25-1602 **Agenda Date: 1/14/2026**

REPORT TO PLANNING COMMISSION

SUBJECT

Public Hearing: Recommendation on The Adoption of The Citywide Objective Design Standards for Multi-Family and Residential Mixed-Use Projects into The Santa Clara Zoning Code. CEQA: Addendum to the 2010-2035 General Plan EIR

BACKGROUND

In recent years, the State Legislature has adopted a series of bills to address the state's housing shortage and high housing costs. For a variety of multifamily and mixed-use residential projects, cities are now required to provide a streamlined ministerial approval process to facilitate and expedite the construction of housing. Laws like the Housing Accountability Act, the Housing Crisis Act (also known as SB 330 (2019)), and SB 35 (2017) expedite the review process for qualifying projects and limit local governments' authority to impose zoning and design standards that are not "objective" criteria. Both the state statutes and the Guidelines of the California Department of Housing & Community Development (HCD) define "Objective Standards" as "involving no personal or subjective judgment by a public official and . . . uniformly verifiable by reference to an external and uniform benchmark or criterion". Importantly, the standards once established are applied ministerially.

Policy A-3 of the City's certified sixth cycle Housing Element is to "Utilize objective design standards to streamline the housing development process." Currently, architectural review is still required for most residential projects, including multi-family developments, as well as single-family attached developments and developments taller than one story. The development of Objective Design Standards (ODS) will help to clarify the applicable standards and potentially reduce review times.

Since the certification of the Housing Element, Planning staff have undertaken the task of developing ODS for Multi-family Residential and Residential Mixed-Use Projects.

On November 12, 2025, the Planning Commission conducted a Study Session on Objective Design Standards for multi-family and residential mixed-use projects to discuss California Government Code Sections 65913.4 and 65589.5, which mandate that cities utilize only "objective planning standards" related to the project site, land use regulations and project form when reviewing residential development applications eligible for streamlined approval. The session discussed how the term "objective planning standards" was added to the California State Land Use Law ("State Law") beginning with the passage of Senate Bill 35, as later amended by SB 423. The Staff Report for this Study Session is found in Attachment 4.

According to California Government Code Section 65913.4(a)(5), residential development applications eligible for streamlined approval shall be "consistent with objective zoning standards, objective subdivision standards, and objective design review standards in effect at the time that the development is submitted". These objective standards must compose of quantitative requirements, numeric thresholds, discrete options, and point-based standards as the criteria must "involve no

personal or subjective judgment by a public official".

Currently, only limited geographic areas of the City (Freedom Circle, Patrick Henry, Lawrence Station, Tasman East, & Downtown) are covered by comprehensive objective standards due to their adopted Specific / Precise Plans, which leaves the rest of the City covered by the limited objective standards found under the various zoning districts of the Zoning Code.

Staff's approach to develop comprehensive citywide ODS will be implemented in two phases. Phase I takes existing ODS from the Specific and Precise Plans that were already vetted by the community and decision makers and codifies them into the Santa Clara City Code as a separate chapter in the Zoning Code. This will allow the City to maintain a maximum degree of local design control in the short run, and abide by the City's Housing Element Policy A-3.

Staff received feedback from the Planning Commission on the gaps in the standards. Their feedback is the following:

- More Prescriptive Architectural Standards by Building Type (Multiplex, Courtyard, Mid-Rise, & etc.)
- Enhance Open Space Standards
    - Standards shall give flexibility in how open space is provided
- More Transitional Zone Standards between Building Type

This feedback will be incorporated into Phase II of the workplan.

Phase II will include the use of consultants to assist with developing new ODS and conduct community outreach.

DISCUSSION

As part of the Phase I, the ODS are to be incorporated into the Santa Clara City Code as a separate chapter in the Zoning Code. The standards will be accompanied by graphic illustrations to help interpret the standards. The ODS will address "site", "building" and "pedestrian-level" design standards of architectural review proposals. These standards would be applicable to new multi-family and residential mixed-use projects and additions to existing multi-family and residential mixed-use projects. The building types affected are townhouses and podium/wrap style buildings.

The following summarizes the subsections of the draft ODS and provides some examples.

Site Design Standards

These standards will create more pedestrian-friendly functional communities through expanded pedestrian access, human-scaled block sizes, and convenient multi-modal connections by regulating:

- Site Access and Layout
    - Example: "Locate loading zones and rideshare pick-up / drop-off areas at least 45 feet away from bus stops."
- Site Organization, Planning, and Design
    - Example: "Ensure that corner buildings actively address both streets by having pedestrian entrances on each frontage."

Building Design Standards

These standards will create human-scaled buildings that blend with their surroundings by regulating:

- Massing
- Example: “Massing Increments as Distinct Buildings. A Podium-Style Building shall appear as distinct buildings when it occupies more than 200 linear feet of street frontage. At minimum, it shall appear as three (3) distinct buildings using massing increments design:
    - There shall be differences in facade materials and color between Distinct Buildings
    - There shall be differences in the type and composition of facade openings and architectural elements between distinct buildings.
    - The building base heights of adjacent Distinct Buildings shall differ by an entire floor.”
- Façade Design
- Example: “The Building’s Base floor shall be differentiated from the rest of the façade whether through a change in material, change in type of opening, belt course, or a combination of these elements.”
- Access & Entrance Design
    - Example: “Primary entrances shall feature at least two of the following:
        - Architectural features such as a prominent tower feature or a peaked roof form and/or a variation in building color/materials.
        - Recess or projection.
        - Pedestrian weather protection (i.e. canopy, overhang, or arcade).
        - Streetscape including outdoor patio, integral planters or wing walls that incorporate landscaped areas and/ or places for sitting.”
- Materials
    - Example: “Untreated plastics, unfinished metal, corrugated fiberglass and non-architectural grade plywood shall not be used as primary materials”

Pedestrian Level Design Standards
These standards will create an enhance street frontage that promotes pedestrian activity by regulating:

- Ground Floor Retail & Active Uses
    - Example: “Ground Floor Retail. Ground floor retail uses shall be at the same grade as the adjacent sidewalk”
- Ground Floor Residential
    - Example: “Stoops shall have a minimum five (5)-foot landing depth with room for a table and chairs to provide an opportunity for residents to engage in the social life of the street.”
- Ground Floor Live/ Work
    - Example: “Because live/work units are meant to be public facing, they shall be entered at-grade and are not required to be elevated above sidewalk level.”
- Open Space Design
    - Example: “Podium - Style buildings shall have privately owned public open space of at least 15 feet wide and 500 square feet in size.”

<u>Proposed Planning Commission Actions</u>

The project is presented to the Planning Commission for consideration and action. The following specific actions are required:

1. CEQA: Recommend that the Council determine that the project is consistent with the 2010-

2035 General Plan EIR Addendum adopted on January 31, 2023. This is a quasi-judicial decision, requiring the Commission to determine that the 2023 Addendum addressed the proposed ODS.

2. Zoning Code Amendment: Recommend that the City Council approve the zoning code amendment to incorporate the Citywide Objective Design Standards. This is a legislative action.

The proposed ordinance adopting the ODS is found in Attachment 1 while the body of the Zoning Code Amendment is found in Attachment 2. The Zoning Code Amendment is a new chapter inserted into Title 18 of the Santa Clara City Code.

COMMUNITY OUTREACH

The proposed ODS come from existing standards found in the City of Santa Clara's Specific / Precise Plans (Freedom Circle, Patrick Henry, Lawrence Station, Tasman East, & Downtown) which have been previously vetted by the community and decision makers and will served as a baseline. These ODS will create consistency across the City for developers of Multi-Family and Residential Mixed-Use Projects. Staff will contact developers, community organizations, and interest groups as part of the community outreach for Phase II.

ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW

The adoption of the Citywide Objective Design Standards is an implementation action of the 2023 Housing Element for which the City prepared an Addendum to the 2010-2035 General Plan Environmental Impact Report (EIR). The Addendum indicated that the adoption of the Housing Element, and its implementing actions, would not result in environmental impacts beyond those described in the General Plan Update EIR. At the conclusion of the public hearing on January 26, 2023, the Planning Commission voted to recommend that the City Council approve the Addendum, and on January 31, 2023, the City Council adopted the Addendum. The recommended actions all fall within the scope of the adopted Addendum.

FISCAL IMPACT

Adoption of the Citywide Objective Design Standards would not involve additional resources beyond those indicated at the time of the Zoning Code adoption.

COORDINATION

This item was coordinated with the City Attorney's Office.

PUBLIC CONTACT

A newspaper notice was published in the December 23, 2025, issue of the Santa Clara Weekly describing the proposed adoption of the Citywide Objective Design Standards.

Public contact was made by posting the Planning Commission agenda on the City's official-notice bulletin board outside City Hall Council Chambers. A complete agenda packet is available on the City's website and in the City Clerk's Office at least 72 hours prior to a Regular Meeting and 24 hours prior to a Special Meeting. A hard copy of any agenda report may be requested by contacting the City Clerk's Office at (408) 615-2220, email clerk@santaclaraca.gov <mailto:clerk@santaclaraca.gov> or at the public information desk at any City of Santa Clara public library.

RECOMMENDATION

1. Recommend that the City Council determine the project to be consistent with the January 31, 2023 Addendum for the 2023 Housing Element pursuant to CEQA; and
2. Recommend that the City Council adopt the Citywide Objective Design Standards ordinance.

Prepared by: Alex Tellez, Assistant Planner, Community Development Department
Reviewed by: Alexander Abbe, Assistant City Attorney
Approved by: Afshan Hamid, Director of Community Development

ATTACHMENTS

1. Citywide Objective Design Standards Ordinance
2. Proposed Zoning Code Amendment
3. ODS Previous Draft Document
4. Study Session Staff Report

ORDINANCE NO. _____

AN ORDINANCE OF THE CITY OF SANTA CLARA, CALIFORNIA TO ESTABLISH CITYWIDE OBJECTIVE STANDARDS FOR MULTI-FAMILY AND MIXED-USE RESIDENTIAL PROJECTS BY ADDING A NEW CHAPTER 18.27 TO TITLE 18 ("ZONING") OF "THE CODE OF THE CITY OF SANTA CLARA, CALIFORNIA"

WHEREAS, Senate Bill 35 (2017) allows eligible multifamily and residential mixed-use development proposals meeting certain affordability requirements to utilize a streamlined ministerial approval process, provided that the projects comply with "objective zoning standards, objective subdivision standards, and objective design review standards" as provided in California Government Code Sections 65913.4;

WHEREAS, the Housing Accountability Act, Government Code Section 65589.5, limits a public agency's authority to disapprove certain housing development project that comply with applicable, objective general plan and zoning standards and criteria in effect as of the application completeness date;

WHEREAS, Senate Bill 330 (2019), also known as the "Housing Crisis Act," limits cities' authority to enact subjective design standards, and provides that eligible residential projects are only subject to applicable, objective general plan and zoning standards in effect at the time an application is deemed complete;

WHEREAS, "objective zoning standards, objective subdivision standards, and objective design review standards" is defined as: "standards that involve no personal or subjective judgment by a public official and are uniformly verifiable by reference to an external and uniform benchmark or criterion available and knowable by both the development applicant or proponent and the public official before submittal" under Government Code Section 65913.14(a)(5);

WHEREAS, the City now intends to adopt objective standards that would apply to multifamily and residential mixed-use projects subject to SB 35, SB 330, the Housing Accountability Act, or any other applicable state law;

WHEREAS, as an implementing action of the 2010 – 2035 General Plan, the proposed city-wide objective standards for multi-family and mixed-use residential projects ordinance falls within the scope of the January 31, 2023 Addendum to the 2010 – 2035 General Plan EIR.

NOW THEREFORE, BE IT ORDAINED BY THE CITY OF SANTA CLARA AS FOLLOWS:

SECTION 1: That the Table of Contents of Article 2, "Zones, Allowable Uses, and Development Standards", of Title 18, "Zoning", of "The Code of the City of Santa Clara, California" ("SCCC") is hereby amended to read as follows:

Article 2 – Zones, Allowable Uses, and Development Standards

July 2025

Title 18 – Zoning Code

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Chapter 18.10 – Residential Zones (R1, R2, R3, R4, R5, R6, UC, UV, HD Flex)2-Error! Bookmark not defined.

18.10.010 – Purposes of Residential Zones ---------- 2-**Error! Bookmark not defined.**
18.10.020 – Land Uses and Permit Requirements ---------- 2-**Error! Bookmark not defined.**
18.10.030 – Residential Development Standards ---------- 2-**Error! Bookmark not defined.**
18.10.040 – Other Applicable Regulations ---------- 2-**Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Chapter 18.12 – Commercial Zones (C-C, C-N, C-R) ----- 2-Error! Bookmark not defined.

18.12.010 – Purpose of Commercial Zones ---------- 2-**Error! Bookmark not defined.**
18.12.020 – Commercial Land Uses and Permit Requirements ---------- 2-**Error! Bookmark not defined.**
18.12.030 – Commercial Development Standards ---------- 2-**Error! Bookmark not defined.**
18.12.040 – Other Applicable Regulations ---------- 2-**Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Chapter 18.14 – Mixed Use Zones (MU-NC, MU-CC, MU-RC, MU-MD, MU-VHD)2-Error! Bookmark not defined.

18.14.010 – Purpose of Mixed Use Zones ---------- 2-**Error! Bookmark not defined.**
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18.14.030 – Mixed Use Development Standards ---------- 2-**Error! Bookmark not defined.**
18.14.040 – Other Applicable Regulations ---------- 2-**Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Chapter 18.16 – Office and Industrial Zones (LO-RD, HO-RD, LI, HI)2-Error! Bookmark not defined.

18.16.010 – Purpose of Office and Industrial Zones ---------- 2-**Error! Bookmark not defined.**
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Chapter 18.18 – Special Purpose Zones (OS, PQP) ------ 2-Error! Bookmark not defined.

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Chapter 18.24 – Two-Unit Dwelling Residential Development and Urban Lot Splits ----------2 -Error! Bookmark not defined.

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18.24.030 – Construction of multiple units in single-family zones---------- 2-**Error! Bookmark not defined.**
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18.24.050 – Development Standards within R-1 building envelope -------- 2-**Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Chapter 18.26 – Downtown Form-Based Code---------- 2-Error! Bookmark not defined.

"Chapter 18.27 – Objective Design Standards for City-wide Multi-Family and Residential Mixed-Use Projects

---------- 2-Error! Bookmark not defined.**1**

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SECTION 2: That a new Chapter 18.27, “Objective Design Standards for City-wide Multi-Family and Residential Mixed-Use Projects”, is added to Article 2, “Zones, Allowable Uses, and Development Standards”, of Title 18, “Zoning”, of the SCCC and will read as shown on Attachment 1 (“Proposed Zoning Code Amendment”).

SECTION 3: Savings clause. The changes provided for in this ordinance shall not affect any offense or act committed or done or any penalty or forfeiture incurred, or any right established or accruing before the effective date of this ordinance; nor shall it affect any prosecution, suit or proceeding pending or any judgment rendered prior to the effective date of this ordinance. All fee schedules shall remain in force until superseded by the fee schedules adopted by the City Council.

Section 4: Effective date: This ordinance shall take effect thirty (30) days after its final adoption; however, prior to its final adoption it shall be published in accordance with the requirements of Section 808 and 812 of “The Charter of the City of Santa Clara, California.”

PASSED FOR THE PURPOSE OF PUBLICATION this XX day of February, 2026, by the following vote:

AYES: COUNCILORS:

NOES: COUNCILORS:

ABSENT: COUNCILORS:

ABSTAINED: COUNCILORS:

ATTEST: _____

NORA PIMENTEL, MMC
ASSISTANT CITY CLERK
CITY OF SANTA CLARA

Attachments incorporated by reference:
1. Proposed Zoning Code Amendment

Chapter 18.27 – Objective Design Standards for City-wide Multi-Family and Residential Mixed-Use Projects

Sections:

18.27.010 – Introduction
18.27.020 – Site Design
18.27.030 – Building Design
18.27.040 – Pedestrian Level Design

18.27.010 – Introduction

A. Intent.

1. The Objective Design Standards identify specific design elements that are required for all multi-family residential and residential mixed-use projects. The intent of the Objective Design Standards is to allow flexibility and creativity in design while providing a clear set of standards and expectations for applicable projects. The Objective Design Standards in this document are a compilation of adopted Objective Design Standards from the City's Specific Plans and Focus Areas.

2. Residential multi-family and mixed-use development in the City of Santa Clara is regulated by the General Plan, Zoning Ordinance, Specific Plans, and other applicable regulatory documents. Compliance with these regulations is supported by a design review process established in Santa Clara City Code (SCCC) Chapter 18.120.

3. The City's Objective Design Standards are intended to be consistent with Government Code Section 65913.4 and 66300(a)(7) as they do not "involve personal or subjective judgment by a public official" and they "are uniformly verifiable by reference to an external and uniform benchmark or criterion".

4. The Objective Design Standards will do the following:

a. Provide clear, objective, and measurable standards for multi-family and residential mixed-use projects throughout the city;

b. Streamline project review of housing, in accordance with State law;

c. Ensure buildings are appropriate to their surroundings and environment;

d. Promote thoughtful, context-sensitive site design;

e. Maintain and enhance Santa Clara's built environment through quality architectural design; and

f. Promote a pedestrian scale urban environment that enriches the quality of life of its citizens.

