



City of Santa Barbara California

PLANNING COMMISSION STAFF REPORT

REPORT DATE: November 19, 2025; updated November 25, 2025
AGENDA DATE: December 4, 2025
SUBJECT: Single Family Streamlining Project (PLN2024-00467)
TO: Planning Commission
FROM: Planning Division
Ellen Kokinda, City Planner
Ted Hamilton-Rolle, Acting Design Review Supervisor

I. PURPOSE

Review and comment on the proposed Single Family Streamlining Project, including amendments to the Single Family Design Board Ordinance and updates to the Single Family Design Board Guidelines, along with amendments to Titles 30 and 22 of the Municipal Code. This project aims to simplify the review and approval process for single-unit development projects while also providing much needed Zoning Ordinance clean-ups.

II. RECOMMENDATION

Staff recommends that Planning Commission consider the proposed amendments to Chapters 22.22, 22.68, 22.69, and multiple chapters in Title 30 (inland Zoning Ordinance) and provide feedback to staff prior to the project returning to Planning Commission for a formal recommendation in early 2026.

When the project returns for a formal recommendation to City Council, the following items will be requested:

- A. Relocate and amend the content of Santa Barbara Municipal Code (SBMC) Chapter 22.68 pertaining to the Architectural Board of Review (ABR) and Chapter 22.69 pertaining to the Single Family Design Board (SFDB) and move it to Title 30 under Chapter 30.220, Design Review;
- B. Re-establish SBMC Chapter 22.22, Historic Landmarks Commission, to reference Chapter 30.220, Design Review, to maintain consistency with the City Charter;
- C. Amend SBMC Title 30 pertaining to process and other regulations for single-family development streamlining and implement Zoning Ordinance clean-up items;
- D. Update the Single Family Design Board General Design Guidelines and Meeting Procedures with content changes to expand administrative approval standards and revise procedures;
- E. Determine that the Single Family Streamlining Project, including Design Board Process Improvements, associated amendments to the Single Family Design Board General Design Guidelines and Meeting Procedures, and proposed amendments to the Municipal Code, is categorically exempt from environmental review pursuant to California Environmental

Quality Act (CEQA) Guidelines Section 15305: Minor Alterations in Land Use Limitations; and

- F. Determine that the Single Family Streamlining Project, including Design Board Process Improvements, associated amendments to the Single Family Design Board General Design Guidelines and Meeting Procedures, and proposed amendments to the Municipal Code, is consistent with the General Plan.

III. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In response to community feedback, State law, direction from City Council, and to implement Housing Element Program HE-5, the Single-Family Development Streamlining Project (Project) is intended to simplify the process for review and approval of single-family residential development projects while maintaining Santa Barbara's tradition of quality architecture and distinctive neighborhood character.

Since establishment of the Single Family Design Board (SFDB) in 2007, the volume of SFDB projects has increased significantly through code updates and the introduction of Title 30. While many of the code updates attempted to streamline processes, the new regulations added projects to SFDB's workload. In 2020, when tasked to review the City's land development processes, the Novak Consulting Group called out the substantial number of single-unit projects subject to review and suggested reassigning SFDB's duties to streamline land development.¹ When polled, homeowners and project applicants provided staff overwhelming feedback expressing frustration with the time, anguish, and money involved in getting approvals for minor home projects, especially when those projects require noticed public hearings. As a result of the input, the City's Land Development Team Oversight Subcommittee, with support from the Planning Commission, directed staff to pursue single family streamlining updates to the zoning code and design guidelines.

The Project aims to reduce the total number of projects that require SFDB review by more than 20 percent, streamline the public hearing process for single family projects, and provide more flexibility within the zoning ordinance and design guidelines to reduce permitting barriers. These changes are expected to result in faster processing times and reduced complexity while upholding SFDB's primary goal of ensuring residential projects are compatible with the surrounding neighborhood in size and design. Further, these efforts are in line with the state's direction in streamlining processes for residential development. The Project also includes zoning ordinance amendments to clarify existing language, as well as make updates required by state law.

IV. PROJECT DESCRIPTION

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.

¹ Novak Consulting Group 2020 [Land Development Process Improvement Report](#)

The Project responds to City Council direction, community input, General Plan policies, and consultant recommendations to streamline and simplify the review and approval process for single-unit residential projects. The Project implements 2023-2031 Housing Element Program HE-5: Process Improvements. In August 2022, the Land Development Team Oversight Subcommittee (LDTOT) directed staff to address recommendations made by the Novak Consulting Group's 2020 [Land Development Process Improvement Report](#), which included reducing the number of design review triggers, streamlining the review process for simple permits and homeowner projects, and developing project tiers that trigger different routing and levels of review.

