

Case File Number: SP25001 and ZA25003

June 4, 2025

Location:	Citywide
Assessor's Parcel Number(s):	N/A
Proposal:	<p>The City of Oakland seeks to adopt Objective Design Standards for one- to four-family dwellings and one- to three-story multifamily residential and mixed-use developments as part of an effort to streamline housing production. These standards are intended to apply to a range of housing types, including single-family homes, missing middle housing, and lower-density multifamily buildings.</p> <p>In parallel with this effort, the City is also proposing amendments to the Design Review chapter of the Oakland Planning Code that would allow to apply the Objective Design Standards to eligible projects. If and when the Planning Code is amended—through the separate, ongoing Code Amendment process—to establish a by-right, ministerial approval pathway for eligible one- to four-family and one- to three-story multifamily residential and mixed-use developments, the Objective Design Standards would apply to those projects under the ministerial track.</p>
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Owner:	N/A
Case File Number:	SP25001 and ZA25003
Planning Permits Required:	N/A
General Plan:	Citywide
Zoning:	Citywide
Environmental Determination:	<p>The proposal relies on the previously certified Final Environmental Impact Reports for: the Oakland 2045 General Plan Update - Phase 1 (2023); the Coliseum Area Specific Plan (2015); Broadway Valdez Specific Plan (2014); West Oakland Specific Plan (2014); Central Estuary Area Plan (2013); Land Use and Transportation Element of the General Plan (1998); the Oakland Estuary Policy Plan (1998); the North Oakland Hill Area Specific Plan (1986); the 1998 Amendment to the Historic Preservation Element of the General Plan; and various Redevelopment Plan Final EIRs (collectively, "EIRs"). No further environmental review is required under CEQA Guidelines Sections 15162 and 15163. Moreover, as a separate and independent basis, this proposal is also exempt from CEQA pursuant to CEQA Guidelines Sections 15183 (projects consistent with General Plan and Zoning) and 15061(b)(3) (general rule, no significant effect on the environment).</p>
Historic Status:	N/A
City Council District:	All Districts
Status:	Under Review
Finality of Decision:	Receive Planning Commission and public comments, and engage in discussion prior to recommending changes to staff and/or making other recommendations.
For Further Information:	Contact Case Planner Ruslan Filipau at (510) 238-3491 or by email at ODS@oaklandca.gov

SUMMARY

In response to California’s housing crisis, the State Legislature has enacted laws, most notably the Housing Accountability Act (HAA) California Government Code Section 65589.5, to streamline housing approvals and limit the ability of California cities to deny or reduce the density of housing projects that meet objective general plan, zoning, subdivision, and design standards or criteria, unless specific life and safety findings are made.¹ Because Oakland’s current design guidelines are not sufficiently objective, the City is limited in how it can enforce its current design review criteria under these laws.

Recent amendments to the Oakland Planning Code (Ord. 13763 C.M.S., adopted October 3, 2023), which increased allowed residential densities and expanded by-right approvals, highlight the urgent need to adopt Objective Design Standards (ODS). Also, as part of its Housing Element Update (*Action Item 3.2.1: Develop zoning standards to encourage missing middle and multi-unit housing types; and Action Item 3.4.8: Implement Objective Design Standards*²), the City aims to streamline housing production of all types including single-family homes and the “missing middle”³ multifamily developments.

To support these goals, the City proposes adopting Objective Design Standards (ODS) for One-Family and Two- to Four-Family residential projects (also referred to as One- to Four-Family ODS), and one- to three-story Multifamily⁴ and mixed-use projects, along with a related but separate code amendment package to the Design Review chapter of the Planning Code to establish a by-right, ministerial approval process for these housing types. Together, these efforts streamline housing approvals, reduce regulatory burdens, accelerate housing production of all types, broaden the variety of in-demand housing stock in Oakland, and support Oakland’s Pro-Housing Designation, enhancing eligibility for state funding.

Moving from subjective guidelines to Objective Design Standards will streamline project reviews, support housing production of all types, promote affordability, and address historic inequities—especially in exclusionary, low-density neighborhoods. ODS will also provide clarity, consistency, and ensure new high-quality buildings integrate well into existing communities.

BACKGROUND

Project and public hearing history

This effort to create and implement Objective Design Standards is a result of previous City Council actions aimed at promoting more housing in Oakland. On March 21, 2019, the City Council adopted Resolution No. 87579 C.M.S, which directed the Bureau of Planning to study, and the Planning Commission to consider, incentives for encouraging transit-oriented housing, including affordable housing, by streamlining

¹ Cal. Gov. Code § 65589.5(j)(1). <https://casetext.com/statute/california-codes/california-government-code/title-7-planning-and-land-use/division-1-planning-and-zoning/chapter-3-local-planning/article-106-housing-elements/section-655895-housing-accountability-act>

² See Page 72 about Action Item 3.2.1 and Page 91 about Action Item 3.4.8: https://cao-94612.s3.us-west-2.amazonaws.com/documents/Oakland-Adopted-Housing-Element-Ch-1-4-21023_2023-02-17-213804_ddow.pdf

³ “Missing Middle” is commonly defined as 1- to 3-story housing that includes duplexes, triplexes, fourplexes, courtyard apartments, townhomes, rowhomes, live/work, stacked apartments, and other types of Multifamily housing.