B. Applicability.

1. The Objective Design Standards are applicable to new multi-family development and residential mixed-use development, and additions to existing multi-family or residential mixed-use development.

2. For modifications to existing residential mixed-use developments where no additional square footage is proposed, these standards and guidelines shall only apply to the use being modified (e.g., a ground floor retail storefront remodel will not trigger any architectural changes to residential units).

3. These standards are additive to the zoning development standards specified in SCCC Chapter 18.10 (Residential Zones) and SCCC Chapter 18.14 (Mixed-Use Zones). Development pursuant to any California state law that references objective design standards, including but not limited to Government Code Section 65589.5 (Housing Accountability Act) and Section 65913.4 must abide by these standards.

4. These objective design standards are intended to supplement, and not repeal, any existing objective standards applicable to a precise plan or specific plan area. In the event of any conflict between standards, the precise/specific plan standards shall control.

5. The specific applicability of these objective design standards will be determined by the multi-family or residential mixed-use product type (such as townhouses, podium/wrap-style buildings) that is proposed. The following table breaks down the applicability of the standards.

Table 2-19
Objective Design Standards Applicability

Design Standard	Product Type	
	Townhouse	Podium/Wrap-Style
Site Design		
Site Access (Parking)	--	•
Site Access (Loading Zone)	--	•
Site Access (Driveways)	--	•
Site Organization (Public Realm Extension)	•	•
Site Access (Corner Building Orientation)	--	•
Building Design		
Massing (Building Length)	--	•
Massing (Massing Increment Dimensional Standards).	•	•
Massing (Massing Increment Design)	•	•
Massing (Massing Increments as Distinct Buildings)	--	•
Massing (Distinct Buildings)	--	•
Façade Design (Facade Composition)	--	•
Façade Design (Base, Middle and Top)	•	•
Façade Design (Façade Fenestration)	•	•
Façade Design (Parking Structure Façade Standards)	--	•
Access & Entrance Design (Building Orientation)	•	•
Access & Entrance Design (Primary Entrances)	•	•
Access & Entrance Design (Frequency of Entries)	--	•
Access & Entrance Design (Vehicular Access)	--	•
Materials (Primary Materials)	•	•

Pedestrian Level Design		
Ground Floor Treatment - Retail (Facade Transparency and Ground Floor Retail)	--	•
Ground Floor Treatment - Residential(Ground Floor Access)	--	•
Ground Floor Treatment - Residential (Stoops)	--	•
Ground Floor Treatment – Live/Work (Entrances)	--	•
Open Space Design (Podium Style Buildings)	--	•
Open Space Design (Pathways)	--	•
Open Space Design (Special Paving)	•	•
Open Space Design (Public Art)	--	•
Open Space Design (Refuse & Recycling Receptacles)	•	•
Alley & Service Access (Lighting)	--	•
Alley & Service Access (Alleys)	•	•

C. Glossary. The definitions below are only applicable within these Objective Design Standards, and do not apply elsewhere in the Santa Clara City Code.

1. **Podium-Style Building.** A development project that involves a horizontal separation between an upper building and a lower, or podium, building. The lower building typically is constructed out of concrete; the upper building (some three to five stories tall) is made of wood.

2. **Primary Materials.** Any wall finish material or color that occupies more than 50 percent of the façade.

3. **Product Type**. The proposed multi-family or residential mixed-use building type, including townhouses, podium style buildings, and wrap-style buildings.

4. **Special Paving.** A distinct impermeable material such as natural stone paver, unit concrete pavers, brick, textured and colored concrete.

5. **Townhouses.** Attached side-by-side or stacked units that generally have front doors on one side and garages on the back side. Most townhouses have two-car garages, either two spaces wide or two tandem spaces (end to end). The front doors look onto a public street, private drive, or common open space, while the garages are usually lined up along an alley with garage doors on both sides. This development type typically includes tuck-under garage parking and additional surface parking spaces for visitors.

6. **Wrap-Style Building.** A development project that typically consists of a central above-grade concrete parking structure surrounded or “wrapped” by 4 – 7 stories of wood or steel construction.

D. Organization of Objective Design Standards. The Objective Design Standards are organized into three design components: site design, building design, and pedestrian level design.

1. **Site Design.** These standards apply to the site layout to foster multimodal connectivity and create cohesive neighborhoods.

2. **Building Design.** These standards apply to the architectural features such as massing, fenestration, and articulation.

3. **Pedestrian Level Design.** These standards apply to the ground floor frontage to promote pedestrian activity and human-scale development.

18.27.020 – Site Design

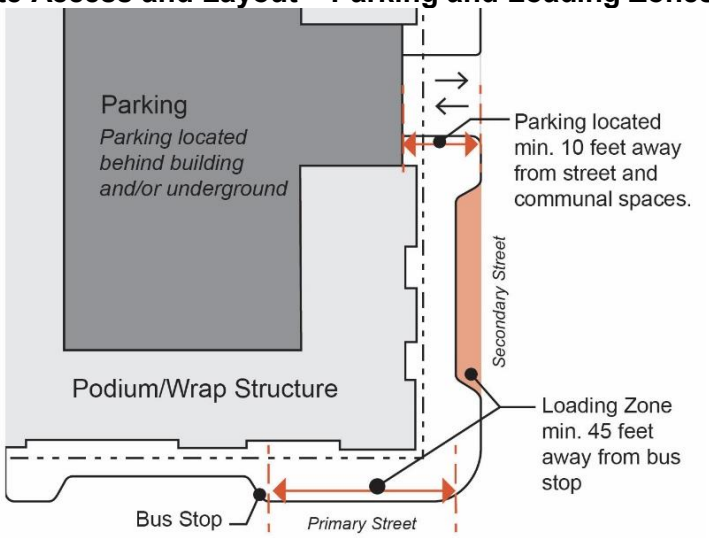
A. Purpose and Goals. This section provides site design standards to create more pedestrian-friendly functional communities through expanded pedestrian access, convenient multi-modal connections, and human-scaled block sizes.

B. Site Access and Layout.

1. Parking. Parking shall be located at least 10 feet away from streets and other public and communal spaces so that it is not visible. Parking shall be located behind buildings, underground, or at the interior of the block except where there is ground floor retail.

2. Loading Zones. Locate loading zones and rideshare pick-up / drop-off areas at least 45 feet away from bus stops.

Figure 2-5
Site Access and Layout – Parking and Loading Zones



3. Driveways and Access. Driveway access shall be designed to clearly prioritize pedestrians, according to the following requirements:

a. Driveway crossings shall maintain the elevation of the sidewalk.

Figure 2-6
Site Access and Layout – Driveway Crossing

b. Driveway aprons shall not extend into the pedestrian clear walkway where cross slopes are limited to a maximum of two percent steeper driveway slopes are permitted in the furnishing and edge zones of the streets.

c. The dimensions and design of parking entry and exit points shall be coordinated with the requirements for stormwater treatment areas and street trees.

d. Greenways or open spaces shall have a maximum of one curb cut per frontage.

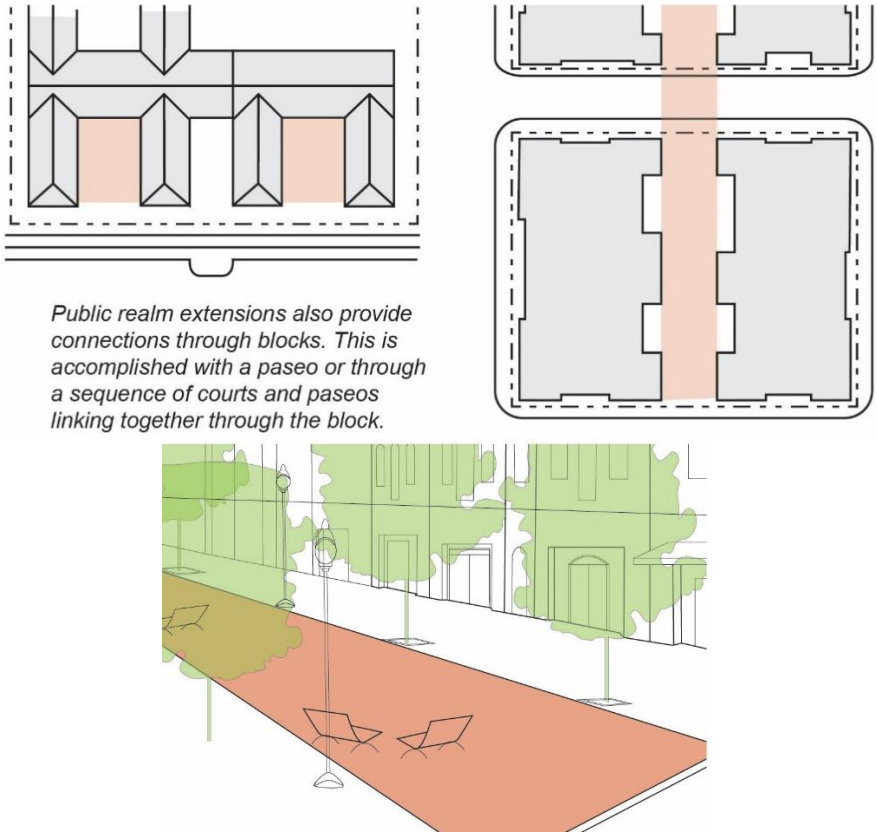
C. Site Organization, Planning, and Design.

1. Public Realm Extensions. While most buildings and ground-floor units will front onto and take their primary access from the adjacent Public Realm right-of-way, some buildings and ground-floor units may take this primary access from shared private spaces and connections that function as extensions of the public realm into a site. Such spaces comprise a "Semi-Public Realm" and serve as transitions between fully public and fully private spaces. Public Realm Extensions are subject to the following standards:

a. **Connectivity.** Public realm extensions also provide connections through blocks. This is accomplished with a paseo or through a sequence of courts and paseos linking together through the block. Where non-vehicular paths are used, full and unrestricted public access shall be provided throughout the route.

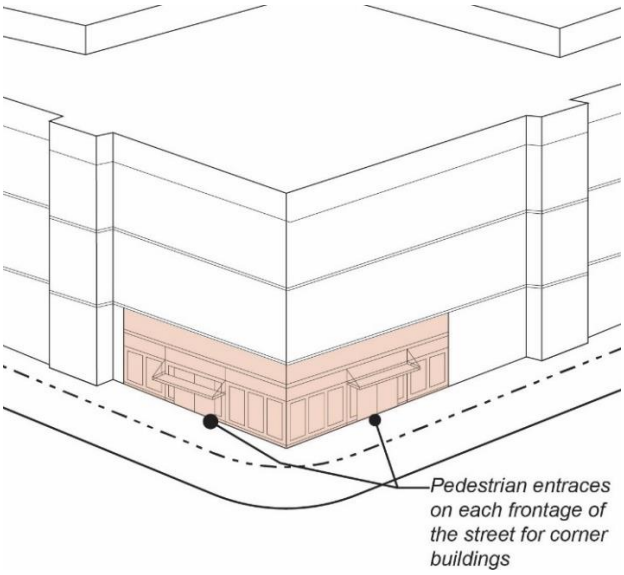
b. **Design.** No wall or fence enclosing a public realm extension may exceed three (3) feet in height.

Figure 2-7
Public Realm Extensions



2. **Corner Building Orientation**. Ensure that corner buildings actively address both streets by having pedestrian entrances on each frontage.

Figure 2-8
Corner Building Orientation



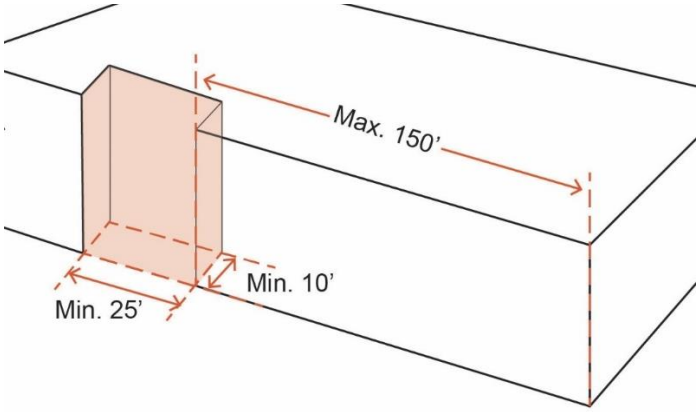
18.27.030 – Building Design

A. **Purpose and Goals.** This section provides architectural design standards to create functional and welcoming human-scaled buildings that blend well with their surroundings and support active streets and public spaces.

B. **Massing.**

1. **Building Length.** To create a more interesting and walkable public realm, individual buildings shall be no longer than 150 feet in length, except as follows. For those buildings that are longer than 150 feet in length, a building notch shall be provided on the podium starting at the street level and extending to the roof, for the entire height of the façade, to break up the massing. The building notch shall have a minimum dimension of 25 feet in width and 10 feet in depth.

Figure 2-9
Massing – Building Length



2. Massing Increment Dimensional Standards.

Table 2-20
Massing Increment Dimensional Standards

Objective Design Standard		Dimensions
A	Massing Increment (max.)	150 feet
B	Façade Height Difference between Massing Increments (min.)	10% of Lesser Façade Height
C	Building Base Height Difference between Massing Increments	3 feet

3. Distinct Buildings Using Massing Increment Design. A Podium- Style Building shall appear as distinct buildings when it occupies more than 200 linear feet of street frontage. At a minimum, it shall appear as three (3) distinct buildings using massing increment design:

a. There shall be differences in facade materials and color between Distinct Buildings.

b. There shall be differences in the type and composition of facade openings and architectural elements between distinct buildings.

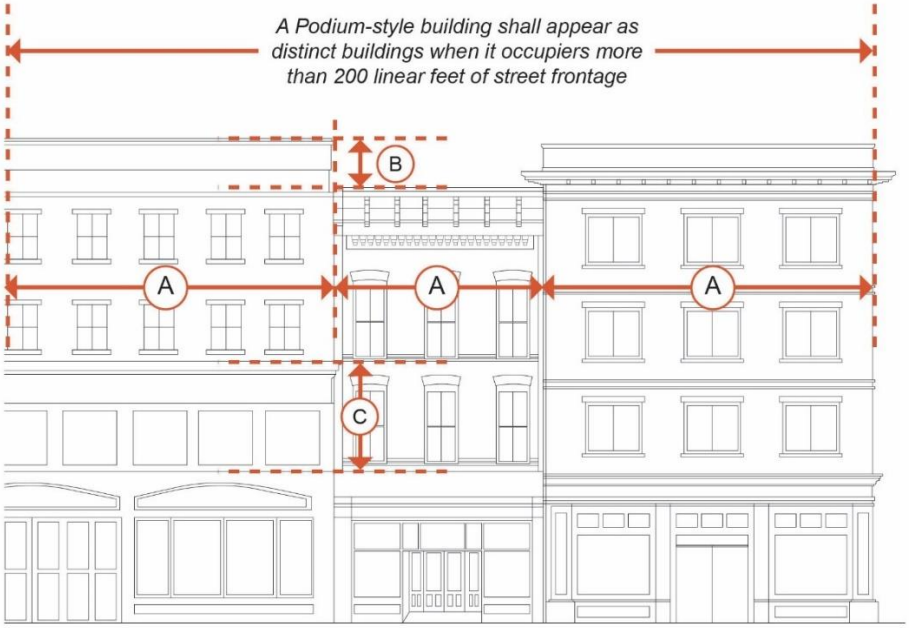
c. The building base heights of adjacent Distinct Buildings shall differ by an entire floor.

d. A Massing Increment Design shall only be repeated up to a maximum of three (3) times on the same project elevation.

(1) Repeated Massing Increments shall not be immediately adjacent to each other.

(2) Forecourts may provide separation between repeated Massing Increment Designs.

Figure 2-10
Massing Increment Design and Dimensional Standards



C. Façade Design.

1. Façade Composition. Facade elements shall be organized by a grid. Patterns of openings within each individual facade or Building Increment shall be organized into a grid per the standards below.

a. **Horizontal Alignment of Elements.** Rooflines, openings, and materials within each facade or facade module must align horizontally and be consistent in style across the entire width.

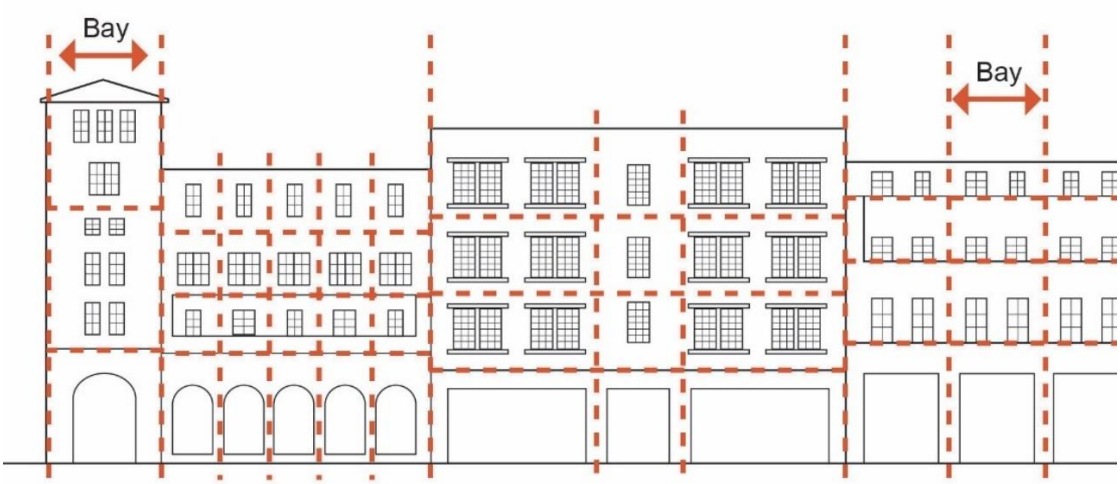
b. **Vertical Alignment of Openings into Bays.** The entirety of a building's façade or massing increments shall be clearly divided into vertical bays, subject to the following:

(1) Façade bays shall extend from the ground to the top of the façade and are defined by vertical structure (solid portions of wall, piers, etc.) which extends from the ground to the top of the façade.

