

# SANTA CLARA COUNTY DESIGN REVIEW GUIDELINES

Approved February 9, 1999, Santa Clara County Board of Supervisors

(Applicable to development subject to design review)

## I. INTRODUCTION

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This document includes guidelines that deal with reducing visual impacts of development as well as some of the procedural issues related to design review submittal. These design review guidelines are adopted and amended by the Planning Commission. Public notice shall be provided prior to significant changes to the guidelines.

Checklists and handouts prepared by staff to facilitate implementation of these guidelines shall be consistent with these guidelines.

## II. INTENT OF THE GUIDELINES

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The purpose of these guidelines is to assure a degree of consistency in the design review process. These guidelines will provide landowners and architects with an advance sense of the County's expectations with regard to the type of development that would be acceptable in the hillsides.

These guidelines are intended to be interpreted with flexibility by staff and are not intended to be strict standards like those in the zoning ordinance. Not all guidelines will be applicable or appropriate for all projects; balanced tradeoffs have to be made, keeping in mind the intent of each guideline. However, all projects are encouraged to meet the objectives of the guidelines to the greatest extent possible.

## III. DESIGN GUIDELINES

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### Main Goal of the Guidelines

**The primary goal of these guidelines is to maintain the predominantly natural character of hillsides areas and areas along designated scenic roads in Santa Clara County.**

### Objective I.

**To minimize the visibility of new structures from the valley floor and designated scenic roads.**

*This objective can be achieved by minimizing bulk and integrating the building with its surroundings. Elements of design such as building form, color, architectural detailing and vegetation can also be effectively used to break up the mass of a building and reduce its visibility.*

### 1. Site Design

- a. The site design should incorporate the existing natural features of the land and take into consideration the contours of the land.
- b. The building form should follow the natural contours of the land.

- c. Whenever possible, the site and structure design should also take into consideration, the impacts on privacy and views of neighboring properties.

## **2. Building Form**

- a. The slopes of the roof should follow the natural contours of the land.
- b. Bulk of the building should be broken up by incorporating varied roof heights rather than having just one or two massive roof planes.
- c. Expansive facades shall be avoided by offsetting walls and by using architectural elements such as windows and cornices to produce patterns of light and shade.
- d. The second and the third stories should be set back from the first floor facade to step with the land and reduce apparent bulk.

For parcels zoned "-d<sub>2</sub>" within the unincorporated Milpitas hillsides, the maximum continuous height of an exposed wall plane on the downhill elevation should be limited to 15 feet. A break in a continuous wall plane can be accomplished by setting back the second story, incorporating architectural elements such as a significant change in building material, or inclusion of a deck or awning which spans the majority of the wall plane.

- e. Additions to buildings should not result in a major increase to the apparent bulk of the building.

## **3. Fences and Retaining Walls**

- a. Open fencing such as welded wire mesh attached to wood posts or other alternate material should be used. Solid fencing should be avoided, especially where highly visible to the public.
- b. Retaining walls should be landscaped by using vines, shrubbery or planters to reduce their apparent height and to ensure that they blend with the natural surroundings.

## **3. Color and Material**

- a. Exterior colors of all structures (walls, roof, window trim / accent, retaining walls, fences) shall use natural dark earth tones such as hues of brown, green and shades of gray. (The colors used must also comply with light reflectance standards in the County Zoning Ordinance)

For parcels zoned "-d<sub>2</sub>" within the unincorporated Milpitas hillsides, in order to mitigate the potential visibility and contrast of a dark building against a lighter background, the exterior colors of all structures shall be earth tones which blend with the color of the predominant natural background.

- b. Light, bright and reflective materials shall be avoided on the exterior surfaces of buildings.

#### **4. Landscape**

- a. Where necessary, vegetation shall be used to blend the structure with the surrounding landscape and soften the impact of development.
- b. Ground cover, shrubs and trees should be used to mitigate visual impacts of development.
- c. All landscaping will be subject to approval by the Fire Marshall to make sure that it does not create a fire hazard.

#### **5. Outdoor Lighting**

- a. Artificial lighting provided for tennis and other recreational courts is discouraged. If provided, it should be not be directly visible from off-site.
- b. The number, intensity and location of light sources should be carefully designed so as not to be directly visible from off-site.

#### **Objective II.**

#### **To retain the natural topography and vegetation of the hillsides and areas along the scenic roads.**

*The general character of the land can be retained by minimizing grading necessary and by retaining as much as possible of the existing vegetation. The skyline is an important part of the hillside landscape and so it is important , as far as possible, to make sure that development does not distort its natural appearance .*

#### **1. Grading**

- a. Proposed structures and driveways should be sited so as to minimize the need for grading.
- b. When grading is required, gradient shall not be steeper than 1:2 (vertical to horizontal) and preferably will be a 1:3 gradient.
- c. Newly graded areas shall be seeded / mulched or re-vegetated within a reasonable time period (30 days) to reduce visual impacts of grading and to prevent erosion.
- d. All cuts and fills of grading should be adequately rounded off to blend with the surrounding natural terrain, where conditions permit.