⁴ As defined in the Planning Code Chapter 17.10.680, “Multifamily Dwelling Residential Facilities include permanently fixed buildings, or those portions thereof, which accommodate or are intended to accommodate Residential Activities and contain five (5) or more Regular Dwelling Units or Efficiency Dwelling Units on a parcel, along with any Accessory Dwelling Units.”

the permitting process. Following this, on January 31, 2023, the City Council adopted Oakland's updated General Plan Housing Element, which includes Action Item #3.4.8: *Implement Objective Design Standards*.

As a result, the Planning staff developed, and the Planning Commission unanimously approved the first portion of Objective Design Standards for four- to eight-story Multifamily residential and mixed-use developments on October 2, 2024. These design standards are being used successfully in streamlined reviews of eligible development proposals that are subject to streamlined review.

Since the adoption of the first set of Objective Design Standards, Planning staff have been working to develop, test, and refine the next sets of objective design standards for: 1) One- to Four-Family residential dwellings, and 2) one- to three-story Multifamily residential and mixed-use developments. The proposed new ODS sets build on the previously adopted standards but are refined significantly and crafted specifically for One-Family, Two- to Four-Family, and one- to three-story Multifamily residential and mixed-use developments.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The proposal for Objective Design Standards and Applicability

To comply with state law and implement the City's adopted Housing Element, Planning staff have developed Objective Design Standards (ODS) for One-Family and Two- to Four-Family Residential Facilities (also referred to as one- to four-family ODS), and for one- to three-story Multifamily and mixed-use developments (see **Attachment A**). The applicability of these ODS sets is contingent on a related but separate Planning Code Amendments proposal. Additional details and materials can be found on the Planning Commission Webpage for this June 4, 2025 hearing date: <https://www.oaklandca.gov/boards-commissions/planning-commission>.

According to that related but separate Planning Code Amendments proposal, the ODS sets that are the subject of this report would apply to projects undergoing the proposed new Ministerial Design Review Process (Planning Code Section 17.136.038) for single-family homes; duplexes, triplexes, and quadplexes; and lower density Multifamily developments that do not require a Conditional Use Permit (CUP), Variance, Planned Unit Development (PUD), or Development Agreement as provided in the Planning Code, or meet another threshold requirement or exception as specified in the Planning Code Amendment proposal. Such project types currently require lengthy, resource-intensive Planning reviews. Please note that these details are subject to change as the proposed code amendments have not been adopted yet.

Currently, most of these projects are already subject to objective criteria under state and local law, limiting staff's ability to enforce desirable design features. Others, like single-family homes, require significant and disproportionately large amount of staff time for minimal housing output. A typical single-family home review under subjective design guidelines can take around a year or more—just to approve one home. This current guidelines-based entitlement process slows housing production and diverts staff resources from reviewing larger, more complex and impactful projects.

The proposed Objective Design Standards aim to streamline the review process, reduce delays, and ensure key design elements valued by the public can be applied consistently and efficiently.

The proposed standards would apply to projects eligible for "ministerial" review (defined below) and evaluated solely against objective criteria. Additional project types may become eligible for ministerial review in the future as the Planning Code is updated. Applicants seeking greater design flexibility may opt

out of the ministerial process under ODS and opt into the City’s discretionary design review process through an exception procedure laid out in a Department Code Bulletin⁵.

The City’s uniformly applied standard conditions of approval, which include a wide variety of environmental protection measures, will continue to apply. This ministerial approach will facilitate faster project approvals without the need for typical discretionary design reviews, while still ensuring high-quality development that respects existing contexts.

“Ministerial” design review means projects are approved based on clear, objective standards, without personal judgment or public input. This checklist-based process is transparent, consistent, and predictable. If a project meets all criteria, it’s approved “by-right,” speeding up approvals, while still ensuring that new buildings integrate into existing contexts.

Iterative Process and Role of Planning Commission

The development of Objective Design Standards has been an iterative process, with public and the Planning Commission playing a key role. Planning Commission feedback will continue to guide the standards to ensure they support high-quality development across Oakland. Planning staff will seek input from the Planning Commission on any future substantive revisions.

After adoption, the standards can be modified over time as needed based on how they perform in practice. If issues, gaps, or unintended outcomes arise—such as overly restrictive or permissive standards—staff will propose to revise, remove, or add new standards and bring these changes forward to the Planning Commission for review and adoption. This ongoing iterative process will help ensure the standards align with the City’s evolving design and development goals.

GENERAL PLAN ANALYSIS

The creation of Objective Design Standards will complement and further the goals, policies, and actions of the Oakland General Plan. Notably, Objective Design Standards advance the ability of the City to achieve the objectives contained in the City’s 2023-2031 Housing Element, and are consistent with its goals, policies, and programs related to housing production, zoning reform, streamlining design review, and expediting permit approval.

The Objective Design Standards are also in conformance with General Plan Land Use and Transportation Element (LUTE). Specifically, ODS support the intent of LUTE policies including, but not limited to, the following:

Policy N3.1 Facilitating Housing Construction.