(2) Each bay must be stacked within bays as illustrated in the figure below. Openings shall be arranged symmetrically within bays.

(3) Each bay shall be at minimum 15 feet wide.

Figure 2-11
Façade Composition



Facade elements shall be organized by a grid. Rooflines, openings, and other materials must align horizontally. Facade elements or massing increments shall be divided into vertical bays.

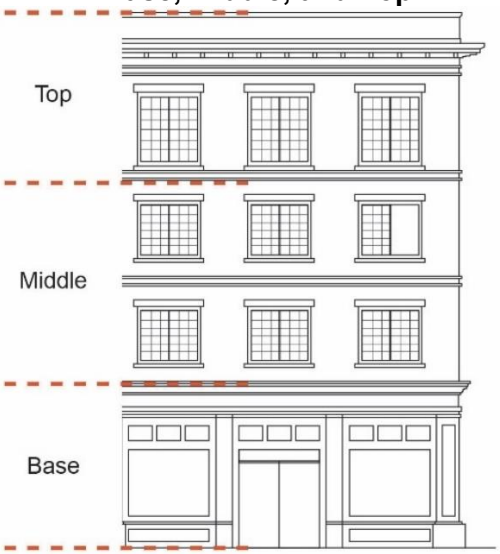
2. Base, Middle and Top. Buildings shall have a Base, Middle, and Top.

a. The Building's Base floor shall be differentiated from the rest of the façade whether through a change in material, change in type of opening, belt course, or a combination of these elements.

b. The Building's Middle floor(s) features shall be repetitive, with only up to three variations in façade elements between each floor

c. The Building's Top floor shall feature some form of capping element, such as a cornice, enhanced ornamentation, or a decorative parapet. In larger buildings, the upper most floor shall be visually incorporated into the building's top design.

Figure 2-12
Base, Middle, and Top



3. Facade Fenestration.

a. **Fenestration Area.** Façade shall be designed with fenestration – openings on the façade, including windows and doors – in the amounts listed in subparagraph b below.

b. Fenestration amount is calculated as a percentage of openings – including all windows and doors on the façade – to an area of façade. Each portion of the façade grid must have a fenestration percentage which falls within the range identified by Table 2-21.

Table 2-21
Fenestration Areas

Fenestration Areas	Dimensions
Base of Building	40% - 95%
Middle & Top of Building	25% - 70%

Figure 2-13
Fenestration Area

c. **General to Base, Middle, and Top.** Window jams shall be set in a minimum of four (4) inches from the main façade plane. Trim/ moldings on the façade do not count toward this recess depth.

d. **Specific to the Top.** Upper-floor wall openings shall be square or taller than they are wide. Individual vertically proportioned windows can be grouped side by side to form a horizontal ensemble of windows.

4. Parking Structure Façade Standards.

a. **Façade Design.** Parking Structure Facades shall be designed to fit into the urban context in one of the two following ways:

(1) The Façades meet the Massing Standard of this document.

(2) Facades designed as art walls, murals, or screens that incorporate decorative, graphic, or sculptural elements. Such facades are subject to recommendations from the Cultural Arts Commission and the Historical & Landmarks Commission, followed by Community Development Director or their designee approval, based on the following Required Finding:

a. Façade design is using durable, element-resistant, materials and techniques.

b. **Future-Proof Parking.** Parking Garages shall be designed to accommodate conversions to other uses and shall have at least one of the following features:

(1) Level floor, apart from necessary ramps.

(2) Floors with 10 feet minimum clear height from floor to ceiling.

(3) Cut-outs for planned shafts in decks and other structural members to accommodate future utilities (heating, cooling, venting, etc.).

D. Access and Entrance Design.

1. Building Orientation. Buildings shall be oriented to ensure the primary facades and entrance areas of all buildings face the street, open spaces, or other pedestrian-oriented circulation areas.

Figure 2-14
Building Orientation for Podium/Wrap-Style Buildings – Entrance Areas

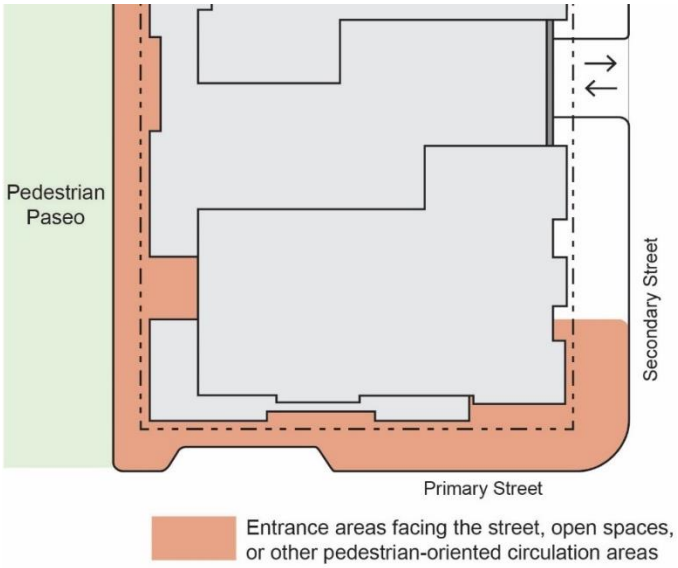
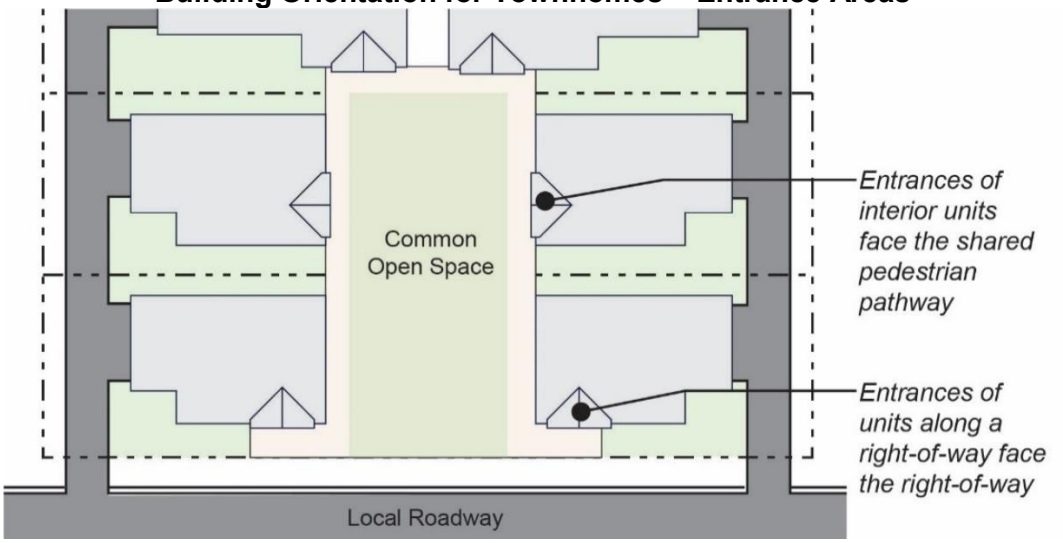


Figure 2-15
Building Orientation for Townhomes – Entrance Areas



2. **Primary Entrances**. Primary entrances shall feature at least two of the following:

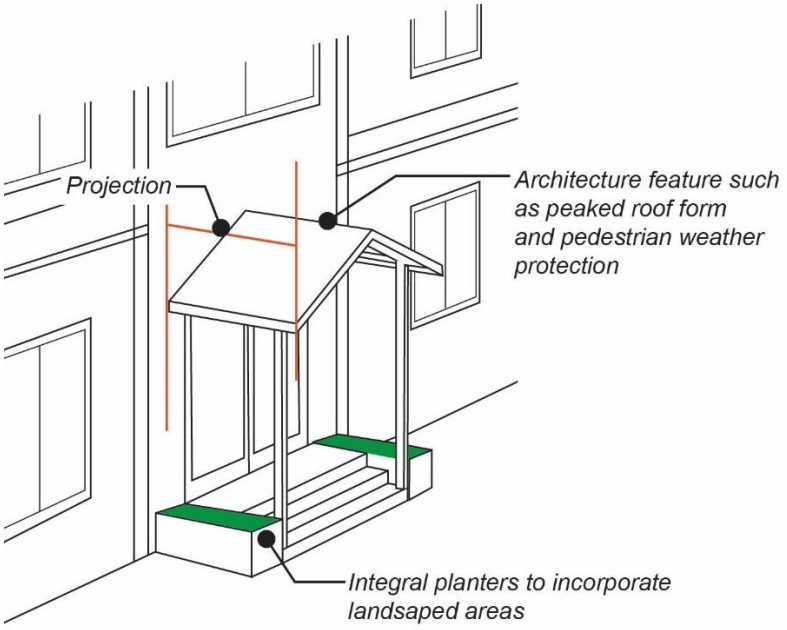
a. Architectural features, such as a prominent tower feature or a peaked roof form, and/or a variation in building color/materials.

b. Recess or projection.

c. Pedestrian weather protection (i.e. canopy, overhand, or arcade).

d. Streetscape including outdoor patio, integral planters, or wing walls that incorporate landscaped areas and/or places for sitting.

Figure 2-16
Primary Entrances



3. **Frequency of Entries (Podium/Wrap-Style).** The quantity of building entrances on a street has a drastic effect on the perceived liveliness of a street. The frequency of entrances is regulated by Table 2-22.

Table 2-22
Frequency of Entries (Podium/Wrap-Style)

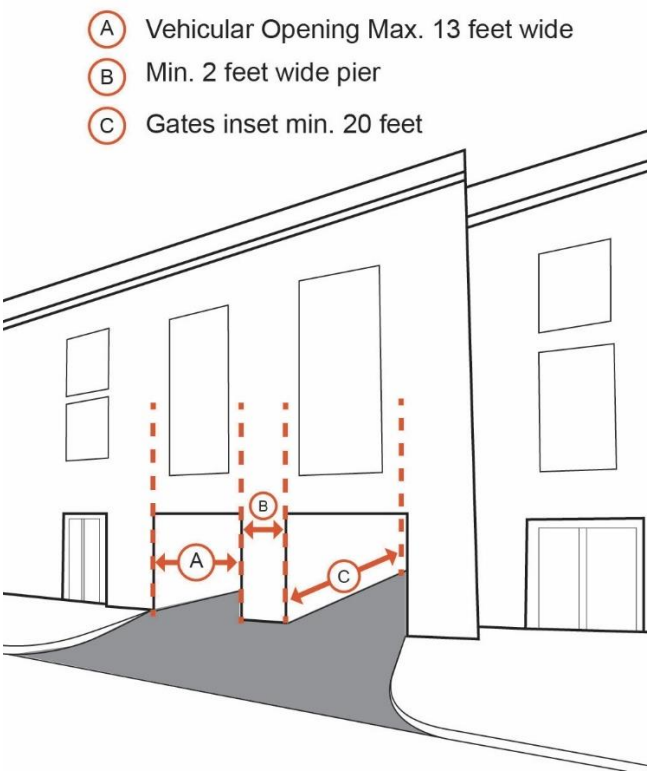
Façade Area	Residential	Mixed-Use
Frequency of Building Entries (max. distance between entries)	100 feet	75 feet

4. **Vehicular Access.**

   a. Vehicular access openings hall be no more than 13 feet wide. Where adjacent openings are necessary to provide entries or exits, they shall be separated by a pier (a portion of wall) of at least two (2) feet in width.

   b. Gates which open to allow cars to enter (excluding security doors that are shut when the garage is not accessible) shall be inset from the façade by a minimum of 20 feet, to allow cars to await entry without blocking the sidewalk.

Figure 2-17
Vehicular Access Design



5. Materials.

a. **Primary Materials.** Untreated plastics, unfinished metal, corrugated fiberglass and non-architectural grade plywood shall not be used as primary materials.

18.27.040 – Pedestrian Level Design

A. Purpose. This section provides standards to enhance the character of new development's street frontage to promote pedestrian activity.

B. Ground Floor Retail and Active Uses.

1. Ground Floor Retail. Ground floor retail uses shall be at the same grade as the adjacent sidewalk.

2. Façade Transparency. Facades of all commercial structures shall incorporate transparent features (clear glass on windows and doors) over a minimum percentage of the surface area at ground-level.

a. Retail uses: a minimum of 75% shall be transparent.

b. Other uses: a minimum of 35% shall be transparent.

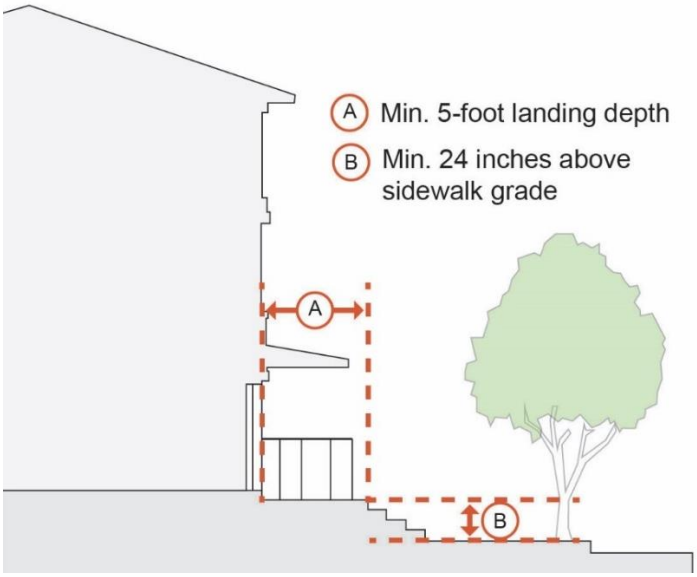
3. Ground Floor Residential.

a. **Ground Floor Access.** Where residential units are located at the ground floor, at least 50% of units on each frontage must be individually accessed from the sidewalk via stoops, side yards or other means.

b. **Stoops.** Stoops shall have a minimum five (5)-foot landing depth with room for a table and chairs to provide an opportunity for residents to engage in the social life of the street.

c. Stoops that face public rights of way shall be set at least 24 inches above sidewalk grade.

Figure 2-18
Ground Floor Residential – Stoop Design



C. Ground Floor Live/Work.

1. Entrances. Because live/work units are meant to be public facing, they shall be entered at-grade and are not required to be elevated above sidewalk level.

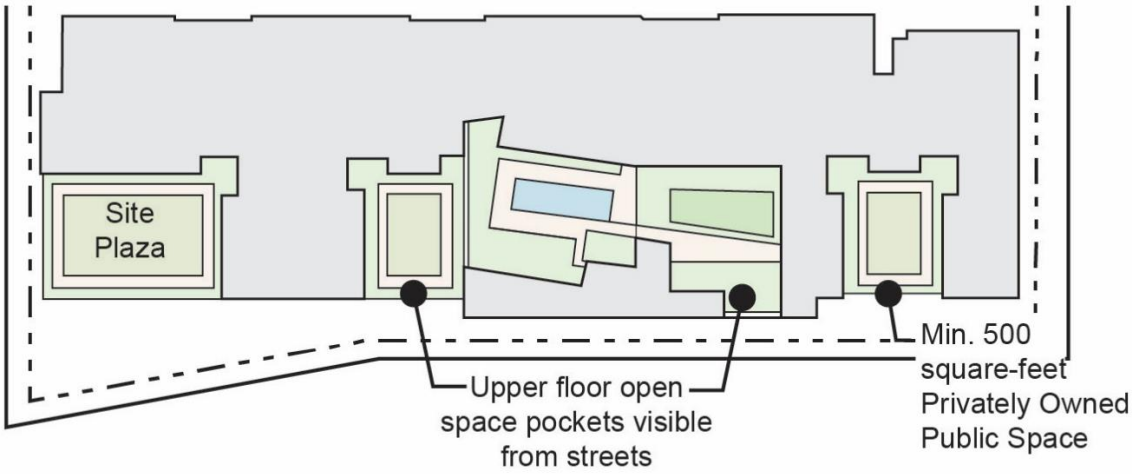
D. Open Space Design.

1. Podium – Style Building.

a. Podium – Style buildings shall have outdoor spaces, such as on-site plazas, interior courtyards, patios, terraces and gardens.

b. Podium – Style buildings shall have privately owned public open space of at least 15 feet wide and 500 square feet in size.

