and duplex.
- LU-15.6: Design standards. Regularly review and update the City's objective design standards to allow for new and innovative design techniques and evolving technologies.
- IA.LU-6: Objective design standards. Adopt and implement objective design standards to manage new residential and mixed use development.

The proposed Citywide Residential and Mixed Use ODS and associated Zoning Code Amendment (ZCA), are intended to implement the goals and measures of the Housing Element and GPU, and applicable State Laws intended to streamline housing development approvals. The ODS are a standalone document that would be referenced in the Zoning Code through the ZCA, which also includes additional minor revisions to ensure alignment and consistency. As proposed, the ODS would supersede any existing neighborhood design guidelines.

ANALYSIS

As defined by State Law under the Housing Crisis Act, a standard is considered "objective" if it involves "no personal or subjective judgement by a public official" and is uniformly verifiable, measurable, and knowable to all parties prior to project submittal. Objective design standards are intended to create a more efficient, predictable, and equitable process for obtaining and granting of planning approvals for a wide variety of residential projects, especially for affordable housing projects, while also establishing standards that produce high quality design and buildings that are appropriate for their surrounding context.

The Culver City Zoning Code, Title 17 of the Culver City Municipal Code (CCMC), includes various objective development standards for residential and mixed use zoning districts, including maximum height, minimum setbacks, and floor area ratios (FAR).

The City has two residential neighborhoods with their own design guidelines adopted by Planning Commission, the Gateway Neighborhood in 2010 and the Gateway Adjacent Neighborhood in 2011; however, many of these guidelines are subjective under State law. Therefore, the proposed ODS will replace all existing neighborhood design guidelines. The proposed Objective Design Guidelines will apply to all new construction projects, as well as additions consisting of more than 50% demolition of the existing and/or more than 50% additional floor area but at least 1,500 additional square feet.

The proposed ODS document includes four chapters:

- Chapter 1: Purpose, Applicability, and Definitions
- Chapter 2: Multi-Family Residential and Mixed Use (Four or More Unit) Buildings
- Chapter 3: One to Three-unit Buildings
- Chapter 4: Design Standards for Architectural Styles

The document separates standards for multi-family and mixed use development from smaller scale development of single-family, two-family, and three-family buildings. Standards for both categories address Building Location and Orientation, Neighborhood Compatibility and Privacy, Building Design and Architecture. Additional standards are provided for projects that fall within specific architectural styles, in order to ensure quality execution of the specified style.

The Building Design and Architecture section provides menus for elements such as massing, entryway enhancement, ground-floor articulation, fenestration, from which applicants can choose, to provide flexibility and accommodate a variety of designs. Similarly, the style-specific standards offer menus for ornamentation and architectural features.

As an example, under the Building Mass and Scale category for multi-family and mixed use, applicants must choose at least one from four options, which include:

- Stepping back the entire uppermost floor on all elevations facing the public right of way, public open space, or other publicly accessible areas by at least five feet.
- Reducing the floor area of the uppermost floor by at least 15% compared to the ground floor.
- Incorporating a combination of a minimum of three volumes with varying heights as applicable to the building type. A volume is defined as a distinct portion of a building form.
- Setting back a minimum of 20% of the elevation at least four feet from the rest of the façade.

The proposed standards also establish parameters for window alignment, colors, and materials/finishes. The corresponding review authority for a project (e.g., Planning and Development Director/designee, Planning Commission) may allow certain deviations from the design standards on a case-by-case basis, provided the requested deviations meet the intent of the ODS. In addition, affordable housing projects may request deviations as part of their allowed concessions and waivers. As drafted, the proposed standards are intended to strike a balance between ensuring high quality design and compatibility while accommodating flexibility and array of design concepts.

As a test of the feasibility of the proposed standards, the following previously approved projects were reviewed using the proposed ODS:

- 4164-4170 Lincoln Avenue (Two duplexes)
This project meets all applicable Objective Design Standards.
- 9763 Culver Blvd (4-story 34-unit mixed use)
This project does not meet the ground floor transparency requirements, due to the unique existing condition at the ground level. The ODS allow for deviations from these requirements. This project could also request deviations as a concession or waiver since it incorporates affordable housing.
- 12727 Washington Blvd (6-story 140-unit mixed use)
This project meets all applicable Objective Design Standards.

To implement the proposed Objective Design Standards, a Zoning Code Amendment is proposed to add a reference to the standards in the Zoning Code. The affected Zoning Code sections include, 17.210.020 -

Residential Zoning District Development Standards, 17.220.030 - Supplemental Standards for Mixed Use Development, and 17.300.010 - Applicability, as shown in Exhibit A of the proposed Planning Commission Resolution No. 2025-P003. Since the document will stand alone, outside of the Zoning Code, it may be revised by Planning Commission resolution as may be needed from time to time to provide clarity, address new design scenarios, etc., without amending the Zoning Code.