The Project includes amendments to Chapters 22.22, 22.68, 22.69 and multiple chapters of Title 30 of the Municipal Code to achieve the project goals and to address general "clean-up" items related Title 30. The code amendments fall into the following four categories: 1) significant change; 2) minor change; 3) cleanup and clarifying amendments; 4) clarifying amendments required by State law. The proposed amendments to Title 30 related to design review will be in effect Citywide. See Exhibits A and B – Draft Title 30 and Title 22 Ordinance Amendments, respectively – for the draft ordinances and Exhibit C - Table of Proposed Ordinance Amendments – for a tabulated list and explanation of the proposed amendments.

This project also proposes updates to the SFDB General Design Guidelines and Meeting Procedures to complement the proposed zoning ordinance amendments.

The zoning ordinance and design guidelines are interconnected, and as such, the proposed amendments must maintain alignment between them. It is important that the Planning Commission and the public understand the interrelation between the ordinance and guidelines, as a change to one will affect the other. The proposed ordinance and design guideline amendments have been carefully calibrated to align with each other, providing a predictable process for City staff and the public.

V. BACKGROUND

City staff initiated the project in August 2022 and conducted more than 14 targeted stakeholder engagement efforts with homeowners, applicants, the design community with major support from the American Institute of Architects Santa Barbara, Planning Commission, and SFDB – both past and present board members. This included an applicant and homeowner survey with over 220 respondents providing feedback on the SFDB process. Most recently, staff workshopped concepts at City Council for feedback and, at Council's direction, sought input from SFDB project appellants (neighborhood representatives).

See Exhibit D – Project Background and Public Outreach Summary and Exhibit E – SFDB Applicant Survey Responses Report for additional information.

VI. DISCUSSION

This discussion section begins with an explanation of the Project goals and proposed solutions. The Project proposes three goals to address single family streamlining and includes a series of proposed solutions for each goal. Following the discussion of goals and solutions is a discussion of proposed updates to the SFDB General Design Guidelines and Meeting Procedures (SFDB Guidelines) that support the Project goals and address other key issues including the SFDB's

purpose and administrative approval standards. Next is a brief discussion of the additional zoning ordinance cleanup efforts, followed by a discussion of the project’s anticipated benefits. For brevity, only the most significant proposed changes are discussed in the staff report. Further details and the full text of proposed solutions can be found in Exhibits A and B (Draft ordinance), C (table of proposed ordinance amendments), F (draft guidelines), and G (summary of guidelines amendments).

A. Project Goals and Proposed Solutions

Each Project goal is supported by multiple proposed solutions, including ordinance amendments and guideline updates, aimed at improving the single-family development process.

Goal	Solution
<i>1. Reduce the number of single family development projects subject to design review.</i>	
	1A. Eliminate site-alterations-only projects from SFDB purview and add objective design standards to the zoning ordinance that address alterations to existing development to avoid automatically triggered design review.*
	1B. Expand exemptions from SFDB review and increase opportunities for administrative (staff) review and approval of minor projects.**
	1C. Reduce triggers for mailed notice.*
	1D. Streamline the process for Minor Zoning Exceptions (MZE) by converting commonly approved MZE into zoning standards.*
<i>2. Streamline the public hearing process for single family projects.</i>	
	2A. Eliminate the SFDB Final Approval hearing and associated appeal.**
	2B. Make SFDB the decisionmaker for projects exceeding the maximum allowable Floor Area Ratio (FAR).**
<i>3. Create more flexibility to address common homeowner interests.</i>	
	3A. Remove the requirement for covered parking.*
	3B. Provide options for the creative use of home space by allowing the conversion of an existing garage or carport from vehicle parking to another residential use, such as a home office, hobby room, or extra bedroom.*
	3C. Reduce open yard requirements for small lots and provide more flexible open yard standards for all other lots.*
	3D. Create design and development standards for storage sheds, playhouses, and similar enclosed yard buildings.*

*Addressed through ordinance amendments

**Addressed through both ordinance amendments and guidelines updates

Goal 1: Reduce the number of single family development projects subject to design review.

Solution 1A: Eliminate alterations-only projects from SFDB purview and add design standards to the zoning ordinance that address alterations to existing development to avoid automatically triggered design review.