Figure 2-19
Open Space Design – Podium – Style Buildings



2. Pathways. Pedestrian paths through the site shall be at least five (5) feet wide.

3. **Special Paving.** Special Paving shall be used for the following areas:

   a. Pedestrian crossing (mid-block, raised pedestrian crossings/speed tables, etc.).

4. **Public Art.** Outdoor plazas and semi-public courtyards shall have public art elements such as sculptures, fountains, and art pieces.

5. **Refuse & Recycling Receptacles.** Provide a maximum of one receptacle every 200 feet along streets if proposing more than 10 units. Additional receptacles should be provided only if a private sponsor provides continued maintenance.

   a. Provide one receptacle at each corner of intersections.

E. Alleys and Service Access.

1. **Lighting.** Provide lighting in alleyways for safety.

CITY OF SANTA CLARA

Draft Objective Design Standards for City-wide Multi-Family and Residential Mixed-Use Projects

NOVEMBER 2025

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1 Introduction

I. Intent

The Objective Design Standards identify specific design elements that are required for all multi-family residential and residential mixed-use projects. The intent of the Objective Design Standards is to allow flexibility and creativity in design while providing a clear set of standards and expectations for applicable projects. The Objective Design Standards in this document are a compilation of adopted Objective Design Standards from the City's Specific Plans and Focus Areas.

Residential multi-family and mixed-use development in the City of Santa Clara is regulated by the General Plan, Zoning Ordinance, Specific Plans, and other applicable regulatory documents. Compliance with these regulations is supported by a discretionary design review process established in Santa Clara City Code (SCCC) Chapter 18.120.

The City's Objective Design Standards are intended to be consistent with Government Code Section 65913.4 and 66300(a)(7) as they do not "involve personal or subjective judgment by a public official" and they "are uniformly verifiable by reference to an external and uniform benchmark or criterion".

The Objective Design Standards will do the following:

- Provide clear, objective, and measurable standards for multi-family and residential mixed-use projects throughout the city;
- Streamline project review of housing, in accordance with State law;
- Ensure buildings are appropriate to their surroundings and environment;
- Promote thoughtful, context-sensitive site design;
- Maintain and enhance Santa Clara's built environment through quality architectural design; and
- Promote a pedestrian scale urban environment that enriches the quality of life of its citizens.

II. Applicability

A. The Objective Design Standards are applicable to new multi-family development and residential mixed-use development, and additions to existing multi-family or residential mixed-use development.

B. For modifications to existing residential mixed-use developments where no additional square footage is proposed, these standards and guidelines shall only apply to the use being modified (e.g., a ground floor retail storefront remodel will not trigger any architectural changes to residential units).

C. These standards are additive to the zoning development standards specified in SCCC Chapter 18.10 (Residential Zones) and SCCC Chapter 18.14 (Mixed-Use Zones). Development pursuant to any California state law that references objective design standards, including but not limited to Government Code Section 65589.5 (Housing Accountability Act) and Section 65913.4 must abide by these standards.

D. The objective design standards shall not conflict with the standards applicable to a specific plan area but if there is conflict, the specific plan standards shall apply

E. The specific applicability of these objective design standards will be determined by the multi-family or residential mixed-use product type (such as townhouses, podium/wrap-style buildings) that is proposed. The following table breaks down the applicability of the standards

Table 1: Objective Design Standard Applicability

Design Standard	Product Type	
	Townhouse	Podium/Wrap-Style
Site Design		
Site Access (Parking)	--	•
Site Access (Loading Zone)	--	•
Site Access (Driveways)	--	•
Site Organization (Public Realm Extension)	•	•
Site Access (Corner Building Orientation)	--	•
Building Design		
Massing (Building Length)	--	•
Massing (Massing Increment Dimensional Standards).	•	•
Massing (Massing Increment Design)	•	•
Massing (Massing Increments as Distinct Buildings)	--	•
Massing (Distinct Buildings)	--	•
Façade Design (Facade Composition)	--	•
Façade Design (Base, Middle and Top)	•	•
Façade Design (Façade Fenestration)	•	•
Façade Design (Parking Structure Façade Standards)	--	•
Access & Entrance Design (Building Orientation)	•	•
Access & Entrance Design (Primary Entrances)	•	•
Access & Entrance Design (Frequency of Entries)	--	•
Access & Entrance Design (Vehicular Access)	--	•
Materials (Primary Materials)	•	•
Pedestrian Level Design		
Ground Floor Treatment - Retail (Facade Transparency and Ground Floor Retail)	--	•
Ground Floor Treatment - Residential(Ground Floor Access)	--	•
Ground Floor Treatment - Residential (Stoops)	--	•
Ground Floor Treatment – Live/ Work (Entrances)	--	•
Open Space Design (Podium Style Buildings)	--	•
Open Space Design (Pathways)	--	•
Open Space Design (Special Paving)	•	•
Open Space Design (Public Art)	--	•
Open Space Design (Refuse & Recycling Receptacles)	•	•
Alley & Service Access (Lighting)	--	•
Alley & Service Access (Alleys)	•	•

Introduction

Glossary

Note: The definitions below are only applicable to the Objective Design Standards on this section of the Santa Clara City Code.

Podium-Style Building: A development project that involves a horizontal separation between an upper building and a lower, or podium, building. The lower building typically is constructed out of concrete; the upper building (some three to five stories tall) is made of wood.

Primary Materials: Any wall finish material or color that occupies more than 50 percent of the façade.

Product Type: The proposed residential building type like detached single family residences, townhomes, podium style buildings, & etc.

Special Paving: A distinct impermeable material such as natural stone paver, unit concrete pavers, brick, textured and colored concrete.

Townhouses: Attached side-by-side or stacked units that generally have front doors on one side and garages on the back side. Most townhouses have two-car garages, either two spaces wide or two tandem spaces (end to end). The front doors look onto a public street, private drive, or common open space, while the garages are usually lined up along an alley with garage doors on both sides. This development type typically includes tuck-under garage parking and additional surface parking spaces for visitors.

Wrap-Style Building: A development project that typically consists of a central above-grade concrete parking structure surrounded or "wrapped" by 4 – 7 stories of wood or steel construction.

Organization of Objective Design Standards

The Objective Design Standards are organized into three design components: site design, building design, and pedestrian level design.

Site Design: These standards apply to the site layout to foster multimodal connectivity and create cohesive neighborhoods.

Building Design: These standards apply to the architectural features such as massing, fenestration, and articulation.

Pedestrian Level Design: These standards apply to the ground floor frontage to promote pedestrian activity and human-scale development.

Note: Graphic reference for this page to visually show each chapter of these standards.

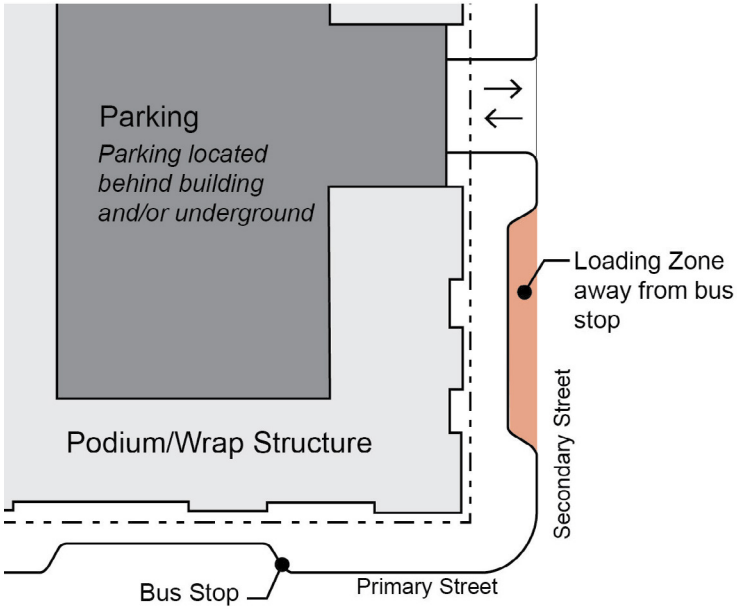
2 Site Design

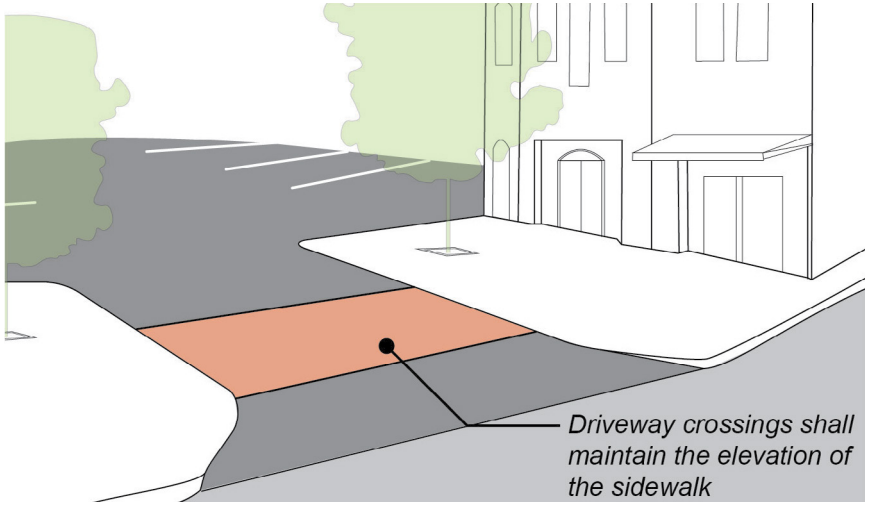
I. Purpose and Goals

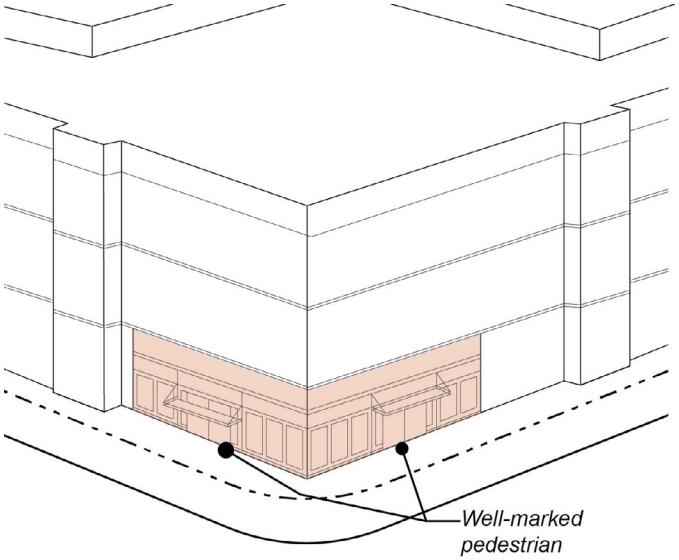
This section provides site design standards to create more pedestrian-friendly functional communities through expanded pedestrian access, convenient multi-modal connections, and human-scaled block sizes.

II. Site Access and Layout

1. Parking. Parking shall be located away from streets and other public and communal spaces. Parking shall be located behind buildings, underground, or at the interior of the block except where there is ground floor retail (Lawrence Station)
2. Loading Zones. Locate loading zones and rideshare pick-up / drop-off areas away from bus stops. (FC Focus Area).
3. Driveways and Access. Driveway access shall be designed to clearly prioritize pedestrians, according to the following requirements:
   a. Driveway crossings shall maintain the elevation of the sidewalk;
   b. Driveway aprons shall not extend into the pedestrian clear walkway where cross slopes are limited to a maximum of two percent; steeper driveway slopes are permitted in the furnishing and edge zones of the streets;
   c. The dimensions and design of parking entry and exit points shall be coordinated with the requirements for stormwater treatment areas and street trees;
   d. Curb cuts shall be minimized on greenways or open spaces, with at most only one maximum allowable curb cut (Tasman East)

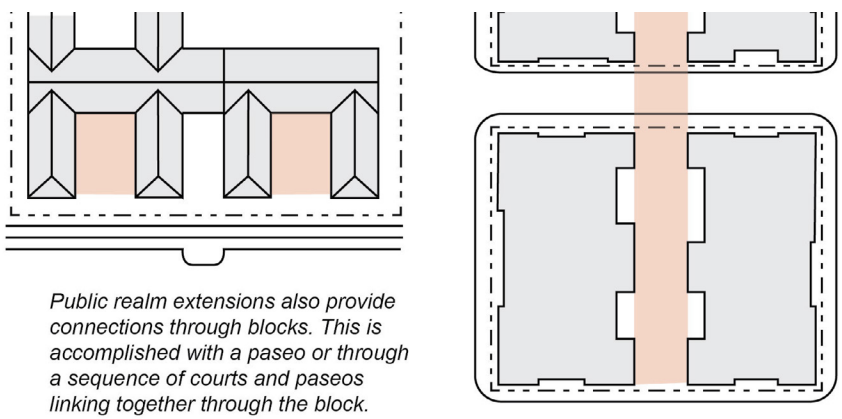




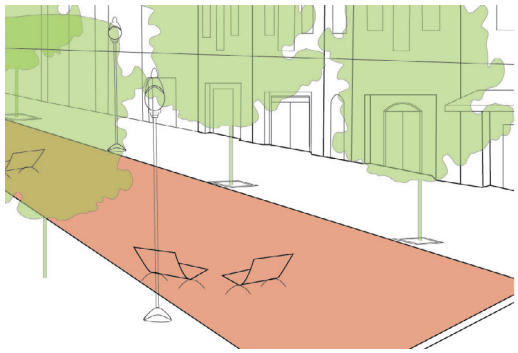


III. Site Organization, Planning, and Design

1. Public Realm Extensions. While most buildings and ground-floor units will front onto and take their primary access from the adjacent Public Realm right-of-way, some buildings and ground-floor units may take this primary access from shared private spaces and connections that function as extensions of the public realm into a site. Such spaces comprise a “Semi-Public Realm” and serve as transitions between fully public and fully private spaces. Public Realm Extensions are subject to the following standards: (Downtown Form Based-Code)
   a. Connectivity. Public realm extensions also provide connections through blocks. This is accomplished with a paseo or through a sequence of courts and paseos linking together through the block. Where non-vehicular paths are used, full and unrestricted public access shall be provided throughout the route.
   b. Design. No wall or fence enclosing a public realm extension may exceed three (3) feet in height.
2. Corner Building Orientation: Ensure that corner buildings actively address both streets with well-marked and attractively designed pedestrian entrances (Patrick Henry Drive)



Public realm extensions also provide connections through blocks. This is accomplished with a paseo or through a sequence of courts and paseos linking together through the block.



3 Building Design

I. Purpose and Goals

This section provides architectural design standards to create functional and welcoming human-scaled buildings that blend well with their surroundings and support active streets and public spaces.