As part of its Pro-Housing Designation, the City of Oakland is committed to accelerating the production of new housing. The primary goal of the Objective Design Standards is to streamline the development process, making it more predictable, efficient, and transparent.

Policy N3.2 Encouraging Infill Development.

The Objective Design Standards (ODS) complement recent Planning Code amendments consistent with this policy that increased housing densities across lower-density neighborhoods and reduced development requirements for higher-density projects in these areas. ODS facilitate the creation of this new missing

⁵ https://cao-94612.s3.us-west-2.amazonaws.com/documents/Zoning-Bulletin-on-Objective-Design-Standards_12192024_Signed.pdf

middle housing while including context transition standards to ensure that new developments are respectful of their context.

Policy N3.8 Required High-Quality Design.

The Objective Design Standards (ODS) incorporate design quality requirements that are appropriate locally while being sensitive of the associated costs, striking a balance between high-quality design and reducing construction costs. Generally, the ODS require only essential elements where they have the greatest impact to public.

Policy N3.9 Orienting Residential Development.

The Objective Design Standards require that residential development face the street and orient front facades and unit entries to the street to enhance the connection between public and private places.

Policy N9.7 Creating Compatible but Diverse Development.

The Objective Design Standards are designed with broad flexibility to foster architectural creativity and prevent "cookie-cutter" development. At the same time, context transition standards ensure that new projects are compatible with the character of existing development.

Policy N11.2 Streamlining Permit Procedures.

The Objective Design Standards would allow to simplify, modernize, and streamline design review and accelerate production of housing.

Race and Equity General Plan Compliance

In 2023, the City of Oakland adopted updated the General Plan Housing and Safety Elements, and created a new Environmental Justice Element (EJ Element), as part of Phase 1 of the General Plan Update. A guiding principle for Phase 1 of the General Plan Update (GPU) is to further the City's mission to "integrate, on a Citywide basis, the principle of 'fair and just' in all the City does in order to achieve equitable opportunities for all people and communities."⁶ In service of that mission, each of the new and updated General Plan Elements was supported by a thorough racial equity impact analysis to guide its development. Both the Safety and Environmental Justice Elements prioritize policies to reduce the risks and harmful impacts the city's most vulnerable and frontline communities face, whether the risks are from daily exposure to pollution or from structural disasters. The Housing Element includes racially equitable housing policies that protect tenants, address patterns of segregation by fostering inclusive neighborhoods, and provides housing options for Oaklanders of all incomes, prioritizing preservation and production for those with the greatest need.

The Objective Design Standards proposal is consistent with goals and policies outlined in the Housing, Safety, and EJ Elements including, but not limited to, the following:

- *Housing Element Action Item 3.4.8: Implement Objective Design Standards.*
 - The City currently requires regular (discretionary) design review based on subjective design guidelines for nearly all residential development, which can significantly lengthen the time required for project approvals. To reduce the permitting timeline and the regulatory burden the City proposes to develop and adopt Objective Design Standards to be used in the streamlined approval of a wide variety of housing.
- *EJ-7.5 Bicycle and Pedestrian Friendly Design.*

⁶ Oakland Municipal Code Section 2.29.170.1

- Site Planning and Design section of the ODS include standards that protect bicyclists and pedestrians and encourage biking and walking. Key considerations include, but not limited to, the following:
 - Curb cuts are limited to minimize conflicts with pedestrians and cyclists, especially on busy streets or those with bicycle infrastructure. Curb cuts are prohibited on streets with protected bike lanes unless no other street frontage is available.
 - Buildings with ground-floor residential units are required in certain cases to include at-grade entries to improve accessibility for individuals with limited mobility.
 - Developments are required to provide direct, unobstructed pedestrian pathways to building entries. Pathways must be easily identifiable and have a minimum width of 4 feet.
 - Trash staging areas must be limited to streets with lower levels of pedestrian and bicycle activity to reduce potential conflicts.
 - If proposed, surface parking should be placed at the rear of developments.
 - New developments are required to frame streets and public spaces, with main entries oriented toward the streets to enhance safety, accessibility, and visual connection.
- *EJ-8.1 Meaningful, Relevant Engagement and EJ-8.4 Community Partners.*
 - In consultation with the City's Department of Race and Equity and the Inclusive Community Engagement Working Group, Planning staff led a broad community engagement process focused on including communities historically excluded from planning—especially Black, Indigenous, and other communities of color, as well as people with disabilities. Although much of the outreach began before the City's new Inclusive Community Engagement policy (AI No. 6802 effective January 18, 2023) took effect, staff followed its principles throughout. Additional efforts were made to engage people living with disabilities and their advocates.
 - Developing Objective Design Standards is a key Housing Element action (*Action #3.4.8: Implement Objective Design Standards*) and builds on the Racial Equity Impact Analysis (REIA)⁷ completed as part of the General Plan update. The REIA underscores that housing location impacts access to opportunity. Consistent with this approach, ODS promotes affordable housing Citywide without imposing separate and higher standards for any specific geographic districts. Instead, it recognizes valuable context throughout Oakland, addressing it wherever it exists adjacent or near to a development, and offering context-sensitive transitions in these specific cases, regardless of any geographic districts. Consistent with Housing Action Plan (HAP) Goal #3: "Close the Gap Between Affordable and Market-Rate Housing Production by Expanding Affordable Housing Opportunities" (REIA, p. 13), ODS aim to remove barriers to affordable housing development Citywide, promote the production of diverse housing types, and expand

⁷ https://cao-94612.s3.us-west-2.amazonaws.com/documents/Housing-Element-REIA-1.6.23_Final.pdf

ownership opportunities, not limited to any areas, and enhancing access to housing opportunities anywhere.