COMMUNITY OUTREACH

Planning Commission Discussion

On April 26, 2023, a Planning Commission discussion item was held to receive feedback on the desired content and approach to the ODS. One member of the public attended the meeting and related concerns as to the ODS impact on the cost of housing. The Commission also provided feedback to staff:

- Avoid standards that render higher density developments infeasible.
- Avoid standards that result in substantial costs.
- Provide standards that are clear and facilitate ministerial approvals.
- Create standards that ensure good design and sustainability.
- Avoid empty articulation or over-articulation.
- Avoid use of too many colors.
- Allow for a variety of architectural styles.
- Staff should collaborate with the design/development community.

Interested Party Distribution

Consistent with Planning Commission feedback, on August 8, 2023, a preliminary draft of the standards was distributed to local design and development professionals to solicit feedback and incorporate as applicable. Staff received comments from three respondents regarding various standards such as setbacks and scale. Reviewers also provided feedback on language and phrasing to ensure clarity and objectivity in the standards. The document was revised to reflect interested party and staff discussions.

Following additional development, including reconciling the document with the ZCU, on November 19, 2024, a second draft was distributed to an expanded group of local design and development professionals. Staff received comments from four respondents. These comments ranged from support of the document as written to recommendation of paring down the number of standards to maximize flexibility and minimize costs. As proposed, the standards strike a balance in achieving the design quality and compatibility desired and expected by the community and the flexibility desired by developers.

Comments Received During Public Comment Period

As of the writing of this report, staff has not any public comments regarding the proposed Objective Design Standards and associated Zoning Code Amendment, in response to the public notification for the public hearing.

FISCAL ANALYSIS

The proposed Objective Design Standards and associated Zoning Code Amendment has no anticipated fiscal impact to the City.

ENVIRONMENTAL DETERMINATION

Pursuant to the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) Guidelines, the adoption of the proposed Objective Design Standards and associated Zoning Code Amendment, which will implement and facilitate compliance with State law (i.e., SB 35) and supplement Zoning Code standards as it relates to design, and do not affect permitted uses or density/intensity, are exempt per Section 15061(b)(3), because it can be seen with certainty that there is no possibility that the activity in question may have a significant effect on the environment.

In addition, the proposed Objective Design Standards and associated Zoning Code Amendment do not require additional review under CEQA pursuant to Section 15168(c)(2) as they are consistent with the Final Program Environmental Impact Report (EIR) for the General Plan and Zoning Code Update certified on August 26, 2024 (SCH# 2022030144) and would not result in new impacts. The adoption of the Objective Design Standards implements the adopted General Plan (Implementation Action LU-6, and Policies LU-13.2, LU-15.6); as the creation of Objective Design Standards was considered in the General Plan and Zoning Code EIR, pursuant to the provisions of CEQA no further environmental analysis is required.

CONCLUSION

The proposed Objective Design Standards and associated Zoning Code Amendment implement programs of the Housing Element and the Land Use and Community Design Element of the General Plan, and various provisions of State Law, all of which are aimed at streamlining and facilitating housing production. As proposed, these standards establish minimum design requirements applicable to all residential and mixed use developments (new construction and substantial additions), which are clear, objective, measurable criteria that eliminate subjective judgment and discretion during the review process. This ensures a streamlined review process and provides more certainty about the visual quality of future residential and mixed-use development.

The proposed standards apply to design only and will supersede and replace the existing neighborhood design guidelines, which contain various guidelines that do not meet the State definition of an objective standard. Development standards such as density, building setbacks, and height limits remain in the Zoning Code. The proposed is consistent with the General Plan and Zoning Code, and the findings for Zoning Code Amendment, P2024-0310-ZCA, are made as outlined in Resolution No. 2025-P003 (Attachment 1).

ATTACHMENTS

1. Proposed Planning Commission Resolution No. 2025-P003, including Exhibit A: Proposed Zoning Code Text Changes in “~~strikethrough~~/underline” format
2. The Citywide Residential and Mixed Use Objective Design Standards

MOTION

That the Planning Commission:

Adopt Resolution No. 2025-P003, recommending to the City Council adoption of an exemption under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) pursuant to Section 15061(b)(3) and 15168(c)(2), and approval of the Citywide Residential and Mixed Use Objective Design Standards and associated Zoning Code Amendment to incorporate the standards by reference and ensure consistency with the Zoning Code.