



COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT DEPARTMENT

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PLANNING COMMISSION STAFF REPORT

Agenda Date: October 28, 2025

Subject

Study Session: Objective Design Standards

Recommended Action

That the Planning Commission provide feedback and recommendations regarding the establishment of objective design standards for new multi-family and residential mixed-use development

Background

Cupertino is preparing new residential design standards, known as objective design standards (ODS) in response to changes in State housing law over the last several years. Staff and the project consultant, PlaceWorks, have conducted Planning Commission Study Sessions for the ODS on May 13 and July 22, 2025. The Study Sessions covered the following topics:

- Relevant legal background for ODS
- The definition of ODS
- Differences between discretionary and ministerial review
- Regulatory limits of ODS, which do not regulate land use or density, unlike zoning of land use plans
- Current Cupertino design policies, guidelines, and standards
- Local flexibility in the ODS processes
- Typical ODS content and approaches

In response to the Planning Commission's request at the most recent July 22, 2025 study session, PlaceWorks has compiled a package of locally-adopted ODS. Each of the following samples includes the following information:

- Adoption date of the ODS
- Publication method
- Applicable development types
- Primary chapters/sections
- ODS approaches and formats

- Summary of Outreach
- Links to document

I. City of Sunnyvale Citywide Objective Design Standards

Adoption date: June, 2023

Publication method: Stand-alone document

Applicable development types covered by the ODS:

- **Multifamily residential**
- **Mixed-Use Residential**
- **Supportive/transitional housing**

Primary chapters/sections:

1. Introduction
2. Site Design
3. Building Form
4. Building Detail and Lighting
5. Parking and Service Area Design
6. Open Space Design
7. Landscape Design
8. Bird Safe Design
9. Glossary

ODS Approaches and Formats:

- Text requirements
- Tabular quantities and requirements
- Selective lists
- Point-based scoring
- Text accompanied by 2D diagrams
- Text accompanied by 3D diagrams
- Text accompanied by photographs

Outreach Summary (2021-2023):

- Virtual Public Meeting: ODS Education
- Virtual Public Meeting: Design Insights
- (1) Virtual Stakeholder Focus Group: Developers and architects
- (1) Joint PC/CC Study Session

Link to document: [Sunnyvale ODS](#)

II. City of San Mateo Multi-Family and Residential Mixed-Use Objective Design Standards

Adoption date: December, 2023

Publication method: Stand-alone document

Applicable development types:

- **New multifamily development**
- **New mixed-use residential development**
- **Additions to multifamily and residential mixed-use development**

Primary chapters/sections:

1. Organization
2. Purpose and Applicability
3. Site Planning
4. Building Design and Architecture
5. Landscaping, Open Space and Exterior Lighting
6. Other Site Features
7. Specific Plan Area Standards
8. Definitions

ODS Approaches and Formats:

- Text only standards
- Text associated with photographs
- Text associated with labeled & illustrated photographs
- Texts associated with 2D diagrams
- Text associated with 3D diagrams
- Selective lists

Summary of Outreach (2021-2023)

- Community Workshop: ODS Education
- Community Workshop: Design input
- (2) Planning Commission Study Sessions
- Developer Roundtable
- Joint PC/CC Study Session

Link to document: [San Mateo ODS](#)

III. City of Palo Alto Objective Design Standards

Adoption date: 2022

Publication method: Palo Alto Municipal Code, Section 18.24

Applicable development types:

“Multifamily housing with three or more units ("multiple-family use" as defined in Section 18.04.030), supportive and transitional housing, and residential mixed-use projects with at least two-thirds residential square footage shall meet the objective design standards.”

Primary chapters/sections:

1. Purpose and Applicability
2. Public Realm/Sidewalk Character
3. Site access
4. Building Orientation and Setbacks
5. Building Massing
6. Façade Design
7. Residential Entries
8. Open Space
9. Materials
10. Sustainability and Green Building Design

ODS Approaches and Formats:

- Text only standards
- Tabular quantities
- Equations
- Texts associated with 2D diagrams
- Text associated with 3D diagrams

Summary of Outreach (2021-2023)

- Multiple Architectural Review Board (ARB) review sessions

Link to document: [City of Palo Alto ODS](#)

IV. City of Foster City Multi-Family Objective Design Standards

Adoption date: September, 2024

Publication method: Stand-alone ODS User Guide

Applicable development types:

- **New multi-family development**
- **New mixed-use development**

Primary chapters/sections:

1. Introduction
2. Applicability
3. Site Design and Development Standards
4. Building Design and Development Standards
5. Appendix: Checklist

ODS Approaches and Formats:

- Text only standards
- Equations
- Text associated with photographs
- Text associated with labeled photographs
- Texts associated with 2D diagrams/site plans

- Text associated with 3D diagrams
- Selective lists

Summary of Outreach (2021-2024)

- Public Study Session
- Urban Design Data Walk
- PC Study Session

Link to document: [Foster City ODS](#)

V. Town of Los Gatos Objective Design Standards

Adoption date: January, 2023 (updated)

Publication method: Stand-alone document

Applicable development types:

- **Multi-family housing developments**
- **Residential mixed-use developments with a minimum of two-thirds of the square footage designated for residential use**
- **Supportive and transitional housing development**

Primary chapters/sections:

1. Purpose and applicability
2. Organization
3. Key Terms
4. Site Standards
5. Building Standards

ODS Approaches and Formats:

- Text only standards
- Texts associated with 2D diagrams/site plans
- Text associated with 3D diagrams

Summary of Outreach (2021-2023)

- Community Meeting: Preliminary Topics
- Community Meeting: Draft Standards
- (2) PC Study Sessions prior to Draft ODS review

Link to document: [Los Gatos ODS](#)

Analysis:

The example ODS discussed above present a range of options and formats that the City can choose to include in its own ODS document. Staff encourages the Commission to review the local agency examples and convey to staff what preferences they have so that staff can develop a draft document for the Commission's consideration prior to the end of the calendar year.

Environmental Review

This study session and the resulting Planning Commission recommendations will not cause a direct or indirect physical change to the environment. As such, they do not constitute a CEQA “project” pursuant to CEQA Guidelines § 21065 – Project. No environmental review is, therefore, required.

Other Department/Agency Review

None required.

COMMUNITY OUTREACH

This Planning Commission Meeting follows two public outreach events conducted as part of the ODS Project:

1. *Open House:* City staff and PlaceWorks conducted a hybrid in-person/virtual Housing Design Preference Open House on February 10, 2025, at Cupertino Community Hall. The goals of the meeting were to introduce residents to the ODS process and conduct a design preference open house.
2. *PC Study Session:* City staff and PlaceWorks conducted the aforementioned Planning Commission ODS Study Session on May 13, 2025.
3. Planning Commission ODS Study Session on July 22, 2025

NEXT STEPS

City staff and PlaceWorks will complete a draft Objective Design Standards document for consideration by the Planning Commission and, subsequently, the City Council, with expected public review and adoption of the final ODS by mid-2026.

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