#### **2. Vegetation**

- a. Existing trees with a circumference of 37.5 inches, measured 4.5 feet above the ground level should be preserved and integrated into the site design.
- b. Existing trees with a circumference of 37.5 inches, measured 4.5 feet above the ground level should be protected during site preparation and building construction.
- c. To ensure a sense of character, trees and shrubs native to the area should be selected as new plant materials in areas visible to the public. (Refer to *Practical Landscaping* available in the Planning Office, for a list of native plant species.) Choice of plants should be sensitive to the character of the sub region in which they will be located. (For instance, pine trees may be native to the region, but may be out of character on grassy hillsides with oak chaparral)

### **3. Ridgeline Protection**

- a. Structures determined to be located on ridgelines should be designed with low profile elevations. (Building height may be required to be lower than the maximum allowed in the ordinance.)
- b. Landscaping should be used to blend the structure with the natural ridgelines and to mitigate the impact of the structure's intrusion into the skyline.
- c. There may be instances where even with a low profile of a structure and substantial landscaping it may not be possible to make the structure less obtrusive on a ridgeline. In such instances, structures determined to be intruding into the skyline may be required to be relocated on the site to ensure that they don't disrupt the lines of the natural ridgeline. This may be required only if alternative locations on the site are possible that will not further increase visual or environmental impacts. If more than one such alternative location is possible, the applicant may choose the preferred location.

## **IV. PROCEDURAL GUIDELINES**

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### **1. Design Review Hearing**

Design review involves a staff level, public hearing that focuses on the review of visual impacts to ensure that potential adverse visual impacts created by proposed development are minimized.

The design review hearing officer conducts the hearing. Typically, the hearing is attended by the owner and / or applicant and other interested persons including neighbors. The design review hearing officer discusses the project with the applicant and other parties present, addresses any issues, asks and answers any questions and takes an action to either grant, deny, continue or hold under advisement.

The decision of the design review hearing officer may be appealed to the Planning Commission. Decisions of the Planning Commission may be appealed to the Board of Supervisors.

### **2. Design Review Hearing Notice**

#### **Notice to Neighbors**

Property owners (both private and public) within a designated distance (as specified in the ordinance) from boundaries of the proposed site receive a notice of the hearing.

#### **Notice to Cities**

All cities with areas zoned -d or -d1 within their sphere of influence will routinely receive design review agendas.

Cities within whose sphere of influence a project site is located in will receive a referral of the application.

## **Notice to Others**

Other individuals, organizations or agencies may receive design review agendas by subscription.

### **3. Design Review Application Requirements**

#### **A. General Application Submittal Requirements**

A submittal shall include:

1. completed application form and related attachments
2. required sets of drawings
3. completed visual impacts check list

All design review application submittals should be accompanied by the visual impacts checklist prepared by the applicant or architect. This checklist summarizes the development standards and guidelines that are applicable to development subject to design review.

This checklist is intended to guide the applicant during the design process to minimize visual impacts and facilitate approval of the project. It is however, not necessary for each proposed house to comply with all the guidelines, so long as they comply with the overall intent of minimizing visual impacts.

This checklist should be used during the design process to determine if all relevant techniques of site and architectural design have been used to ensure that visual impacts are minimized. This completed checklist will then be reviewed by staff to ensure that adequate steps have been taken to minimize the extent of visual impacts created by the house.

#### **B. Additional Application Requirements for Houses 6,500 Square Feet or Larger and for Any Structure within the Milpitas Hillside Areas “-d<sub>2</sub>” Zoning District**

Large houses generally have a greater potential for creating significant visual impacts. Similarly, in some areas, topographic characteristics and lack of vegetation may contribute to a house or structure of any size having significant visual impacts. Consequently, certain projects may be subject to additional application requirements to ensure that they will not create significant adverse visual impacts.

For houses 6,500 square feet in floor area or larger, story poles may be required to help staff and other interested parties to visualize the mass and potential visual impacts of the proposed project and ensure that appropriate mitigations are implemented to help minimize visual impacts. Floor area by definition includes the area of the main building, attached garage, and attached secondary dwelling, if any.

Story poles are a temporary, full scale framework of timber or other structural materials connected at ridges and eaves with netting to simulate the actual mass and dimensions of a building or structure in its proposed location. When required, story poles would be constructed and remain in place for a specified time period prior to a Design Review hearing, and through any appeal period.

For those areas of the Milpitas hillside within the “-d<sub>2</sub>” zoning district, story poles may be required for any structure to ensure that potential visual impacts to the crestline are objectively evaluated and that no structure protrudes above the perceived crestline.

### **4. Los Gatos Hillside Specific Plan Area Landscape Maintenance Agreement**

All new development applications within the Los Gatos Hillside Specific Plan area, which include landscaping plans, shall also include a separate two-year maintenance agreement which shall be administered and enforced by the Town of Los Gatos. This is in addition to any other agreement(s) that may be required by the County.

The applicant should be made aware that the two-year maintenance agreement must be obtained from the Town of Los Gatos. Once agreement is reached between the Town and the applicant, the applicant must submit to the County proof to such agreement before design review will be granted.

Negotiations with the Town of Los Gatos in obtaining the two-year maintenance agreement is the sole responsibility of the applicant. The applicant should anticipate the additional time which may be necessary to obtain the agreement.