There are currently over 35 triggers for SFDB design review, mostly listed in Chapter 22.69, with some in Titles 28 and 30 (coastal and inland zoning ordinances). The major amendment proposed to reduce SFDB design review triggers is to exempt alteration projects that do not involve a change in building square footage. In reviewing three years of SFDB project data (2019-2022), staff found that approximately 45% of projects were building or site alterations that did not involve any changes to floor area, and were instead routine maintenance, upgrades, and repairs, with a slim minority resulting in a significant change to the appearance of the building or site². Board members and applicants felt strongly that projects involving routine repairs, maintenance, and updates that do not affect house size are the least important thing for the SFDB to review, while new two-story houses, large additions, and major site work are among the most important. As a result, the proposed amendments to the SFDB design review triggers have been carefully calibrated to exempt alteration-only projects if they meet proposed design and development standards within Title 30.

If adopted, these amendments would result in an estimated 21% reduction in the total number of SFDB projects³. The 21% estimated project reduction is conservative; the actual percentage of projects that would no longer be subject to SFDB review may be higher. In addition, staff anticipate that a larger share of the projects under SFDB purview will be eligible for administrative approval based on the expanded administrative approval standards in the proposed SFDB Guidelines. At the March 2024 hearing, the Planning Commission directed staff to draft an objective definition for major alterations as the initial definition lacked clarity⁴. Since the March 2024 Planning Commission hearing, staff explored an exhaustive number of potential definitions for major alterations, but they posed challenges for implementation. Staff are now proposing a different approach. Rather than identifying projects that constitute a major alteration, staff propose creating exemptions for minor alterations that do not rise to the level of SFDB oversight. The resulting design review exemptions are drafted as design and development standards and allow ministerial review of projects that either visually match the existing, permitted condition of the building or site, or result in a new, cohesive design style as defined in the SFDB Guidelines. This approach allows for ministerial review of routine maintenance projects such as window replacement, reroofing, and exterior siding replacement, while avoiding significant time spent between applicants and staff debating what constitutes as major alteration.

² See Exhibit H for a summary of SFDB project data analysis.

³ The 21% reduction is estimated based on analysis of 3 years of project data subtracting projects that would no longer be triggered for design review under the proposed code.

⁴ See Exhibit I – Planning Commission Minutes, March 21, 2024.

Some members of the public expressed concern that City staff do not have the expertise to review projects for consistency with a specific architectural style and to determine whether a project matches the existing style or results in a new cohesive style. Staff acknowledge this concern but remain confident that we possess the ability to do this type of review. Staff process administrative approval requests daily through the review of Accessory Dwelling Unit projects for consistency with the codified ministerial design criteria and through review of other minor projects for consistency with the Administrative Approval Standards in the Architectural Board of Review (ABR), Historic Landmarks Commission (HLC), and SFDB Guidelines. Staff conduct weekly internal workshops to review architectural details, window schedules, and materials and finishes to evaluate consistency with the ministerial criteria. Staff also rely on *A Field Guide to American Houses* to evaluate project details for consistency with a variety of architectural styles. For these reasons, the type of review required to evaluate whether a proposed alteration matches existing development or results in a cohesive new style is not new to City staff. Further, as part of Project implementation, staff will be thoroughly trained on the proposed ordinance and procedures and expectations for project review.

In addition to the exemptions from SFDB design review discussed above, the Project proposes additional design standards throughout the zoning ordinance for alterations projects. Creating design standards gives applicants a clear permitting path to ministerial approval if desired, but also an option to choose a process that allows them to deviate from the objective standard. The proposed design standards for elements such as retaining walls, decks, and new or expanded upper story windows, are based on long-standing design *guideline* criteria, and thus push applicants to design toward existing, familiar design preferences.

For example, there are no standards for retaining walls under current code other than those that apply to fences, which do not directly address considerations specific to retaining walls. The proposed design standards for retaining walls include required materials (natural stone, brick, or stucco) and required landscape elements for retaining walls over 4 feet in height to soften the massing. The proposed standards also clarify cumulative height limits for terraced retaining walls in both cut slope and fill slope configurations.

As another example, there are no standards for upper story decks under the current code, even though they tend to present neighbor privacy concerns. The proposed amendments address this by implementing a 15-foot setback from interior lot lines for upper story decks, consistent with Good Neighbor Guideline 36.2.4 from the Single Family Residence Design Guidelines. Decks smaller than 160 square feet that are more than 15 feet from an interior lot line would not require design review, and decks that do not meet those size or distance standards may request an exception reviewed by the applicable design review body. One deck is allowed per façade.