- ODS also supports equity by applying the same high-quality design standards to both market-rate and affordable housing projects approved through ministerial, by-right processes. Community feedback—such as the need for affordable housing to match the appearance and quality of market-rate housing—was directly incorporated into the standards. This ensures developers meet consistent, community-driven design expectations as a condition of approval.

Community Engagement and Feedback

Community feedback was central to shaping the Objective Design Standards. Working with the Department of Race and Equity and the Inclusive Community Engagement Working Group, Planning staff prioritized outreach to communities historically excluded from planning, resulting in broader participation and more equitable input.

Beyond the official public hearings, Planning staff carried out an inclusive engagement plan since Fall 2022 with stakeholder meetings, focus groups, advisory sessions, public workshops, and a community survey. Participants included architects, developers, advocates, neighborhood groups, nonprofits, and residents. This feedback shaped both the ODS set for four- to eight-story Multifamily residential development adopted on October 2, 2024, , and the proposed new ODS sets for One-Family and Two- to Four-Family Residential Facilities (also referred to as One- to Four-Family ODS), and for one- to three-story Multifamily and Mixed-Used Developments, which build on the earlier work and incorporate additional more recent public input from recent workshops and comments to a public review draft ODS.

The public review draft of the proposed ODS was released on March 24, 2025, with open public review and comment period of almost a month. In addition, two public workshops were held on April 15 and April 17, 2025. Public comment summaries from the workshops and comments received via email by April 21 deadline, along with staff responses, are posted online on the project website and attached to this report in **Attachment B**. To access all meeting materials, including recordings, summaries, and staff responses to the public's comments and questions, visit the project website's past community engagement and events section: <https://www.oaklandca.gov/topics/objective-design-standards>. Key revisions based on public comments received during the public comment period are discussed below under Section “Objective Design Standards Organization.”

ZONING ANALYSIS

The creation of Objective Design Standards (ODS) will complement the zoning standards specified in the City's Planning Code (OMC Title 17). Planning staff have carefully drafted the ODS to suit Oakland's local context, be development-friendly, be practical for applicants, and enforceable by staff in a streamlined ministerial review process. While the Planning Code controls land use regulations and the general building envelope, ODS will address site and building design aspects previously governed by the City's design guidelines and applied through the discretionary design review process. Additionally, a public-facing guide has been developed to further explain the relationship between these regulations⁸.

⁸ Relationship Between Zoning and ODS. https://cao-94612.s3.us-west-2.amazonaws.com/documents/Oakland-Zoning-ODS_120823.pdf

If any standard in the ODS document conflicts with the Planning Code, the Planning Code standard will prevail. ODS will apply in all zones where One- to Four Family or 1-3 story Multifamily residential or mixed-use development is allowed. ODS draws from existing adopted City regulations, design guidelines, and Area plans - including the Design Guidelines for Corridors and Commercial Areas, Small Project Design Guidelines, Broadway Valdez Specific Plan, Central Estuary Area Plan, Coliseum Area Specific Plan, Downtown Oakland Specific Plan, Lake Merritt Station Area Plan, West Oakland Specific Plan, and other documents. If an eligible housing project is reviewed ministerially and meets all ODS, the City's existing design guidelines will not apply. All Oakland Municipal Code (OMC) regulations under the purview of other City Departments such as Building, OakDOT, Public Works, and other Departments still apply. City of Oakland Standard Conditions of Approval will also continue to apply.

ENVIRONMENTAL DETERMINATION

The proposal relies on the previously certified Final Environmental Impact Reports for: the Oakland 2045 General Plan Update - Phase 1 (2023); the Coliseum Area Specific Plan (2015); Broadway Valdez Specific Plan (2014); West Oakland Specific Plan (2014); Central Estuary Area Plan (2013); Land Use and Transportation Element of the General Plan (1998); the Oakland Estuary Policy Plan (1998); the North Oakland Hill Area Specific Plan (1986); the 1998 Amendment to the Historic Preservation Element of the General Plan; and various Redevelopment Plan Final EIRs (collectively, "EIRs"). No further environmental review is required under CEQA Guidelines Sections 15162 and 15163. Moreover, as a separate and independent basis, this proposal is also exempt from CEQA pursuant to CEQA Guidelines Sections 15183 (projects consistent with General Plan and Zoning) and 15061(b)(3) (general rule, no significant effect on the environment).

KEY ISSUES AND IMPACTS

Key Aspects and Differences from Adopted 4- to 8-Story Multifamily Objective Design Standards

The proposed new Objective Design Standard sets build on the ODS for 4–8 story Multifamily residential development adopted by the Planning Commission on October 2, 2024, which have already helped to streamline approvals for some housing proposals, cutting timelines off these projects significantly. For example, nearly 200 units of affordable housing were approved in Jack London Square at 430 Broadway in record time, thanks for a combination of the S-13 Affordable Housing Combining Zone overlay and the streamlined ministerial review process under ODS.

