

Project Background and Public Outreach Summary

A. PROJECT BACKGROUND

SFDB Background and Regulatory Context

The Single Family Design Board (SFDB) is a five-member design review board that includes at least one licensed architect and up to three members of the public who reside in the City of Santa Barbara. Established to curb the development of excessively large homes, the SFDB reviews proposals for additions, alterations, and new single family homes in the Hillside Design District and above 17 feet in height.

Prior to 1992, the only single family development projects subject to design review were historic homes reviewed by the Historic Landmarks Commission. Review of single family homes by the Architectural Board of Review (ABR) started with adoption of the Neighborhood Preservation Ordinance and Single Family Design Guidelines in 1992, with specific focus on hillside projects due to their visibility. In the years following, there was a proliferation of homes in single family neighborhoods that the public considered excessively large, and an overwhelming number of projects on ABR agendas. As a result, City Council directed staff to create a new design review board for single family projects. In 2007, City Council established the Single Family Design Board and adopted zoning limits on Floor Area Ratio (FAR)¹ in Santa Barbara's residential neighborhoods.

Streamlining Project Background

This project began in August 2022 following a thorough review of City policies and procedures by the Novak Consulting Group. The Novak report identified significant concerns that the SFDB process had become overloaded with too many projects and process steps, resulting in delayed projects and frustration among those involved in the design review process. City staff launched an applicant survey in early 2023 to gain a better understanding of these issues and identify opportunities for improvement. The 220 survey respondents indicated that the SFDB process adds significant time, money, and frustration in getting approvals for home projects, especially when those projects require public hearings.

Since establishment of the SFDB in 2007, updates to City ordinances have increased the number of SFDB design review triggers, which has added to the review process for single family projects. In particular, the 2017 adoption of Title 30 shifted the review responsibility from Staff Hearing Officer or Planning Commission for requests for exceptions to certain zoning standards to the SFDB (or other applicable design review board) as a way to streamline review of those items. However, updates to the SFDB review process have not kept pace, despite local ordinance changes and the State legislature continuing to pass housing streamlining laws that reduce local control over discretionary review and land use. Comparing the City's two other design review boards, the SFDB reviewed twice as many

¹ Floor Area Ratio (FAR) is the relationship between the amount of building floor area and the area of the lot.

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applications as HLC and one and a half times as many as ABR in 2024. This project aims to reduce the number of SFDB projects to similar levels as ABR and HLC while streamlining the review process for single family projects.

The goals of the Single Family Development Streamlining Project (Project) are as follows:

1. Reduce the number of single family development projects subject to design review.
2. Streamline the public hearing process for single family projects.
3. Create more flexibility to address common homeowner interests.

Achieving the three project goals is expected to result in faster processing times and reduced complexity while still upholding the SFDB's primary objective of ensuring residential projects are compatible with the surrounding neighborhood in size and design.

B. PUBLIC OUTREACH SUMMARY

Meetings, surveys, and other public engagement efforts have occurred since this project was initiated in 2023 as follows:

- *February 2023 – April 2023: Online Survey of SFDB Applicants.* In collaboration with American Institute of Architects (AIA) Santa Barbara, this online survey, emailed to Land Development Team customers who have had a project at SFDB in the last 3 years, asked respondents 22 questions about their experience with the SFDB process. Questions focused on the length of time spent in the discretionary review process, project permitting costs, and experiences with SFDB public hearings. Over 220 responses were received from residents, architects, design professionals, and others. Most respondents indicated that the SFDB design review process took longer than expected, cost more than anticipated, and resulted in frustration and heartache. Respondents were asked to offer their thoughts on how the process could be improved, and their answers informed the draft ordinance amendments.
- *February 2023 – March 2023: Meetings with Current & Former SFDB Members.* Staff solicited feedback from current and former SFDB members and discussed initial ideas for process improvements. Board members provided valuable input about the board's goals, guidelines, design review triggers, and challenges they encountered with the design review process.
- *March 2023 – April 2023: Focus Group Meetings with SFDB Applicants.* Staff requested feedback from architects, design professionals, and land use planning consultants who frequently present projects at SFDB during a series of three focus group meetings. During these meetings, focus group members shared the challenges they encountered during the SFDB design review process, as well as suggestions for streamlining the process.
- *April 19, 2023: Land Development Team Oversight Subcommittee Meeting.* City Staff introduced the Single Family Design Board Process Improvement Project and received feedback from the Subcommittee on the Project's goals and direction.

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- *June 2023 – August 2023: AIA & SFDB Subcommittee Working Group Meetings.* Members of the American Institute of Architects (AIA) Advocacy Group and two SFDB members met with City Staff to discuss specific code amendment concepts related to design review triggers and administrative approval standards for minor projects.
- *June 2023 – August 2023: Single Family Design Board Trainings.* City Staff facilitated three formal training sessions for the SFDB to enhance Board members' understanding of their purview and City policies and processes. Topics included an overview of the Planning Application process and SFDB's jurisdiction in the Municipal Code; how to use design guidelines to make required findings to approve a project; and special considerations for projects proposing a high floor area ratio (FAR).
- *October 26, 2023: Land Development Team Oversight Subcommittee Meeting.* City Staff presented findings from project data analysis and public outreach and sought feedback on the general approach and scope of the Project. The Subcommittee supported Staff's proposal.
- *March 11, 2024: Single Family Design Board Discussion #1.* City Staff presented a conceptual-level discussion of the proposed ordinance amendments. The Board provided comments and general support for the concepts presented.
- *March 21, 2024: Planning Commission Discussion.* City Staff presented ordinance amendment concepts for design review triggers, mailed noticing thresholds, and required findings to approve projects. The Commission provided comments and direction to staff.
- *November 13, 2024: Single Family Design Board Discussion #2.* City Staff presented refined ordinance amendment concepts for design review triggers to the Single Family Design Board for comments and feedback.
- *February 10, 2025: Single Family Design Board Discussion #3.* City Staff presented proposed updates to the Single Family Design Board General Design Guidelines & Meeting Procedures for comments and feedback, focusing on changes to administrative review.
- *June 10, 2025: Meeting with Santa Barbara Association of Realtors (SBAOR).* City Staff met with representatives of SBAOR to inform them of the proposed amendments. SBAOR representatives were generally supportive of the proposed amendments, particularly the Title 30 amendments to introduce flexibility in how people develop their property.
- *June 17, 2025: City Council Briefing Session.* City staff presented an overview of the proposed project, including the zoning streamlining amendments to Title 30, and requested general feedback regarding the proposed amendment concepts. City Council provided positive feedback on the proposed concepts.
- *August 11, 2025: Focus Group with Project Appellants.* City Staff met with and received written comments from three individuals who had participated in appeals of

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SFDB decisions at City Council and Planning Commission. Participants provided feedback about the appeal process and identified opportunities for improvement.

- *November 2025: Design Review Body Discussions.* City Staff presented highlights of the proposed changes at ABR, HLC, and SFDB in preparation for the release of the full amendments package.