Also included in the proposed amendments to Title 30 are new standards for landscape improvements for all zones. The standards require that front setbacks must be landscaped with ground cover, shrubs, vines, or trees to provide a landscape buffer from the street and avoid excessive paving. Existing properties made nonconforming by these new standards would not be required to meet the standards unless building or site improvements are proposed that require a landscape plan⁵.

⁵ See SBMC Ch.14.23 – Landscape Design Standards and Recycled Water Use – for projects that require a landscape plan.

See Exhibit A (draft ordinance, section 30.220.040.B) for the full text of the proposed SFDB design review triggers, and Exhibit F (Draft SFDB Guidelines, Section 6) for the updated administrative approval standards.

Solution 1B: Expand opportunities for administrative (staff) review and approval of minor projects.

In addition to reducing the number of projects that require SFDB review at any level, this project proposes to reduce the number of single family projects that require a public hearing by expanding the criteria for administrative approvals in the SFDB Guidelines. Proposed cleanups and clarifications to the SFDB Guidelines incorporate feedback from the SFDB Working Group, applicants, and staff. As part of this effort, staff are also addressing lessons learned from previous administrative approvals based on feedback from neighbors. The discussion below does not include every change to the administrative approval criteria; only those that are the most significant. Proposed expansion of administrative approvals includes the following increases in approvable size limits for accessory buildings, additions, and decks. Note that projects must comply with additional criteria beyond these proposed administrative approval size limits.

Project Element	Administrative Approval Limit	
	Current	Proposed
Accessory Buildings ⁶ (one-story, max. 17 feet in height)	250 SF (500 SF if not publicly visible)	800 SF
Additions, First-Story ⁷	500 SF	800 SF
Additions to an existing Second- or Higher-Story	150 SF	250 SF
Decks, First Story	200 SF	400 SF
Decks, Second- and Higher-Story (except roof decks)	Ineligible for administrative approval	250 SF

See Exhibit F, Draft SFDB Guidelines, Section 6.1-6.3 for the full text of the SFDB Administrative Approval Standards, and Exhibit G, Summary of Changes to SFDB Guidelines, for additional information.

Solution 1C: Reduce triggers for mailed notice.

The purpose of a mailed notice is to inform neighbors about proposed development that may affect them. Not all projects require mailed notice; only those that have the greatest potential for neighborhood impacts are subject to this requirement. Staff recognize that mailed noticing is a critical component of public participation in the Planning process. Therefore, we propose to

⁶ To qualify for administrative approval, accessory buildings cannot be located in the front yard.

⁷ To qualify for administrative approval, additions must not significantly alter the front/street-facing façade in terms of massing, scale, and architectural style.

maintain the noticing requirement for projects that warrant it while removing the noticing requirement for projects that do not generally garner neighborhood interest.

Projects that require a mailed notice are not eligible for administrative approval. Therefore, to expand administrative approvals, the SFDB’s mailed notice triggers also require adjustment. To determine appropriate adjustments to the mailed notice triggers, staff reviewed project data and consulted with SFDB stakeholders. Notably, the proposed amendments change the noticing trigger for first-story additions from 500 square feet to 800 square feet to be consistent with the State allowance for an 800 square foot ministerial ADU. SFDB stakeholders felt that this threshold was appropriate for additions to the first story as it encourages massing on the first story rather than the second story. In addition, some Minor Zoning Exceptions and other waivers of zoning requirements that routinely receive a rubber-stamp approval at design review are proposed to become ministerial and no longer require a mailed notice or public hearing. A new main building, a new upper story on an existing building, and grading in excess of 250 cubic yards would still require a mailed notice. All existing mailed notice thresholds are listed in the table below, along with proposed changes:

Mailed Noticing Threshold	
Current	Proposed
New main building	No change
500-square-foot first story addition	800-square-foot first story addition
New second or higher story on an existing building	No change
150-square-foot addition to an existing second or higher story	250-square-foot addition to an existing second or higher story
250 cubic yards of grading outside the main building footprint or on a vacant lot	No change
Minor Zoning Exceptions: fence and hedge height	No change
Minor Zoning Exceptions: alterations to nonconforming structures, trash enclosure location	No notice required ⁸
Exterior lighting with potential for impacts to neighboring properties	No change ⁹
Uncovered parking spaces exception	No notice required

Solution 1D: *Streamline the process for Minor Zoning Exceptions (MZE) by converting commonly approved MZEs into zoning standards.*

⁸ All MZEs except those for additional fence and hedge height are proposed to be converted to zoning standards reviewed ministerially or as a waiver by the applicable design review body, without a mailed notice. Refer to additional discussion under Solution 1D.