The proposed ODS, however, have been tailored to address the specific needs and realities of smaller-scale and missing-middle housing. Many standards appropriate for larger developments are not appropriate for the missing middle and lower density buildings. The redesign of these ODS was guided by three key priorities: the practicalities of designing smaller buildings, the capabilities and constraints of end users (such as small-scale developers, architects, and homeowners), and the need for a practical base for Planning staff to implement the streamlined, ministerial process successfully and efficiently, so that it takes less time to review and approve than a regular discretionary design review application.

Compared to the 4–8 story ODS, the proposed design standards for One-Family and Two- to Four-Family Residential Facilities (also referred to as One- to Four-Family ODS), and for one- to three-story Multifamily and Mixed-Used Developments are significantly fewer and simpler: staff reduced standards' volume by more than half, eliminated complex and prescriptive standards, and simplified the rest. Every standard was evaluated from both applicant and staff perspectives to ensure clarity, practicality, and realities of implementation.

Particularly, context transition requirements, which often demand extensive survey and photo-documentation from applicants, and time-consuming compliance verification by staff, have been reduced while still covering the most important aspects for integrating projects into their surroundings. The “Immediate Context Area” and “Existing Context” standards are now limited to the same block as the subject lot, where context is stronger and simpler to identify. The previous method included lots across side streets, leading to survey complexity and occasional need for discretion. Also, smaller projects typically have a much lower impact on neighborhoods as compared to 4-8 story Multifamily buildings, so the goal is to ensure a basic level of design quality through a focused, practical, and nimble set of requirements.

Planning staff worked diligently to distill the standards to only what is essential to support high-quality housing of the specified types and forms. The standards were tested by staff on real housing proposals to confirm they can be applied efficiently in a streamlined review process. For this reason, staff recommends preserving the current baseline and avoiding significant expansion of the standards, particularly the context transition requirements. Introducing additional complexity would slow down both the design and review processes and may undermine the City’s goal of enabling expedited approvals for urgently needed housing.

Objective Design Standards Organization

Planning staff divided the Objective Design Standards in **Attachment A** into two separate sets: 1) One- to Four-Family homes; and 2) for 1–3 story Multifamily buildings, to improve usability and better reflect the distinct needs of each housing type. Separate documents will make it easier for users, including staff, homeowners, and small developers, to find the standards relevant to their specific project. Additionally, these housing types have different planning and design considerations that require more tailored approaches. While some standards are shared across both sets to address common design principles, many are customized to reflect the unique characteristics of each housing type. For example, exterior access corridors (Standard 2.4.2) are typically not an issue for smaller One- to Four-Family buildings, so this standard was omitted from the 1-4 family draft. This kind of customization was implemented to make each standard set clearer, more specific, and more user-friendly.

The ODS sets are organized by topics such as site design, façades, building elements such as entries, and additions to historic buildings that create additional units of housing. Each section begins with a purpose and intent statement to explain the general purpose for the regulations, followed by specific, enforceable standards. The intent statements are for reference only and are not used in project approval; only the listed standards are mandatory unless an exception within a particular standard applies. The project reviewer can also mark a standard as not applicable in cases when does not relate to a particular project. Below is an overview of the ODS structure, goals, and key feedback to date from the public, organized by topic.

Site Planning and Design.

This section outlines the City’s design priorities for new housing developments, capturing essential urban design principles that contribute to creating a livable, accessible by all, and safe urban environment consistent with established development patterns. Some key focus areas in this section include:

- **Building Orientation and Access.** New buildings should generally face the street to create active, safe, and walkable neighborhoods, and promote visual interaction between public and private space. Main entrances must be clearly visible and easily accessible from the sidewalk. Walkways should be direct and wide enough for a wheelchair and a passerby.
- **Vehicular Access and Parking.** If proposed, surface parking should be placed at the rear of developments. All developments should have limited frequency of curb cuts, especially along

busy Corridors or streets with bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure to minimize possible conflicts with pedestrians and bicyclists, increasing safety for all.

- Services and Utilities. Strategic placement and screening of service areas, utilities, and entrances are essential to maintain attractive and safe public spaces and building frontages. The intent is also to minimize conflicts between trash staging and loading with pedestrians and bicyclists.
- Open Space. Well-placed open spaces for multi-unit developments provide vital shared amenities. These spaces should be integrated into site plans and accessible. Special attention is given to children's play areas to promote comfortable family-friendly developments.

Mitigation of Blank Walls.

The goal of this ODS section is to minimize long stretches of blank walls on facades and non-active frontages. When blank walls are unavoidable, design treatments should be used to add visual interest. These standards are applicable only to Multifamily buildings as One- to Four-Family homes usually do not have the issue of large blank walls.

Façade Treatments and Modulation.

Well-designed facades add visual richness and character and can help buildings fit into their surroundings by adopting and interpreting existing context elements. Features like bay windows, balconies, minor changes in plane, varied materials, and architectural details create a more engaging, memorable, and human-scaled appearance. Façade treatments matter most at the ground floors of larger Multifamily buildings. For Multifamily projects, applicants can choose any two options from a flexible list that includes features like bay windows, wall offsets, window screens, decorative details, or quality materials. The list is designed to be both flexible and low-cost. Smaller buildings (One- to Four-Family) only need to include one facade treatment to reduce building costs and avoid potential facade busyness.