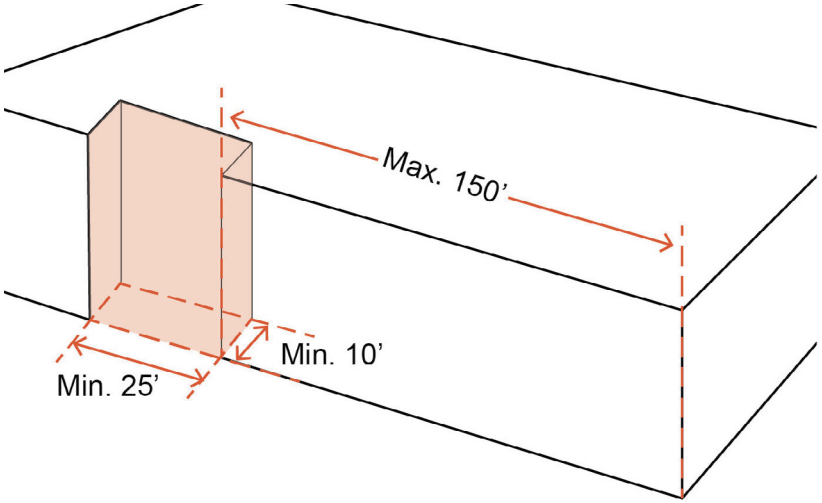
II. Massing

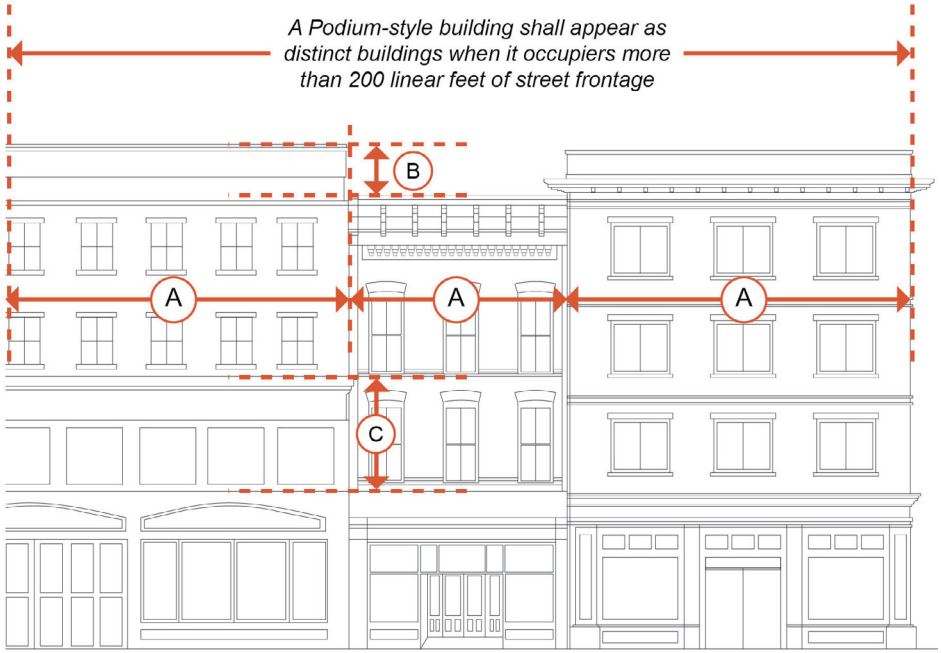
1. Building Length. To create a more interesting and walkable public realm, individual buildings shall be no longer than 150 feet in length. For those buildings that are longer than 150 feet in length, a building notch shall be provided on the podium starting at the street level, for the entire height of the façade, to break up the massing. The building notch shall have a minimum dimension of 25 feet in width and 10 feet in depth (Tasman East)

2. Massing Increment Dimensional Standards

Table 2: Massing Increment Dimensional Standards

Objective Design Standard		Dimensions
A	Massing increment (max.)	150 feet
B	Facade Height Difference between Massing Increments (min.)	10% of Lesser Facade Height
C	Building Base Height Difference between Massing Increments	3 feet

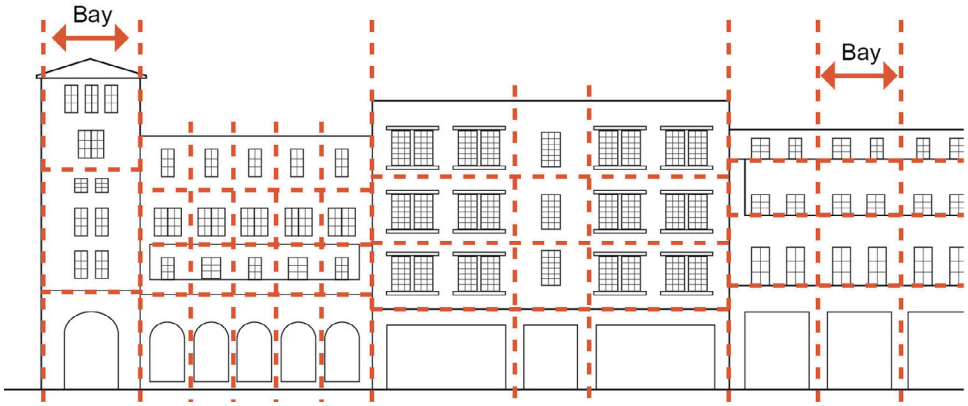




3. Distinct Buildings Using Massing Increment Design. A Podium-Style Building shall appear as distinct buildings when it occupies more than 200 linear feet of street frontage. At a minimum, it shall appear as three (3) distinct building using massing increments design: (Downtown Form-Based Code)
   a. There shall be a clearly noticeable difference in facade materials and color between Distinct Buildings
   b. There shall be a clearly noticeable difference in the type and composition of facade openings and architectural elements between distinct buildings.
   c. The building base heights of adjacent Distinct Buildings shall differ by an entire floor.
   d. A Massing Increment Design shall only be repeated up to a maximum of three (3) times on the same project elevation.
      i. Repeated Massing Increments shall not be immediately adjacent to each other.
      ii. Forecourts may provide separation between repeated Massing Increment Designs

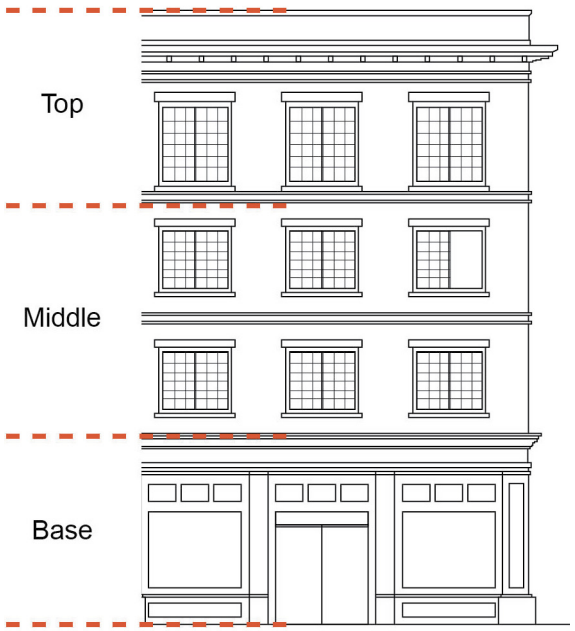
III. Facade Design

1. Facade Composition. Facade elements shall be organized by a grid. Patterns of openings within each individual facade or Building Increment shall be organized into a grid per the standards below. (Downtown Form Based Code)
   a. Horizontal alignment of elements. Rooflines, openings, and materials within each facade or facade module must align horizontally and be consistent in style across the entire width.
   b. Vertical alignment of openings into bays. The entirety of a building's façade or massing increments shall be clearly divided into vertical bays, subject to the following:
      i. Façade bays shall extend from the ground to the top of the façade and are defined by vertical structure (solid portions of wall, piers, etc.) which extends from the ground to the top of the façade.
      ii. Each bay must be stacked within bays as illustrated in the figure below. Openings shall be arranged symmetrically within bays.
      iii. Each bay shall be at minimum 15 feet wide.



Facade elements shall be organized by a grid. Rooflines, openings, and other materials must align horizontally. Facade elements or massing increments shall be divided into vertical bays.

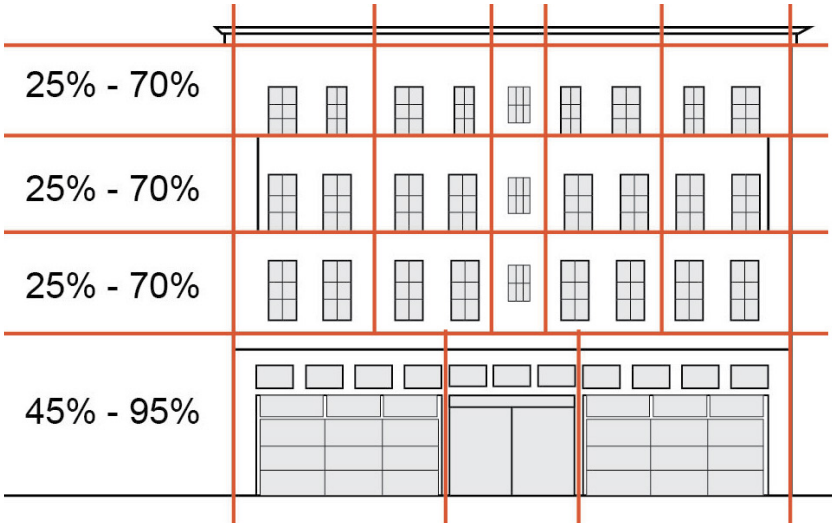
2. Base, Middle and Top. Buildings shall have a Base, Middle, and Top. (Downtown Form Based Code)
   a. The Building's Base shall be differentiated from the rest of the façade whether through a change in material, change in type of opening, belt course, or a combination of these elements.
   b. The Building's Middle features floors shall be generally repetitive, with only minor variations between each floor.
   c. The Building's Top shall feature some form of capping element, such as a cornice, enhanced ornamentation, or a decorative parapet. In larger buildings, the upper most floor shall be visually incorporated into the building's top design.



3. Facade Fenestration.
   a. Fenestration Area. Façade shall be designed with fenestration – openings on the façade, including windows and doors – the amount identified by:

Table 3: Fenestration Areas

Facade Area	Dimensions
Base of Building	40% - 95%
Middle & Top of Building	25% - 70%



   b. Fenestration amount is calculated as a percentage of openings – including all windows and doors on the façade – to an area of façade. Each portion of the façade grid must have a fenestration percentage which falls within the range identified by Table 3.

c. General to Base, Middle, and Top. Window jams shall be set in a minimum of four (4) inches from the main façade plane. Trim/ moldings on the façade do not count toward this recess depth.

d. Specific to the Top. Upper-floor wall openings shall be square or taller than they are wide. Individual vertically proportioned windows can be grouped side by side to form a horizontal ensemble of windows

4. Parking Structure Façade Standards. (Downtown Form Base Code)

a. Façade Design. Parking Structure Facades shall be designed to fit into the urban context in one of the two following ways:

i. The Façades meet the Massing Standard of this document.

ii. Facades designed as art walls, murals, or screens that incorporate decorative, graphic, or sculptural elements. Such facades are subject to recommendations from the Cultural Arts Commission and the Historical & Landmarks Commission, followed by Community Development Director or their designee approval, based on the following Required Finding:

- Façade design is unique and iconic, using durable, element-resistant, materials and techniques

b. Future-Proof Parking. Parking Garages shall be designed to accommodate conversions to other uses and shall have at least one of the following features:

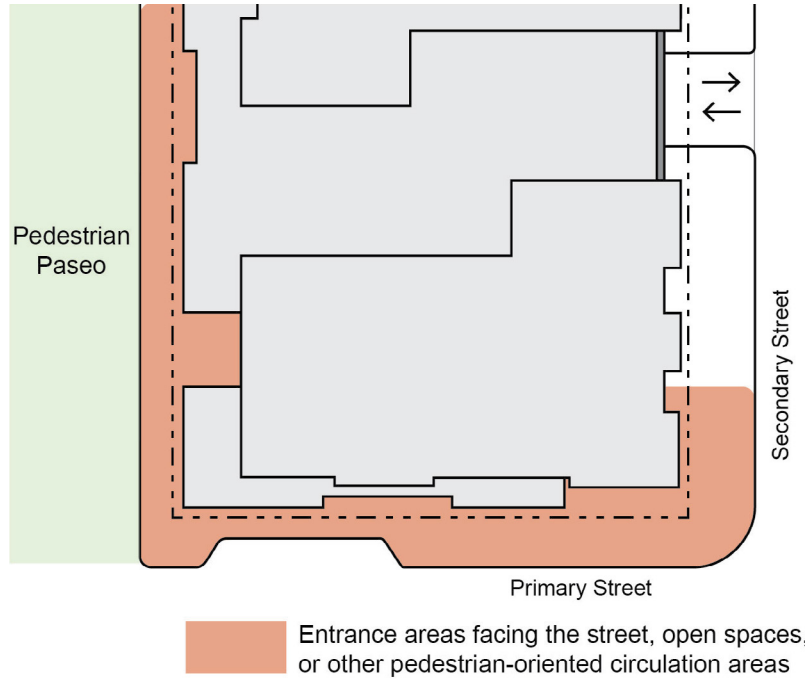
i. Level floor, apart from necessary ramps

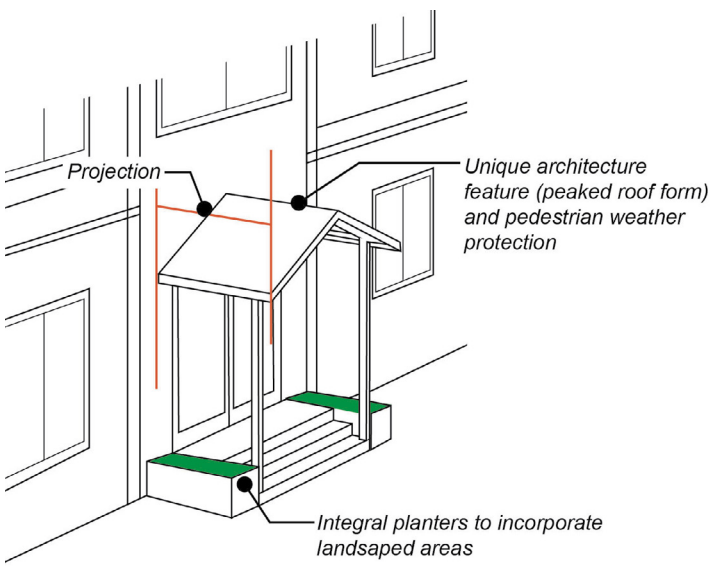
ii. Floors with 10 feet minimum clear height from floor to ceiling

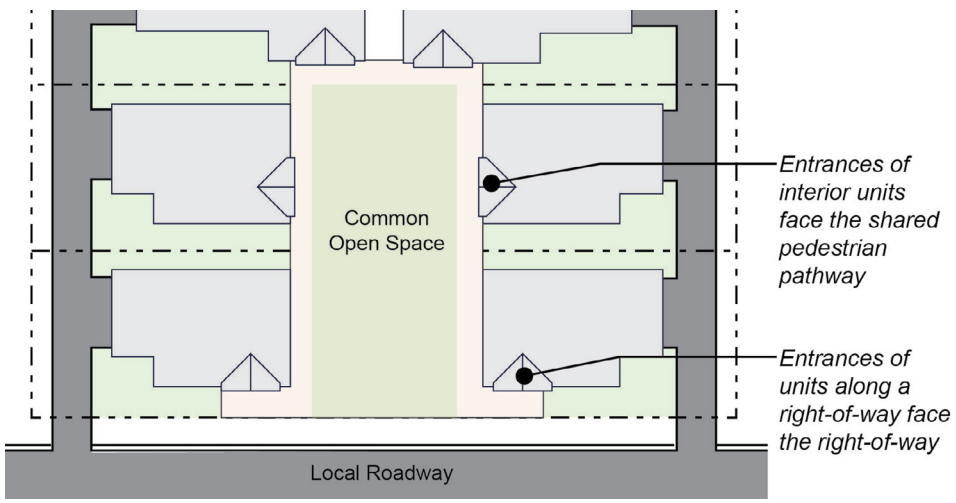
iii. Cut-outs for planned shafts in decks and other structural members to accommodate future utilities (heating, cooling, venting, etc.)

IV. Access and Entrance Design

1. Building Orientation. Buildings shall be oriented to ensure the primary facades and entrance areas of all buildings face the street, open spaces, or other pedestrian-oriented circulation areas. (Lawrence Station).
2. Primary Entrances. Primary entrances shall feature at least two of the following: (Tasman East)
   a. Unique architectural feature (i.e. prominent tower feature or peaked roof form and/or variation in building color/material);
   b. Recess or projection;
   c. Pedestrian weather protection (i.e. canopy, overhang, or arcade).
   d. Streetscape including outdoor patio, integral planters or wing walls that incorporate landscaped areas and/ or places for sitting.



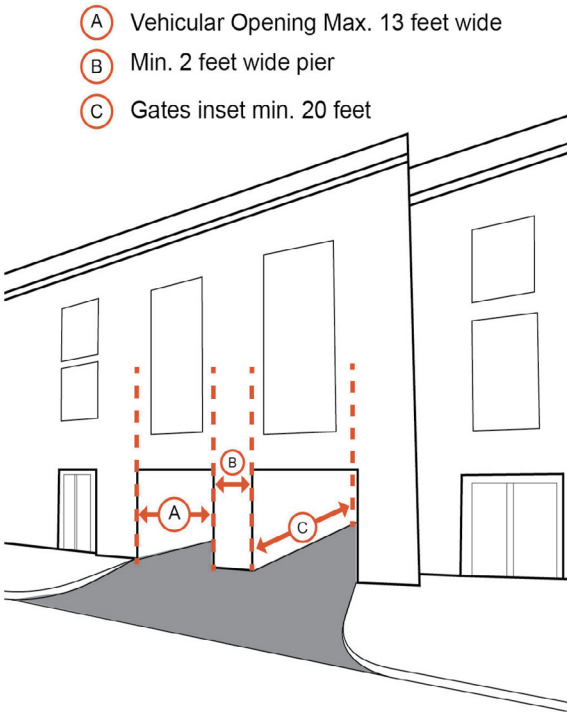




3. Frequency of Entries (Podium/Wrap-Style). The quantity of building entrances on a street has a drastic effect on the perceived liveliness of a street. The frequency of entrances is regulated by Table 4 (Downtown Form Based Code)

Table 4: Frequency of Entries (Podium/Wrap-Style)

Facade Area	Residential	Mixed-Use
Frequency of Building Entries (max. distance between entries)	100 feet	75 feet



4. Vehicular Access. (Downtown Form Based Code)
   a. Vehicular Access openings shall be no more than 13 feet wide. Where adjacent openings are necessary to provide entry and exist, they shall be separated by a pier (a portion of wall) of at least two (2) feet in width
   b. Gates which open to allow cars to enter (excluding security doors that are shut when the garage is not accessible) shall be inset from the façade by a minimum of 20 feet, to allow cars to await entry without blocking the sidewalk.

V. Materials

1. Primary Materials. Untreated plastics, unfinished metal, corrugated fiberglass and non-architectural grade plywood shall not be used as primary materials (Tasman East).