⁹ Although the noticing trigger for lighting is not being substantively changed, it is being edited for clarity so that Staff better understand when it applies.

Currently, Title 30 identifies a limited number of specific projects (e.g. new or enlarged window openings in setbacks) for which an MZE can be granted by the applicable design review body, subject to specific findings. Prior to adoption of Title 30, exceptions to the zoning standards for these projects required Staff Hearing Officer review and approval of a Zoning Modification. In that sense, Title 30 MZEs already streamline the process compared to the former (Title 28) regulations. However, we have learned that at SFDB, most MZE requests get a “rubber stamp” approval because they generally do not garner neighborhood interest at hearings and do not pose architectural compatibility concerns. All MZE requests heard by SFDB between 2019 and 2022 were approved. Current and former board members and SFDB Process Improvements working group members indicated that most MZEs are straightforward enough to be handled at the staff level and rarely warrant the level of oversight they are given at a public hearing.

Initially, this Project proposed to take all MZEs out of design review purview by making the Community Development Director the MZE review authority. However, street-facing fences and hedges can have a major aesthetic impact on the streetscape and pose inconsistencies with neighborhood patterns; and interior fences and hedges can have impacts on adjacent neighbors’ properties. Staff believe fence and hedge MZEs still warrant a public forum and design review board oversight. Therefore, the proposed ordinance maintains the applicable design review body as the review authority for front- and interior-lot-line fence and hedge MZE requests. The remaining MZEs – for height and volume increases in setbacks, trash enclosures in front yards, and new or enlarged openings in setbacks – are proposed to be reviewed by the Community Development Director using new design standards in the zoning ordinance. MZE requests that the Director finds do not meet those standards would be forwarded to the applicable design review body. This approach ensures aesthetic oversight of projects with more potential to impact neighbors and neighborhood character while providing additional streamlining for projects that are less likely to present neighborhood compatibility issues.

Goal 2: Streamline the public hearing process for single family projects.

Solution 2A: Eliminate the Final Approval hearing and associated appeal.

Under the current SFDB process, staff, the Board, and project applicants spend a significant amount of time on Final Approval, the last discretionary action by the SFDB prior to building permit submittal. The Board’s purview at Final Approval is narrow, limited to whether the plans substantially conform to Project Design Approval¹⁰ and whether the exterior construction details and materials are sufficient and accurate. Along with adding time and cost to a homeowner, the current Final Approval process requires staff to perform an additional plan review that otherwise occurs during building permit application review – a redundancy in the process. Specifically, when a project granted Project Design Approval is submitted for Final Approval, staff reviews for substantial conformance to Project Design Approval and ensures the required materials and details are on the plans. The same staff review is performed again when the project is submitted for a building permit.

To shorten the time a project spends in the SFDB process, this Project proposes making the Community Development Director the default review authority for post-approval decisions,

¹⁰ Project Design Approval is the substantive approval for all City design boards.

namely Final Approval and Review After Final, for SFDB projects. The Director would have the ability to refer post-approval decisions to SFDB if necessary to ensure substantial conformance to Project Design Approval or verify final details. This would make Final Approval and Review After Final ministerial actions performed by the Community Development Director. It would also make Project Design Approval the only SFDB action appealable by the public – Final Approval and Review After Final would be appealable only by the project applicant, but only if referred to the SFDB by the Director.

To ensure a robust Project Design Approval, some project details currently required at Final Approval, including exterior colors, materials, and key exterior structural details, would now be required at Project Design Approval. Under the proposed process, staff would perform their routine plan check of Final Approval plans during the building permit phase, verifying that all conditions of approval have been met and that any changes requested by the SFDB have been made. Minor changes to the approved plans would be eligible for an administrative substantial conformance determination, subject to the new Substantial Conformance Criteria in the proposed SFDB Guidelines (explained in detail below). If staff determines that a Final Approval plan set does not substantially conform to the plans that received Project Design Approval, then a revised Project Design Approval would be required. Staff would also be able to refer any post-approval decision to the SFDB, which would then be appealable to Planning Commission only by the project applicant.