This design standard offers broad, flexible, and relatively low-cost design options commonly used in small-scale buildings, improves streetscape quality, avoids blank or monotonous façades, and ensures a baseline level of design without being overly restrictive. Most well-designed typical buildings already include features offered as options for new development.

Building Elements.

Building Entrances. Well-designed, street-facing building entrances play a key role in neighborhood character, safety, and walkability. Inviting, visible, and accessible entries help connect buildings to their surroundings and support active, pedestrian-friendly streets. Features like recesses, porches, plantings, low walls, and gates provide privacy, weather protection, and a transition from public to private space. These standards ensure entrances are welcoming, accessible, while grounding a building in the neighborhood context.

The limit on exterior access corridors (Standard #2.4.2 in the Multifamily ODS) was carried over from the adopted 4–8 story ODS because the aesthetic and functional problems these corridors cause still apply to missing middle buildings. These issues are not just about appearance and aesthetics, they also include practical and regulatory challenges. For example, exterior corridors can trigger Building Code requirements for fire-rated walls or additional side setbacks, which reduce the buildable area and can outweigh any perceived efficiency benefits. Exterior corridors also pose additional security risks. In examples observed by staff, windows facing these corridors often add metal security gates or bars for safety of the tenants. This condition is not desirable and does not support safe and attractive neighborhoods.

Awnings, Sunshades, Screens, and Coverings. For Multifamily buildings, shading devices such as awnings add architectural articulation, weather protection and aid in indoor comfort at the ground floor by reducing solar heat gain and glare. Ground-floor permanent awnings enhance pedestrian scale, differentiate building sections, and provide identity for businesses or modulation for residences. These elements also help to relate new Multifamily buildings to existing context.

Roofs and Parapets. Roof forms and articulation methods like cornices, overhangs, and parapets influence building appearance and character. These details help new buildings integrate harmoniously with their surroundings by breaking up long rooflines, adding interest, modulation, and preventing a monolithic appearance.

Balconies and Decks. These elements help add vital private open for resident's enjoyment, especially in places without access to other types of open space. To maintain privacy, the standards require side setbacks and privacy screening along interior shared side property lines.

Windows and Glazing. Windows are essential for architectural balance, comfort, and neighborhood character. Recessed, trimmed windows add depth and detail to façades, while street-facing windows improve safety, create a welcoming presence, and support natural light and ventilation.

Window alignment standards from 4-8 story ODS were not included for 1–4 unit or 1–3 story buildings because alignment is less impactful at this scale and can limit necessary design flexibility or to create undesirable floor plans. For smaller buildings, alignment standards are not recommended to avoid unnecessary restrictions.

Materials. High-quality materials on facades, particularly at ground levels, ensure durability and sustainability, while reducing long-term maintenance needs. Using materials that reflect the local context helps create a sense of place and visually relate buildings within their surroundings. Thoughtful material selection can also highlight different parts of the building. However, it's important to balance these material requirements with construction costs. Mandating premium materials for windows, for example, may not be equitable or cost-effective. The materials standard is only applicable to Multifamily building and commercial ground floors.

Hillside and Sloped Lots. These standards offer design strategies that adapt buildings to the terrain, reduce visual bulk, and support fire safety. The standards encourage stepped forms, limited wall heights, and fire-resistant materials in high fire risk areas to promote safer development that follows the natural slope and avoids excessive grading and retention walls. Many One-Family project applications are for homes in the Hills or on sloped lots, so it was important to include standards for these areas.

Additions to Historic Properties. ODS include additional standards for building additions to historic properties that result in new dwelling units. These standards aim to ensure that developments respect the existing main historic building and help preserve and repair existing features. These standards include basic safeguards that include maintaining access to original entrances, matching roof forms, preserving porches, matching original windows, regulating upper story additions, and guiding design of additions that propose raising existing historic buildings.

Finally, a Glossary and Definitions section at the end of the document includes a definition of terms and concepts used throughout the document.

General Design Principles

In addition to the key design considerations discussed above, the following overarching design principles permeate through the ODS document:

Relation to Diverse Neighborhood Contexts and Historic Contexts.

The Objective Design Standards include several measures and standards to ensure that new developments integrate into existing neighborhood contexts, including historic contexts. Typically, the regular discretionary design review process based on previously adopted design guidelines helps enforce the consistency of new development with the existing neighborhood. However, these existing design guidelines can no longer apply to most residential development as they are not sufficiently objective.

Planning staff drafted the context transition standards to help new buildings integrate into their surroundings without requiring strict replication of historic styles or features. The goal is to balance transitions to existing contexts with the need for streamlined housing production and design flexibility. This balance is especially important in ministerial approvals, where compliance with complex context transition requirements can slow the process that is envisioned to be efficient. The design standards are grounded in real-world conditions and reflect successful, high-quality projects previously approved through the regular design review process. Rather than mandating conformity to specific historic styles, ODS allow a wide range of architectural expressions, including traditional and modern ones, ensuring that existing development patterns do not obstruct diverse, denser housing.