4 Pedestrian Level Design

I. Purpose

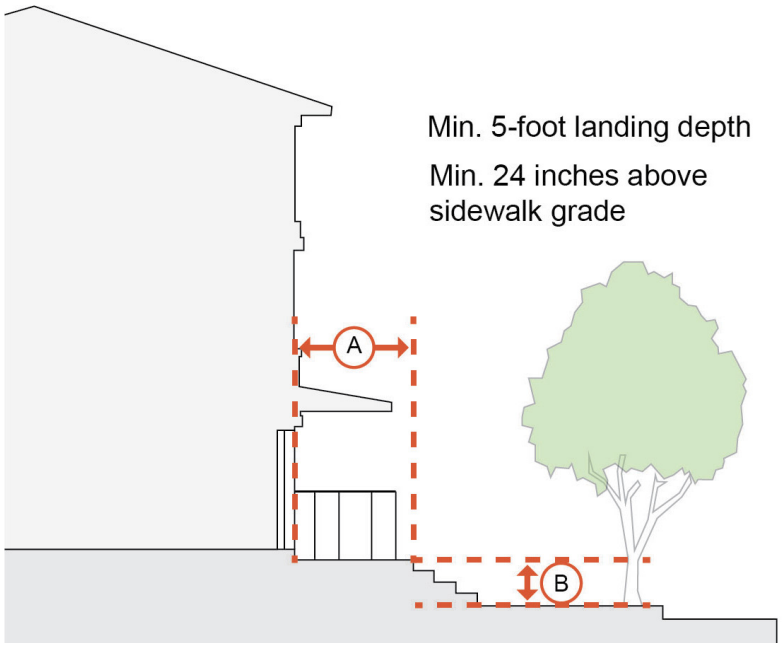
This section provides standards to enhance the character of new development's street frontage to promote pedestrian activity.

II. Ground Floor Retail and Active Uses

1. Ground Floor Retail. Ground floor retail uses shall be at the same grade as the adjacent sidewalk (Lawrence Station)
2. Façade Transparency. Facades of all commercial structures shall incorporate transparent features (clear glass on windows and doors) over a minimum percentage of the surface area at ground-level (Lawrence Station)
   a. Retail uses: a minimum of 75% shall be transparent
   b. Other uses: a minimum of 35% shall be transparent

III. Ground Floor Residential

1. Ground Floor Access. Where residential units are located at the ground floor, at least 50% of units on each frontage must be individually accessed from the sidewalk via stoops, side yards or other means. (Tasman East)
2. Stoops. Stoops shall have a minimum five (5)-foot landing depth with room for a table and chairs to provide an opportunity for residents to engage in the social life of the street. (Tasman East)
3. Stoops that face public rights of way shall be set at least 24 inches above sidewalk grade (Tasman East)

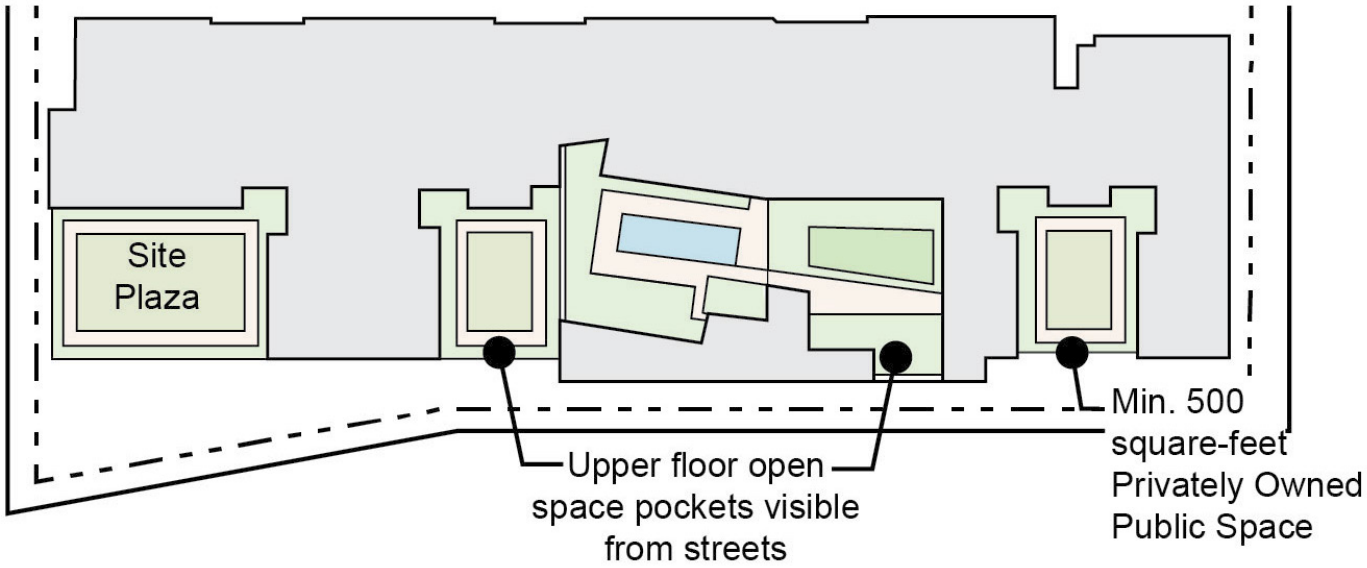


IV. Ground Floor Live / Work

1. Entrances. Because live/work units are meant to be public facing, they shall be entered at-grade and are not required to be elevated above sidewalk level. (Lawrence Station)

V. Open Space Design

1. Podium Style Buildings.
   a. Podium – Style buildings shall have well-defined outdoor space, such as on site plazas, interior courtyards, patios, terraces and gardens
   b. Podium – Style buildings shall have privately owned public open space of at least 15 feet wide and 500 square feet in size. (Patrick Henry Drive)
2. Pathways. Pedestrian paths through the site shall be at least five (5) feet wide (Patrick Henry Drive)



3. Special Paving. Special Paving shall be used for the following areas:
   a. Pedestrian crossing (mid-block, raised pedestrian crossings/speed tables, and etc.)
4. Public Art. Outdoor plazas and semi-public courtyards shall have public art elements such as sculptures, fountains, and art pieces.
5. Refuse & Recycling Receptacles. Provide a maximum of one receptacle every 200 feet along streets if proposing more than 10 units. Additional receptacles should be provided only if a private sponsor provides continued maintenance
   a. Provide one receptacle at each corner of intersections (Patrick Henry Drive)

VI. Alleys and Service Access

1. Lighting. Provide lighting in alleyways for safety.
2. Alleys. Alleys intended for emergency vehicles access shall have a minimum width of 25 feet to allow for access and landscaping (Patrick Henry Drive)

25-996 **Agenda Date: 11/12/2025**

REPORT TO PLANNING COMMISSION

SUBJECT
Study Session on Draft Citywide Objective Design Standards

BACKGROUND
California has been facing a housing affordability crisis since the 1980's due to various reasons. One reason has been the unpredictable development environment that developers have faced as they juggle between multiple cities' varied zoning development standards and processes.

Beginning with the passage of Senate Bill 35 (SB 35, now SB 423) in 2017, State law allows for the streamlined, ministerial approval of eligible housing development projects with two or more dwelling units. A series of housing laws passed since 2017 resulted in additional streamlining provisions for various multifamily housing types.

Currently, California Government Code Sections 65913.4 and 65589.5 mandate that cities utilize only "objective planning standards" related to the project site, land use regulations and project form when reviewing residential development applications. Subjective criteria, frequently contained in local design guidelines and land use priorities, may not be used as a basis for approving or disapproving a housing project that is eligible for streamlined approval.

According to California Government Code Section 65913.4(a)(5), residential projects eligible for streamlining shall be "consistent with objective zoning standards, objective subdivision standards, and objective design review standards in effect at the time that the development is submitted." State law defines "objective standards" as:

> "Criteria that involve no personal or subjective judgment by a public official and are uniformly verifiable by reference to an external and uniform benchmark or criterion available and knowable by both the development applicant or proponent and the public official before submittal."

Based on this definition, objective design standards must be composed of quantitative requirements, numeric thresholds, discrete options, point-based standards, and/or other approaches that facilitate ministerial, or "checklist-style" review.

Like most jurisdictions in California, Santa Clara had not adopted a comprehensive set of objective design standards prior to SB 35. Currently, the City of Santa Clara has objective design standards codified through its five Specific and Precise Plans- Freedom Circle, Patrick Henry, Lawrence Station, Tasman East, & Downtown-but those standards are only applicable within each plan area. These are small geographic areas within the City, leaving the rest of the City covered by the limited number of objective standards found under the various zoning districts and the existing design guidelines (Single Family & Duplex Residential Design Guidelines & Community Design Guidelines).

As such, except for the limited geographic areas, the City has no means of ensuring that housing projects streamlined under State law are consistent with local design priorities. Through the review of development projects utilizing SB 35 and related laws, the Planning Division recognized this deficiency and started working on City-wide objective design standards so that the City can maintain the maximum degree of local design control as required by Housing Element Policy A-3

Proposed Workplan

Staff has started to address this issue through a workplan that completes this effort in two phases. Phase I is to identify and gather existing objective design standards that have already been vetted by the community and decision-makers that are included in the various regulatory City documents, most specifically from the five Specific/Precise Plans. These standards will form the baseline for the City's comprehensive objective design standards that will be applicable Citywide. During this initial phase, gaps will be identified where additional objective design standards are necessary to address design situations not covered with existing standards. Phase II will commence when the City hires a consultant team to assist with the development of new standards that will include a process that will seek community feedback through outreach and engagement.

This study session is intended to provide the Planning Commission with an overview of the Phase I efforts, gather input on the draft document and identify any gaps in the standards. The standards are a baseline and will be expanded with feedback from the Commission, community input, developer input and internal staff. Staff expects Phase I to be implemented into the zoning code by March 2026 and Phase II by 2028 at the latest.

DISCUSSION

The study session will be guided by the following agenda:

- Background
  - Objective Design Standards ("ODS") Definition
  - Reasons to have ODS
- ODS Applicability
- ODS Crafting & Implementation Plan
  - Phase I
    - Using existing ODS that have been vetted by the community & decision makers from Planning Documents to apply Citywide
    - Create an ODS Checklist for Developers to use & Staff to confirm compliance
  - Phase II
    - Hire a consultant to help with engaging the community to fill ODS gaps (e.g. more townhouse standards) (Start Date:2026)
- ODS Document Draft
- Feedback Discussion
- Conclusion
  - Next Steps

ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW

This study session does not constitute a "project" under the California Environmental Quality Act ("CEQA") pursuant to CEQA Guidelines Section 15378(b)(5), as it's a governmental administrative

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activity that won't result in a direct or indirect change to the environment. Prior to adopting any zoning code update, the City will undertake appropriate environmental review.

FISCAL IMPACT
There is no fiscal impact to the City other than administrative staff time.

COORDINATION
This report has been coordinated with the City Attorney's Office.

PUBLIC CONTACT
Public contact was made by posting the Council agenda on the City's official-notice bulletin board outside City Hall Council Chambers. A complete agenda packet is available on the City's website and in the City Clerk's Office at least 72 hours prior to a Regular Meeting and 24 hours prior to a Special Meeting. A hard copy of any agenda report may be requested by contacting the City Clerk's Office at (408) 615-2220, email clerk@santaclaraca.gov <mailto:clerk@santaclaraca.gov> or at the public information desk at any City of Santa Clara public library.

Prepared by: Alex Tellez, Assistant Planner, Community Development Department
Reviewed by: Alexander Abbe, Assistant City Attorney
Approved by: Afshan Hamid, Director, Community Development Department

ATTACHMENTS
1. ODS Draft Document
2. Web Links - ODS Resources & Laws

CITY OF SANTA CLARA

Draft Objective Design Standards for City-wide Multi-Family and Residential Mixed-Use Projects

NOVEMBER 2025

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1 Introduction

I. Intent

The Objective Design Standards identify specific design elements that are required for all multi-family residential and residential mixed-use projects. The intent of the Objective Design Standards is to allow flexibility and creativity in design while providing a clear set of standards and expectations for applicable projects. The Objective Design Standards in this document are a compilation of adopted Objective Design Standards from the City's Specific Plans and Focus Areas.

Residential multi-family and mixed-use development in the City of Santa Clara is regulated by the General Plan, Zoning Ordinance, Specific Plans, and other applicable regulatory documents. Compliance with these regulations is supported by a discretionary design review process established in Santa Clara City Code (SCCC) Chapter 18.120.

The City's Objective Design Standards are intended to be consistent with Government Code Section 65913.4 and 66300(a)(7) as they do not "involve personal or subjective judgment by a public official" and they "are uniformly verifiable by reference to an external and uniform benchmark or criterion".

The Objective Design Standards will do the following:

- Provide clear, objective, and measurable standards for multi-family and residential mixed-use projects throughout the city;
- Streamline project review of housing, in accordance with State law;
- Ensure buildings are appropriate to their surroundings and environment;
- Promote thoughtful, context-sensitive site design;
- Maintain and enhance Santa Clara's built environment through quality architectural design; and
- Promote a pedestrian scale urban environment that enriches the quality of life of its citizens.

II. Applicability

A. The Objective Design Standards are applicable to new multi-family development and residential mixed-use development, and additions to existing multi-family or residential mixed-use development.

B. For modifications to existing residential mixed-use developments where no additional square footage is proposed, these standards and guidelines shall only apply to the use being modified (e.g., a ground floor retail storefront remodel will not trigger any architectural changes to residential units).

C. These standards are additive to the zoning development standards specified in SCCC Chapter 18.10 (Residential Zones) and SCCC Chapter 18.14 (Mixed-Use Zones). Development pursuant to any California state law that references objective design standards, including but not limited to Government Code Section 65589.5 (Housing Accountability Act) and Section 65913.4 must abide by these standards.

D. The objective design standards shall not conflict with the standards applicable to a specific plan area but if there is conflict, the specific plan standards shall apply

E. The specific applicability of these objective design standards will be determined by the multi-family or residential mixed-use product type (such as townhouses, podium/wrap-style buildings) that is proposed. The following table breaks down the applicability of the standards

Table 1: Objective Design Standard Applicability

Design Standard	Product Type	
	Townhouse	Podium/Wrap-Style
Site Design		
Site Access (Parking)	--	•
Site Access (Loading Zone)	--	•
Site Access (Driveways)	--	•
Site Organization (Public Realm Extension)	•	•
Site Access (Corner Building Orientation)	--	•
Building Design		
Massing (Building Length)	--	•
Massing (Massing Increment Dimensional Standards).	•	•
Massing (Massing Increment Design)	•	•
Massing (Massing Increments as Distinct Buildings)	--	•
Massing (Distinct Buildings)	--	•
Façade Design (Facade Composition)	--	•
Façade Design (Base, Middle and Top)	•	•
Façade Design (Façade Fenestration)	•	•
Façade Design (Parking Structure Façade Standards)	--	•
Access & Entrance Design (Building Orientation)	•	•
Access & Entrance Design (Primary Entrances)	•	•
Access & Entrance Design (Frequency of Entries)	--	•
Access & Entrance Design (Vehicular Access)	--	•
Materials (Primary Materials)	•	•
Pedestrian Level Design		
Ground Floor Treatment - Retail (Facade Transparency and Ground Floor Retail)	--	•
Ground Floor Treatment - Residential(Ground Floor Access)	--	•
Ground Floor Treatment - Residential (Stoops)	--	•
Ground Floor Treatment – Live/ Work (Entrances)	--	•
Open Space Design (Podium Style Buildings)	--	•
Open Space Design (Pathways)	--	•
Open Space Design (Special Paving)	•	•
Open Space Design (Public Art)	--	•
Open Space Design (Refuse & Recycling Receptacles)	•	•
Alley & Service Access (Lighting)	--	•
Alley & Service Access (Alleys)	•	•

Introduction

Glossary

Note: The definitions below are only applicable to the Objective Design Standards on this section of the Santa Clara City Code.

Podium-Style Building: A development project that involves a horizontal separation between an upper building and a lower, or podium, building. The lower building typically is constructed out of concrete; the upper building (some three to five stories tall) is made of wood.

Primary Materials: Any wall finish material or color that occupies more than 50 percent of the façade.

Product Type: The proposed residential building type like detached single family residences, townhomes, podium style buildings, & etc.

Special Paving: A distinct impermeable material such as natural stone paver, unit concrete pavers, brick, textured and colored concrete.

Townhouses: Attached side-by-side or stacked units that generally have front doors on one side and garages on the back side. Most townhouses have two-car garages, either two spaces wide or two tandem spaces (end to end). The front doors look onto a public street, private drive, or common open space, while the garages are usually lined up along an alley with garage doors on both sides. This development type typically includes tuck-under garage parking and additional surface parking spaces for visitors.

Wrap-Style Building: A development project that typically consists of a central above-grade concrete parking structure surrounded or "wrapped" by 4 – 7 stories of wood or steel construction.

Organization of Objective Design Standards

The Objective Design Standards are organized into three design components: site design, building design, and pedestrian level design.

Site Design: These standards apply to the site layout to foster multimodal connectivity and create cohesive neighborhoods.

Building Design: These standards apply to the architectural features such as massing, fenestration, and articulation.

Pedestrian Level Design: These standards apply to the ground floor frontage to promote pedestrian activity and human-scale development.

Note: Graphic reference for this page to visually show each chapter of these standards.