This process improvement reduces confusion by making Project Design Approval the only appealable action at which all project elements can be addressed. Further, it decreases confusion for the public on the appropriate time to appeal a project. In addition, it facilitates compliance with the Housing Crisis Act, which limits the total number of hearings that a single family residence may be subject to, which is especially important when projects can be subject to other City discretionary review processes and *those* appeal processes (e.g. Staff Hearing Officer, Planning Commission, or Street Tree Advisory Committee/Parks and Recreation Commission, and City Council). Appeals are staff-intensive, highly subsidized by the General Fund, involve multiple departments, and a single appealable hearing is sufficient for single family development.

Requiring a Final Approval decision at the SFDB remains a popular idea to some community members who have expressed concerns about staff's ability to determine substantial conformance. Our effort in removing the automatic SFDB Final Approval hearing is to significantly streamline review and provide clear standards for substantial conformance for building permit submittals.

Substantial Conformance

To better assist staff and the public, the proposed SFDB Guidelines provide new criteria for determining substantial conformance to approved plans. For SFDB projects, the new substantial conformance determination process will be carried out by the Community Development Director and will apply to projects seeking Final Approval at the building permit phase and projects proposing changes after Final Approval (Review After Final). Below are the criteria that must be met for a Final Approval plan set or revised project to substantially conform to Project Design Approval:

Issue	Substantial Conformance Criteria (Proposed)
<i>Conditions of Approval</i>	Does not conflict with findings or conditions of approval made by the SFDB or Planning Commission on appeal.
<i>Height</i>	Does not result in an overall height which is greater than one foot above the approved height and does not exceed a maximum of 25 feet. For residences between 25 and 30 feet in height, the revised project does not increase the height by more than 4 inches above the approved height. In no case shall the building height exceed the maximum residential height in the zone.
<i>Floor Area</i>	Does not result in an increase of more than 150 square feet to the approved net floor area.
<i>Grading</i>	Does not result in an increase in grading outside the building footprint greater than 25 cubic yards more than the quantities shown on the approved plans.
<i>Environmental Studies</i>	Alterations do not occur in any biologically sensitive area as identified in the City's MAPS database, unless a technical study prepared by a qualified consultant indicates that the alterations will not have an adverse environmental impact. Does not result in environmental effects not analyzed or discussed at the approval process and does not result in new mitigation measures.
<i>Trees</i>	Any proposed tree removal is consistent with the Administrative Approval Standards for tree removals.
<i>Privacy</i>	Alterations do not result in new or enlarged window or door openings within interior setbacks. Any new or expanded decks or patios are located outside required zoning setbacks.

In addition to these criteria, the proposed changes in the SFDB Guidelines include staff considering broad issues such as whether the project was subject to an appeal, whether the proposed changes result in a new project or impact zoning conformance, whether the project was subject to significant controversy, whether there was significant discussion about the particular issue, and whether the proposed revisions would alter the public's perception of the project. The above-listed criteria provide guardrails for the decision, and the additional considerations provide the project-specific critical analysis needed to ensure consistency in the Director's determinations of substantial conformance.

Although eliminating the final approval hearing has garnered major support and was included in the Novak Report recommendations, some concerns and considerations were raised during public outreach. These concerns, along with staff responses, are provided below:

- **Concern:** City staff are not licensed architects, and therefore, are less equipped to make informed decisions on substantial conformance determinations during building permit review or to make calls on architectural details for administrative design review requests.

Staff response: Staff review architectural plans and details daily and hold weekly meetings to review and apply eligibility criteria when assessing administrative design requests. If staff raise questions about final architectural details and feel uncomfortable with making a determination, staff would refer those to the SFDB. To be clear, although a project is eligible for administrative approval, staff are not obligated to approve the request if questions or concerns emerge about neighbor impacts, neighborhood compatibility, or any other design elements. In these instances, staff may refer projects back to the Board (either Consent or Full Board) for a decision.

- **Concern:** Requiring more information and project details at Project Design Approval would be too costly or too much of a time investment when the project has not yet been approved.

Staff response: Due to the significant upfront cost, full working construction drawings would not be required at Project Design Approval, but it is expected that more details will be required. Staff consider this a balance between concerns we hear from applicants about early investment without knowing if a project will be approved and having enough detail that the SFDB can make their required findings. Staff find that the trade-off is worth being able to eliminate an additional appealable hearing. Conceptual review is the best way for applicants to get early feedback on the design and massing before moving forward with the additional details that would be required prior to Project Design Approval and it is included in the SFDB review fee (fee currently covers up to four total hearings). The SFDB may also request exterior details to clarify confusion with a design and the submitted plans.