Each standard includes clear guidance on when and where it applies. Most apply only in historic districts such as Areas of Primary or Secondary Importance (APIs or ASIs) or near highly rated historic resources, though some extend more broadly to recognize valuable context outside designated areas where the immediate context is particularly strong, for example, when at least 60% of nearby buildings share a certain desirable feature. Key terms such as *Immediate Context Area*, *Existing Context*, and others are defined in the ODS documents, which also explain how to identify and respond to these contexts. Please see **Attachment C** for a detailed summary of the context transition standards' application.

Staff recommends keeping the standards narrowly focused to support efficient housing production and avoid requiring buildings to imitate existing styles, which could constrain modern, high-quality design. Examples of context transition methods include:

- A requirement for covered and/or recessed entries such as porches in Areas of Primary Importance (APIs) and Areas of Secondary Importance (ASIs) if there is an existing strong context of these types of entries (see 2.3.1 in 1-4 family and 2.5.1 in 1-3 story Multifamily ODS)
- Roof form context transition in APIs if there is a strong context of roof forms, such as pitched roofs (see 2.4.1 in 1-4 family and 2.7.1 in 1-3 story Multifamily ODS)
- Shade elements at residential ground floor such as awnings where such features are shared among adjacent buildings (see 4.4.1 in both drafts)
- Ground floor context transition for commercial ground floors that require to continue an expression line such as cornice formed by a trim or another element from adjacent to new buildings (see 2.6.1 in Multifamily ODS)
- Window materials in APIs (see 2.6.2 in 1-4 family and 2.9.3 in 1-3 story Multifamily ODS)
- Exterior building materials transitions (see 2.10.5 in 1-3 story Multifamily ODS)

The terms *Local Register Properties* and *Areas of Primary or Secondary Importance (APIs and ASIs)* refer to different historic designations. Local Register Properties are the highest-rated historic resources (about 2% of Oakland's buildings), while APIs and ASIs are geographic areas in Oakland that include a mix of properties with different historic ratings, and buildings that carry no historic rating. As the name suggests, APIs include a higher number of highly-rated historic buildings, and there are fewer of them. For reference, Oakland has 55 Areas of Primary Importance (APIs) where the historic context is usually very strong and unified, and 332 ASIs where the mix of properties is usually more diverse and include more modern or contemporary buildings without historic designation.

Historic district design guidelines typically rely on replicating defined period or architectural styles, but this approach is not practical or appropriate under this ODS proposal, which aims to streamline housing approvals through a ministerial review process. Requiring stylistic replication would hinder housing production, stifle architectural creativity, and potentially preclude higher density housing in exclusive historic districts. Instead, the proposed standards are flexible and support a variety of building styles, types and densities, focusing on the practical interpretation of desirable features, like recessed and covered entries or high-quality materials.

Objective Design Standards, including the context transition standards, apply to new buildings and additions that create new housing units. In cases where new housing units are proposed on a Local Register Property or Potentially Designated Historic Property, the ODS include special standards in Section 5: Additional Standards to Historic Properties (see **Attachment A**). Any proposed demolition of CEQA-eligible historic resources remain subject to discretionary review and is outside the scope of this proposal.

Accessibility Priorities.

To advance social equity, Objective Design Standards must address the needs of people with disabilities. The ODS prioritizes accessibility in the built environment, particularly for people with limited mobility, by implementing several key measures. These include the prioritization of at-grade entries for residential units in buildings with ground-floor residential uses and limiting the ground floor level height for commercial entries. The standards require direct pedestrian access from adjacent sidewalks to primary building entries and mandate a minimum 4-foot-wide pedestrian pathway to access building entrances, lobbies, and any ground-floor dwelling units. Please note that work in any public sidewalks is within the purview of the Oakland Department of Transportation (OakDOT). To enhance pedestrian and bicycle safety, curb cuts have been prohibited on streets with existing or proposed protected bike lanes, unless no other street frontage is available, and curb cut frequency has been reduced. Garage entries must be recessed to further improve pedestrian circulation and safety. Trash staging, if necessary, is limited to the streets with the least activity to limit the potential conflicts with pedestrians and bicyclists.

Ground Floor and Building Entrances.

Ground-floor design plays a crucial role in how people experience the city. It affects walkability, safety, accessibility, neighborhood character, and commercial success. Well-designed ground floors help buildings fit into their surroundings and support vibrant, pedestrian-friendly streets. To achieve this, the Objective Design Standards require ground floor treatments and attention to building entries.

For residential ground floors, the standards encourage placing main entrances at the front with direct access from the sidewalk. Street-facing and recessed and/or covered entrances improve safety, accessibility, and walkability, and ensure context transitions while enhancing privacy and comfort of inhabitants. Transitional elements, such as porches, plantings, low walls, or decorative paving, create a buffer between public sidewalks and private spaces, enhancing both privacy and inclusivity.

For commercial ground floors, elements like large windows, awnings, durable materials, recessed entrances, and architectural detailing create inviting, active frontages. Designers have flexibility in how they apply these features, where storefronts and aligned horizontal elements with neighboring facades help form a unified and welcoming street wall. These standards also draw from Oakland's "Small Project Design Review Guidelines."