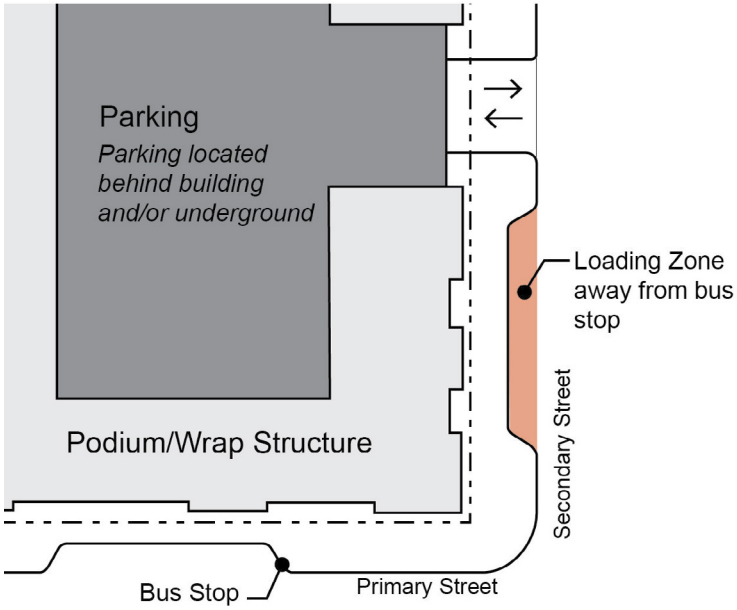
2 Site Design

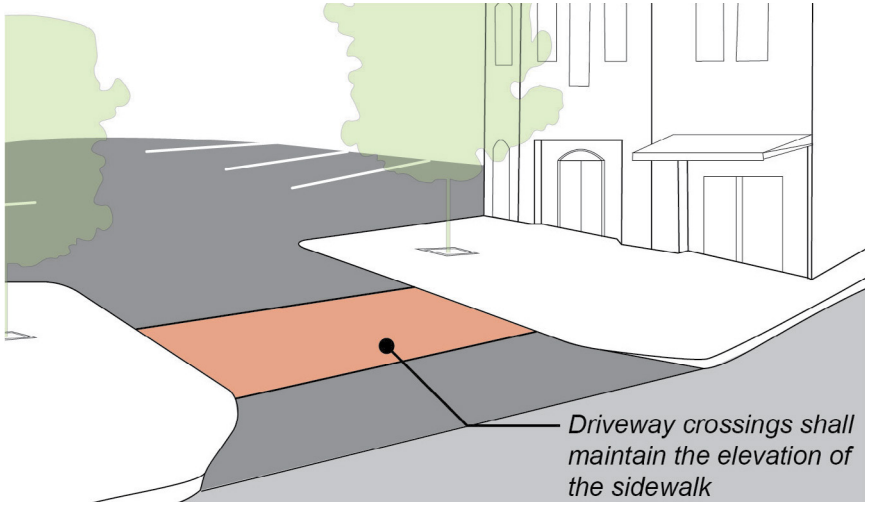
I. Purpose and Goals

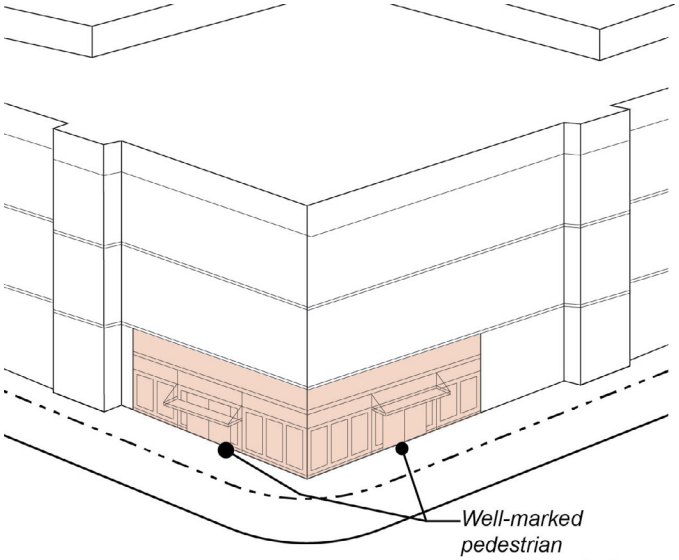
This section provides site design standards to create more pedestrian-friendly functional communities through expanded pedestrian access, convenient multi-modal connections, and human-scaled block sizes.

II. Site Access and Layout

1. Parking. Parking shall be located away from streets and other public and communal spaces. Parking shall be located behind buildings, underground, or at the interior of the block except where there is ground floor retail (Lawrence Station)
2. Loading Zones. Locate loading zones and rideshare pick-up / drop-off areas away from bus stops. (FC Focus Area).
3. Driveways and Access. Driveway access shall be designed to clearly prioritize pedestrians, according to the following requirements:
   a. Driveway crossings shall maintain the elevation of the sidewalk;
   b. Driveway aprons shall not extend into the pedestrian clear walkway where cross slopes are limited to a maximum of two percent; steeper driveway slopes are permitted in the furnishing and edge zones of the streets;
   c. The dimensions and design of parking entry and exit points shall be coordinated with the requirements for stormwater treatment areas and street trees;
   d. Curb cuts shall be minimized on greenways or open spaces, with at most only one maximum allowable curb cut (Tasman East)

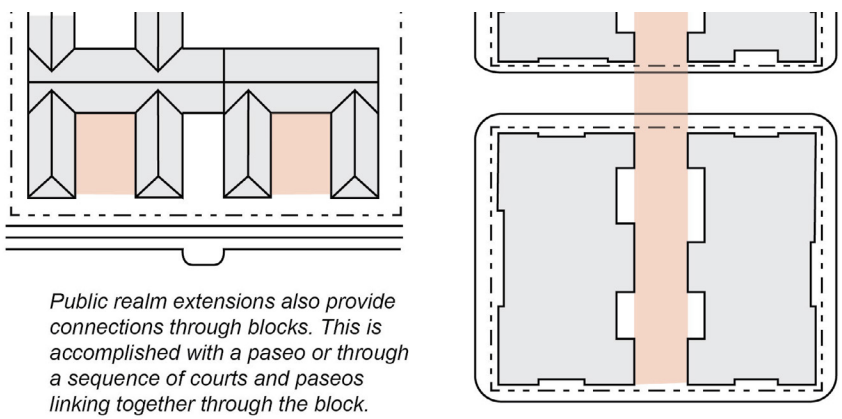




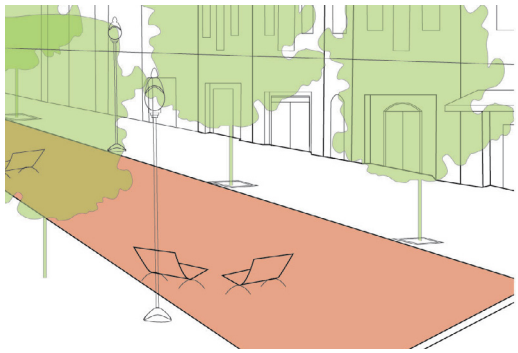


III. Site Organization, Planning, and Design

1. Public Realm Extensions. While most buildings and ground-floor units will front onto and take their primary access from the adjacent Public Realm right-of-way, some buildings and ground-floor units may take this primary access from shared private spaces and connections that function as extensions of the public realm into a site. Such spaces comprise a “Semi-Public Realm” and serve as transitions between fully public and fully private spaces. Public Realm Extensions are subject to the following standards: (Downtown Form Based-Code)
   a. Connectivity. Public realm extensions also provide connections through blocks. This is accomplished with a paseo or through a sequence of courts and paseos linking together through the block. Where non-vehicular paths are used, full and unrestricted public access shall be provided throughout the route.
   b. Design. No wall or fence enclosing a public realm extension may exceed three (3) feet in height.
2. Corner Building Orientation: Ensure that corner buildings actively address both streets with well-marked and attractively designed pedestrian entrances (Patrick Henry Drive)



Public realm extensions also provide connections through blocks. This is accomplished with a paseo or through a sequence of courts and paseos linking together through the block.



3 Building Design

I. Purpose and Goals

This section provides architectural design standards to create functional and welcoming human-scaled buildings that blend well with their surroundings and support active streets and public spaces.

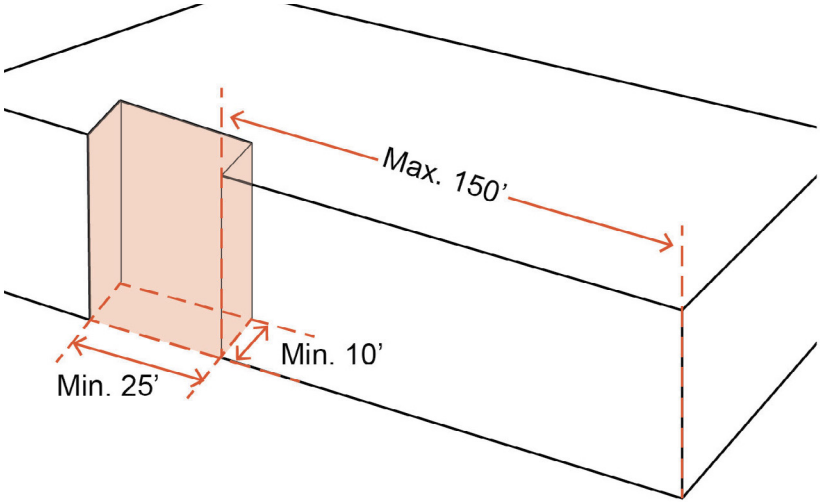
II. Massing

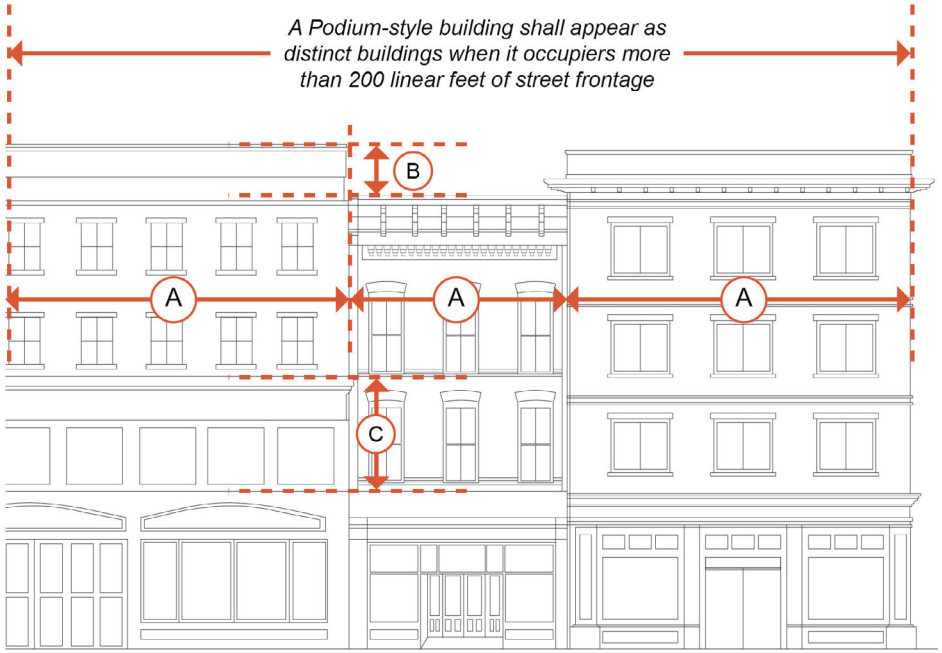
1. Building Length. To create a more interesting and walkable public realm, individual buildings shall be no longer than 150 feet in length. For those buildings that are longer than 150 feet in length, a building notch shall be provided on the podium starting at the street level, for the entire height of the façade, to break up the massing. The building notch shall have a minimum dimension of 25 feet in width and 10 feet in depth (Tasman East)

2. Massing Increment Dimensional Standards

Table 2: Massing Increment Dimensional Standards

Objective Design Standard		Dimensions
A	Massing increment (max.)	150 feet
B	Facade Height Difference between Massing Increments (min.)	10% of Lesser Facade Height
C	Building Base Height Difference between Massing Increments	3 feet

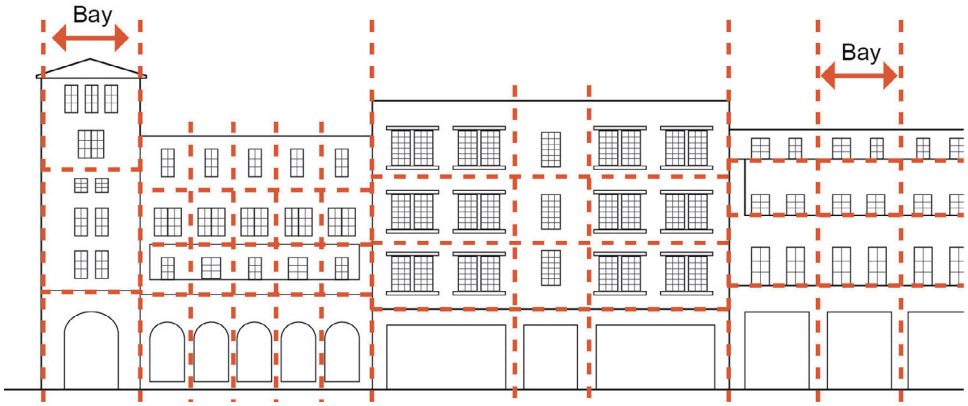




3. Distinct Buildings Using Massing Increment Design. A Podium-Style Building shall appear as distinct buildings when it occupies more than 200 linear feet of street frontage. At a minimum, it shall appear as three (3) distinct building using massing increments design: (Downtown Form-Based Code)
   a. There shall be a clearly noticeable difference in facade materials and color between Distinct Buildings
   b. There shall be a clearly noticeable difference in the type and composition of facade openings and architectural elements between distinct buildings.
   c. The building base heights of adjacent Distinct Buildings shall differ by an entire floor.
   d. A Massing Increment Design shall only be repeated up to a maximum of three (3) times on the same project elevation.
      i. Repeated Massing Increments shall not be immediately adjacent to each other.
      ii. Forecourts may provide separation between repeated Massing Increment Designs

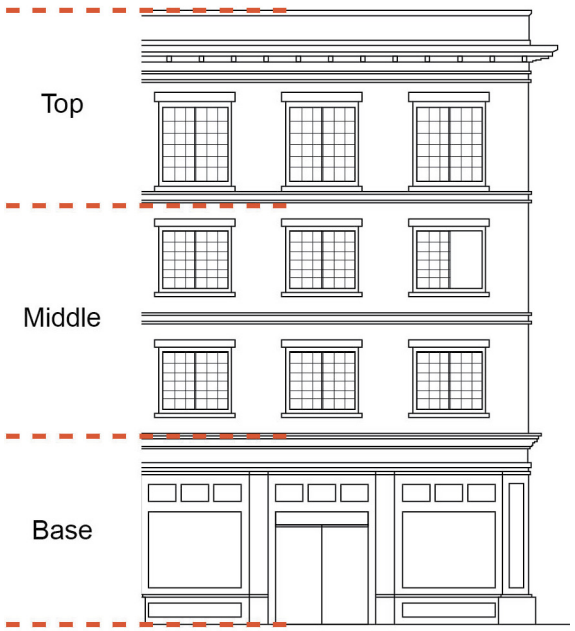
III. Facade Design

1. Facade Composition. Facade elements shall be organized by a grid. Patterns of openings within each individual facade or Building Increment shall be organized into a grid per the standards below. (Downtown Form Based Code)
   a. Horizontal alignment of elements. Rooflines, openings, and materials within each facade or facade module must align horizontally and be consistent in style across the entire width.
   b. Vertical alignment of openings into bays. The entirety of a building's façade or massing increments shall be clearly divided into vertical bays, subject to the following:
      i. Façade bays shall extend from the ground to the top of the façade and are defined by vertical structure (solid portions of wall, piers, etc.) which extends from the ground to the top of the façade.
      ii. Each bay must be stacked within bays as illustrated in the figure below. Openings shall be arranged symmetrically within bays.
      iii. Each bay shall be at minimum 15 feet wide.



Facade elements shall be organized by a grid. Rooflines, openings, and other materials must align horizontally. Facade elements or massing increments shall be divided into vertical bays.

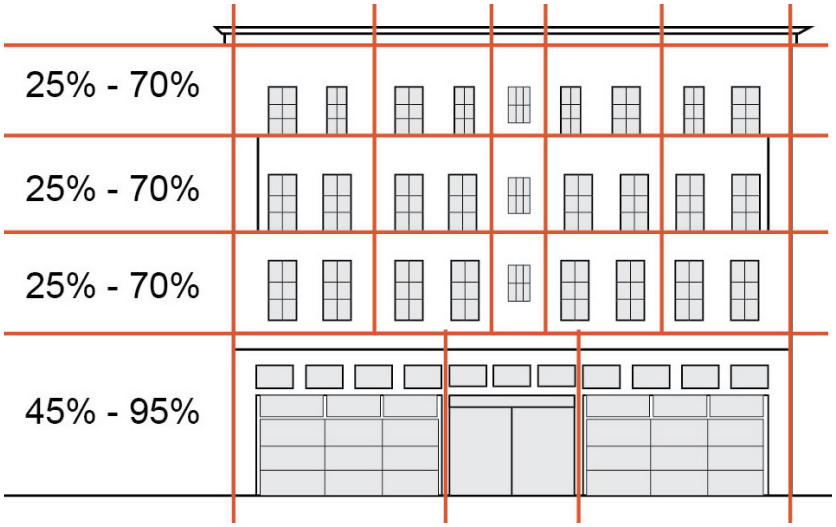
2. Base, Middle and Top. Buildings shall have a Base, Middle, and Top. (Downtown Form Based Code)
   a. The Building's Base shall be differentiated from the rest of the façade whether through a change in material, change in type of opening, belt course, or a combination of these elements.
   b. The Building's Middle features floors shall be generally repetitive, with only minor variations between each floor.
   c. The Building's Top shall feature some form of capping element, such as a cornice, enhanced ornamentation, or a decorative parapet. In larger buildings, the upper most floor shall be visually incorporated into the building's top design.