- **Consideration:** Some members of the public will want to maintain maximum oversight on neighborhood development and will not support the expansion of administrative approvals.

Staff response: The most significant single-unit projects—such as new second and third story additions and new residences, including new residences in the Hillside Design District—will still require Full Board SFDB review. This project aims to maintain the existing oversight that SFDB has on projects that pose the greatest impact to neighborhood compatibility based on a project's size, bulk, and scale. Unlike the Architectural Board of Review and the Historic Landmarks Commission, the SFDB is not a Charter board or commission. As such, there is more flexibility to experiment with streamlining efforts—an advantage that will help us try to find the right balance of SFDB oversight. Prior to 1992, there was no design review for single family residences. Over time, we have added a significant number of projects to SFDB's plate. This effort will hopefully course correct to bring the number of minor projects down so that they may be ministerially reviewed and approved. The effort to streamline the process for single family homeowners is a tradeoff to maintaining maximum oversight of projects. We understand the desire of some to maintain maximum oversight, but staff believe there is a more appropriate balance of oversight given the direction to streamline.

Solution 2B: *Make SFDB the decisionmaker for projects exceeding the maximum allowable Floor Area Ratio (FAR).*

To further streamline the process for single family projects, this Project proposes a shift in the decision-making responsibility for FAR Modifications from Planning Commission to the SFDB (or HLC for historic resources). Currently, if a project proposes to exceed the maximum allowable FAR, the majority of SFDB or HLC members must vote in favor of the project at a

concept hearing. Following an affirmative majority vote at design review, the project is referred to Planning Commission for a decision on the FAR Modification. In discussions with both the SFDB and Planning Commission, this process was determined to be unnecessary because the required findings¹¹ to grant an FAR Modification are more closely related to design and aesthetics than land use. As a result of the proposed change, appeals of FAR Design Exceptions granted by the SFDB would be heard by Planning Commission, and appeals of FAR Design Exceptions granted by HLC would be heard by City Council, allowing projects the standard practice of due process at a higher review authority.

Goal 3: Create more flexibility within the code and design guidelines to address common homeowner interests.

Solution 3A: Remove the requirement to provide covered parking.

The proposed amendments give homeowners more flexibility by removing the requirement for off-street parking to be “covered”—meaning in a garage or carport. Currently, two covered parking spaces are required for every single family residence, with some exceptions¹². The proposed amendments would not change the number of required spaces, only the requirement that they be covered in either a carport or garage. Staff proposed this amendment as a common-sense solution to a problem that tends to hold up projects. While covered parking is encouraged both as a principle of sound transportation planning and an aesthetic preference, to require it can present hardships, especially for owners of lots developed prior to the current covered parking requirement. Removing the covered parking requirement can make it easier for homeowners who have to address existing substandard garages. In instances where substandard garages have needed to be rebuilt to conform to current regulations, it has been a massive cost to a homeowner for something they may not wish to have. Replacement uncovered parking spaces would be allowed in an existing driveway¹³. This is a newer concept that received strong support from City Council at their June 2025 project briefing.

Solution 3B: Provide options for the creative use of home space by allowing the conversion of an existing garage or carport from vehicle parking to another residential accessory use, such as a home office, hobby room, or extra bedroom.

By giving homeowners the option to park in different configurations, the proposed code amendments facilitate the conversion of an existing garage to another residential use such as a storage room, workshop/home office, bedroom, or guest house (no requirement for kitchen). This flexibility would allow homeowners to increase the amount of usable space on their property at

¹¹ Findings to approve an FAR Modification (SBMC §30.250.060.C): 1. Not less than five members of the Single Family Design Board or six members of the Historic Landmarks Commission (on projects referred to the Commission pursuant to Section 22.69.030) have voted in support of the Modification following a concept review of the project; 2. The subject lot has a physical condition (such as the location, surroundings, topography, or the size or dimensions of the lot relative to other lots in the neighborhood) that does not generally exist on other lots in the neighborhood; and 3. The physical condition of the lot allows the project to be compatible with existing development within the neighborhood that comply with the floor area standard.

¹² SBMC §30.175.030.N provides for two exceptions to the covered parking requirement for lots under 15,000 square feet: i.) One covered and once uncovered space allowed for lots developed with less than 85% of the allowed floor area ratio, and ii.) Two uncovered spaces allowed for lots developed with less than 80% of the allowed floor area ratio, if at least 200 cubic feet of enclosed exterior storage space is provided and subject to approval by the appropriate design review body.