Other Key Considerations

In addition to the key design considerations mentioned above, the following factors were important in drafting of the Objective Design Standards. Some of these topics emerged during community engagement, discussions with internal staff from various City Departments, and reviews of best practices from other jurisdictions.

Equitable Outcomes.

The Objective Design Standards aim to address housing inequities that have historically impacted Black, Indigenous, and other communities of color in Oakland. Historically, the notion of "neighborhood character" has shaped zoning to preserve single-family neighborhoods, often restricting apartments and missing-middle housing, and often indirectly or directly excluding lower-income residents and people of color from these areas.

One of key components of ODS is eliminating the institutional bias toward specific architectural or historic styles. Planning staff developed these ODS to balance the context consistency with the urgent need for new homes.

By replacing subjective, discretionary design review with a clear, unbiased ministerial process based on a checklist available in advance, the ODS aim to promote fairer, more consistent, and streamlined approvals of housing of all types and styles, including modern and contemporary styles, across all City neighborhoods. By streamlining approvals and lowering permitting hurdles, ODS helps to increase housing supply, reduce costs, and improve affordability, especially for Oakland's most vulnerable residents. In doing so, the standards help confront racial disparities in housing access and production.

Finally, by establishing clear, objective rules, the ODS will help level the playing field for smaller developers, removing the need to navigate costly, subjective review processes. Guided by an equity lens, the standards avoid unnecessary requirements that would drive up development costs. (See the "Race and Equity" section of the report for more detail.)

Grounding in Local Regulatory Context and Local Expertise, and Consistency with Existing Zoning Regulations.

The standards are grounded in local design priorities drawn from the Planning Code, design guidelines, area plans, and other adopted regulations, as detailed in the Zoning Analysis section. Planning staff translated the most relevant and appropriate guidelines into clear, objective standards using their extensive project review experience. Input from other city departments like Transportation (OakDOT), Public Works, and Sustainability ensured key public goals were addressed. The standards were also tested on real projects internally, with results used to refine the proposed ODS.

Testing of Objective Design Standards.

The proposed Objective Design Standards were thoroughly reviewed within Oakland's regulatory framework and tested on real development proposals to ensure clarity, objectivity, regulatory consistency, and suitability for a checklist-based ministerial process. Feedback received after the tests helped refine the current proposal.

Planning staff found the draft ODS documents generally clear and well-organized. Familiarity with the standards and practice applying ODS significantly reduced review time after a learning curve, indicating that efficiency improves with experience, supporting the City's streamlining goals.

The common challenge during testing of all projects was missing plan details such as required dimensions and elements not shown on plans. This issue should improve once ODS are adopted because current

projects in with the city for review now were not designed and submitted to Planning with ODS available as a guide. A new General Provision within the ODS now requires applicants to clearly demonstrate compliance with applicable standards. Staff training and additional applicant guidance will follow adoption to improve submittal quality. Existing procedures for incomplete applications will remain, and staff will receive direction for handling unclear submittals. Where confusion arose due to unclear language, the standards were revised for clarity. Ongoing testing and refinement will continue, as described in the “Iterative Process” section.

Planning staff also recommended adding illustrative graphics to support the written standards. An illustrated version of the ODS will be developed after adoption to ensure that the graphics produced accurately reflect the finalized standards to save valuable staff time and budget and increase the overall work efficiency.

Additional feedback on specific standards led to targeted revisions: overly prescriptive and onerous standards with low positive impact were eliminated. Some important clarifications were added, such as requiring a map highlighting lots included in the Immediate Context Area. To maintain flexibility and usability, staff recommends keeping the standards focused, practical, and limited in scope to support the City goal for streamlined housing approvals. This applies especially to context transition standards.

Efficiency, Transparency, Predictability, and Cost Implications.

Each design standard was carefully evaluated for feasibility and practicality to avoid placing undue burdens on applicants or staff. Drawing on resources like the ABAG ODS Handbook⁹, internal Planning expertise, design standard examples from other cities, and local public input, staff developed practical design standards appropriate for a streamlined ministerial process. Drafts were reviewed by developers, designers, staff, pro-housing groups, historic preservation groups, and Oakland residents to identify ways to reduce costs and approve all types of housing faster.

Streamlined design review under the Objective Design Standards will eliminate subjective criteria and reduce project delays, accelerating approvals and providing greater certainty for developers and property owners, without compromising quality for the public or future tenants. This efficiency will also lower administrative costs and burdens, allowing Planning staff to focus on more complex and impactful projects and improving overall resource allocation.

⁹ <https://abag.ca.gov/tools-resources/digital-library/objective-design-standards-handbookapril-2024pdf>

RECOMMENDATIONS:

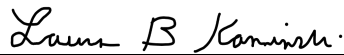
Staff recommends that the Planning Commission conduct a public hearing, receive public comments, and engage in discussion prior to recommending changes to staff and/or making other recommendations.

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ATTACHMENTS:

- A. Planning Commission Hearing Drafts Objective Design Standards for One-Family and Two- to Four-Family Dwellings, and One- to Three-Story Multifamily Residential and Mixed-Use Developments.
- B. Public Comments with Staff Responses and Workshop Summaries.
- C. Context Transition Standards' Applicability Summary.