3. Facade Fenestration.
   a. Fenestration Area. Façade shall be designed with fenestration – openings on the façade, including windows and doors – the amount identified by:

Table 3: Fenestration Areas

Facade Area	Dimensions
Base of Building	40% - 95%
Middle & Top of Building	25% - 70%



   b. Fenestration amount is calculated as a percentage of openings – including all windows and doors on the façade – to an area of façade. Each portion of the façade grid must have a fenestration percentage which falls within the range identified by Table 3.

c. General to Base, Middle, and Top. Window jams shall be set in a minimum of four (4) inches from the main façade plane. Trim/ moldings on the façade do not count toward this recess depth.

d. Specific to the Top. Upper-floor wall openings shall be square or taller than they are wide. Individual vertically proportioned windows can be grouped side by side to form a horizontal ensemble of windows

4. Parking Structure Façade Standards. (Downtown Form Base Code)

a. Façade Design. Parking Structure Facades shall be designed to fit into the urban context in one of the two following ways:

i. The Façades meet the Massing Standard of this document.

ii. Facades designed as art walls, murals, or screens that incorporate decorative, graphic, or sculptural elements. Such facades are subject to recommendations from the Cultural Arts Commission and the Historical & Landmarks Commission, followed by Community Development Director or their designee approval, based on the following Required Finding:

- Façade design is unique and iconic, using durable, element-resistant, materials and techniques

b. Future-Proof Parking. Parking Garages shall be designed to accommodate conversions to other uses and shall have at least one of the following features:

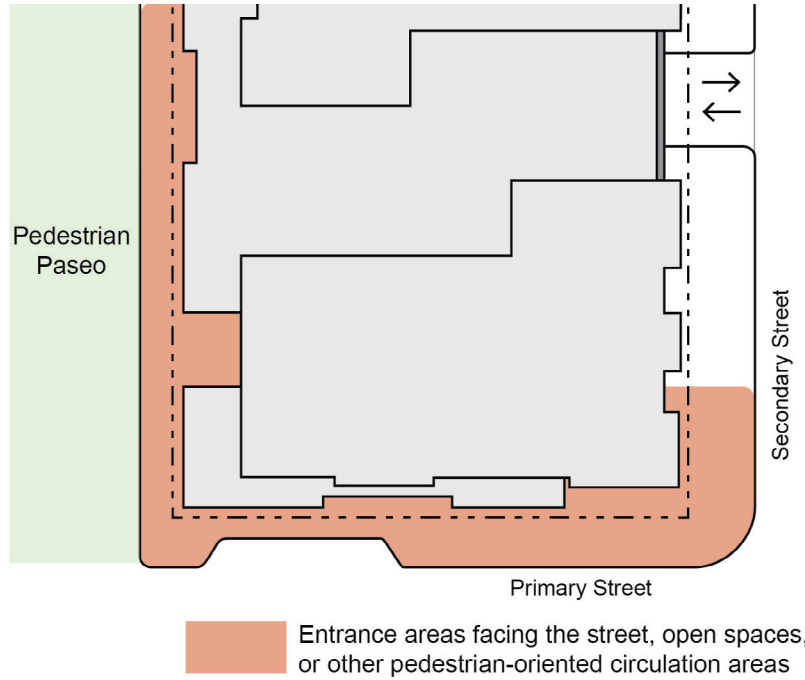
i. Level floor, apart from necessary ramps

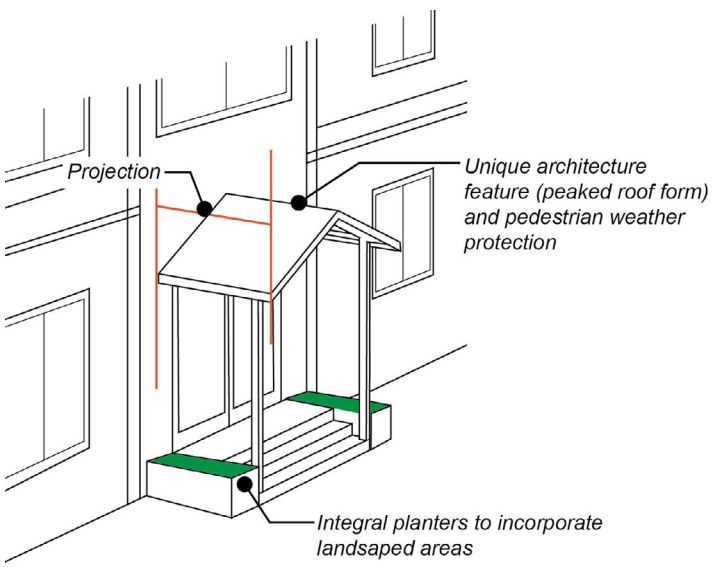
ii. Floors with 10 feet minimum clear height from floor to ceiling

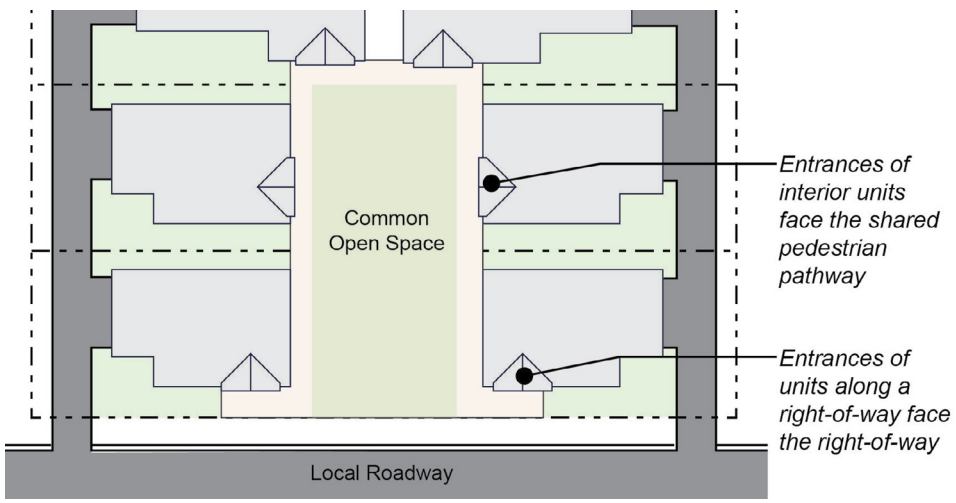
iii. Cut-outs for planned shafts in decks and other structural members to accommodate future utilities (heating, cooling, venting, etc.)

IV. Access and Entrance Design

1. Building Orientation. Buildings shall be oriented to ensure the primary facades and entrance areas of all buildings face the street, open spaces, or other pedestrian-oriented circulation areas. (Lawrence Station).
2. Primary Entrances. Primary entrances shall feature at least two of the following: (Tasman East)
   a. Unique architectural feature (i.e. prominent tower feature or peaked roof form and/or variation in building color/material);
   b. Recess or projection;
   c. Pedestrian weather protection (i.e. canopy, overhang, or arcade).
   d. Streetscape including outdoor patio, integral planters or wing walls that incorporate landscaped areas and/ or places for sitting.



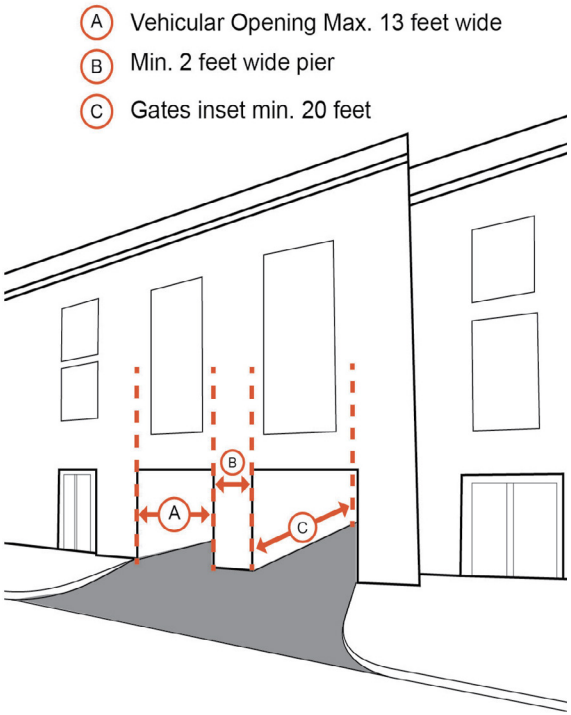




3. Frequency of Entries (Podium/Wrap-Style). The quantity of building entrances on a street has a drastic effect on the perceived liveliness of a street. The frequency of entrances is regulated by Table 4 (Downtown Form Based Code)

Table 4: Frequency of Entries (Podium/Wrap-Style)

Facade Area	Residential	Mixed-Use
Frequency of Building Entries (max. distance between entries)	100 feet	75 feet



4. Vehicular Access. (Downtown Form Based Code)
   a. Vehicular Access openings shall be no more than 13 feet wide. Where adjacent openings are necessary to provide entry and exist, they shall be separated by a pier (a portion of wall) of at least two (2) feet in width
   b. Gates which open to allow cars to enter (excluding security doors that are shut when the garage is not accessible) shall be inset from the façade by a minimum of 20 feet, to allow cars to await entry without blocking the sidewalk.

V. Materials

1. Primary Materials. Untreated plastics, unfinished metal, corrugated fiberglass and non-architectural grade plywood shall not be used as primary materials (Tasman East).

4 Pedestrian Level Design

I. Purpose

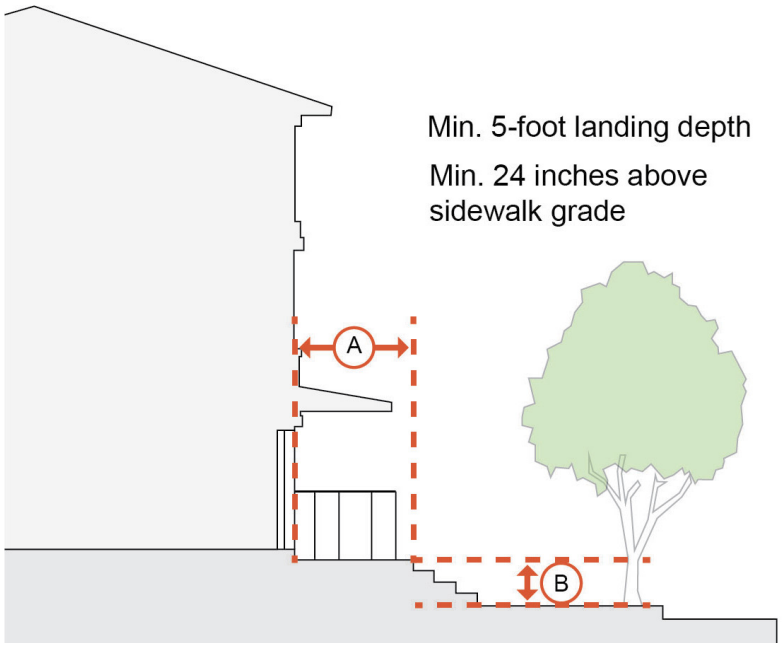
This section provides standards to enhance the character of new development's street frontage to promote pedestrian activity.

II. Ground Floor Retail and Active Uses

1. Ground Floor Retail. Ground floor retail uses shall be at the same grade as the adjacent sidewalk (Lawrence Station)
2. Façade Transparency. Facades of all commercial structures shall incorporate transparent features (clear glass on windows and doors) over a minimum percentage of the surface area at ground-level (Lawrence Station)
   a. Retail uses: a minimum of 75% shall be transparent
   b. Other uses: a minimum of 35% shall be transparent

III. Ground Floor Residential

1. Ground Floor Access. Where residential units are located at the ground floor, at least 50% of units on each frontage must be individually accessed from the sidewalk via stoops, side yards or other means. (Tasman East)
2. Stoops. Stoops shall have a minimum five (5)-foot landing depth with room for a table and chairs to provide an opportunity for residents to engage in the social life of the street. (Tasman East)
3. Stoops that face public rights of way shall be set at least 24 inches above sidewalk grade (Tasman East)

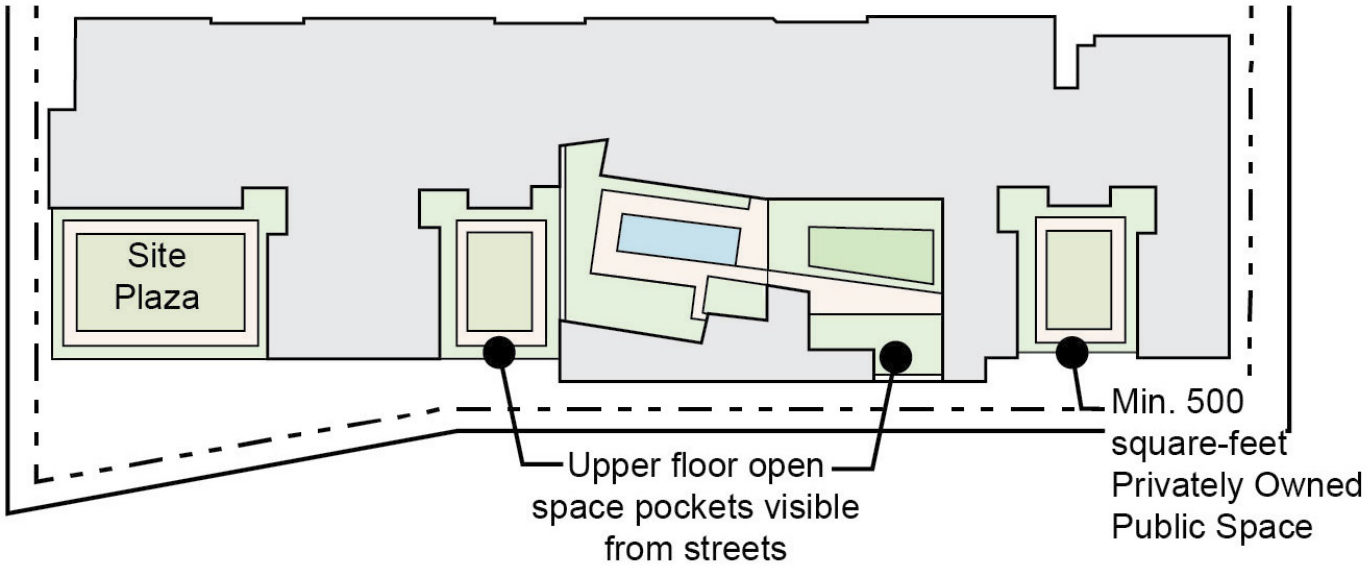


IV. Ground Floor Live / Work

1. Entrances. Because live/work units are meant to be public facing, they shall be entered at-grade and are not required to be elevated above sidewalk level. (Lawrence Station)

V. Open Space Design

1. Podium Style Buildings.
   a. Podium – Style buildings shall have well-defined outdoor space, such as on site plazas, interior courtyards, patios, terraces and gardens
   b. Podium – Style buildings shall have privately owned public open space of at least 15 feet wide and 500 square feet in size. (Patrick Henry Drive)
2. Pathways. Pedestrian paths through the site shall be at least five (5) feet wide (Patrick Henry Drive)



3. Special Paving. Special Paving shall be used for the following areas:
   a. Pedestrian crossing (mid-block, raised pedestrian crossings/speed tables, and etc.)
4. Public Art. Outdoor plazas and semi-public courtyards shall have public art elements such as sculptures, fountains, and art pieces.
5. Refuse & Recycling Receptacles. Provide a maximum of one receptacle every 200 feet along streets if proposing more than 10 units. Additional receptacles should be provided only if a private sponsor provides continued maintenance
   a. Provide one receptacle at each corner of intersections (Patrick Henry Drive)

VI. Alleys and Service Access

1. Lighting. Provide lighting in alleyways for safety.
2. Alleys. Alleys intended for emergency vehicles access shall have a minimum width of 25 feet to allow for access and landscaping (Patrick Henry Drive)

Web Links

Objective Design Standards Handbook
https://abag.ca.gov/tools-resources/digital-library/objective-design-standards-handbookapril-2024pdf

Objective Design Standards Handbook Webinar
https://mtcdrive.box.com/s/9kcobvgt8cyyp8sk1b4e3ercdgjlzwqc

SB 423 (2023) (Extends SB 35 of 2017)
https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill_id=202320240SB423

SB 330 (2019)
https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill_id=201920200SB330

These documents are available for viewing in the Community Development Department