¹³ Uncovered parking spaces may be located in the front yard if they are screened from public view, meeting zoning standards.

a lower cost than building a new addition or accessory building while maintaining the residential character of the area. Additionally, more opportunities to allow a full bathroom (i.e. toilet, sink, and bathtub/shower) in a garage or other accessory buildings are offered. This allows owners to add a “guest house”—a maximum 500-square-foot building used for guests—without the need to create a separate dwelling unit. This fills a need not currently met for homeowners who do not want to go to the length of permitting an ADU, specifically installing a kitchen, but want to convert their garage to livable space with a full bathroom.

Solution 3C: Reduce open yard requirements for small lots and provide more flexible open yard standards for all other lots.

Modest changes to the residential open yard requirements for both single family and multi-family developments are proposed to simplify the requirements and make it easier for smaller, constrained lots to build additions without needing a discretionary approval, waiver, or modification. Additional flexibility would allow a mix of open yard options (e.g. balconies, decks, patios, natural areas, etc.) by eliminating the need for a design review “waiver” of private open yards.

For example, the open yard requirement for a single family residence on a lot less than 6,000 square feet (sq. ft.) would be reduced from 1,250 sq. ft. to 800 sq. ft. and minimum dimensions for all lots would be reduced from 20 feet x 20 feet to 15 feet x 20 feet. Similarly, the open yard requirement for multi-family development is not decreasing in overall area— it is still 15% of the lot area—but the strict requirement to provide a certain area of private patio or balcony area for each unit based on the number of bedrooms is relaxed to give more options in a new project¹⁴.

Solution 3D: Create design and development standards for storage sheds, playhouses, and similar enclosed yard buildings.

The proposed amendments would make it easier for homeowners to have a small accessory building, such as a storage shed, bicycle locker, or playhouse, in the backyard. Current zoning requirements are strict on these types of yard buildings, with the main limitation being that they are not allowed in setbacks or open yards. The proposed code would allow a 6-foot-tall yard building in side-yard setbacks if it meets size, location, and screening requirements. Accessory buildings in the setbacks that exceed those requirements would require a Modification and review by the applicable design review body.

B. Updates to the SFDB General Design Guidelines & Meeting Procedures

This Project includes an extensive overhaul of the *Single Family Design Board General Design Guidelines and Meeting Procedures*, including a proposed renaming to the *Single Family Design Board Guidelines* (SFDB Guidelines). The proposed scope and content of the SFDB Guidelines remains largely the same, with several key changes:

- Consolidate SFDB purpose and goals
- Update references to other guidelines
- Expand and update administrative approval standards
- Update SFDB meeting procedures

¹⁴ This concept was discussed and supported by Planning Commission in 2022.

- Update and clarify submittal requirements
- Reorganize, reformat, and edit for clarity

The SFDB Guidelines were most recently updated in June 2023 to address SFDB membership, quorum requirements (from four¹⁵ members to three members), and a change in the appeal body (from Council to Planning Commission). The next most recent update occurred in 2011 to clarify SFDB procedures and clean up the original 2007 document. Other than these two updates, the document has remained largely unchanged since the SFDB's inception. As a result, the guidelines have not evolved with options for new building materials, sustainability practices, and development policies. The proposed guideline updates allow staff to approve more minor, aesthetically appropriate projects, thereby reducing the number of SFDB projects at a hearing.

Consolidating the SFDB's Purpose and Goals

Guided by robust community feedback, staff carefully revised the SFDB's purpose statement in the municipal code and the SFDB's goals in the SFDB Guidelines to better align with the realities of the SFDB process. The SFDB's current purpose statement within SBMC Chapter 22.69 addresses the SFDB's primary goal of ensuring projects are compatible with their surrounding neighborhood, but in the expanded list of goals in the existing Guidelines, it also includes elements that SFDB members feel are less within their purview or serve a tertiary purpose, such as "promoting the ecological sustainability of the City's built environment." The SFDB General Design Guidelines and Meeting Procedures identify 12 additional goals, which the Board wished to consolidate to be more focused. SFDB members indicated that the Board's purpose statement and goals should more concretely reflect their purview, including project size and design, architectural style, landscape design, exterior building materials, and the protection of public views of the hillsides and ocean. They felt that other considerations within the purpose statement and goals, such as public safety, sustainability, and consistency with the zoning ordinance, were adequately addressed through staff's routine review of development applications for consistency with code standards and CEQA requirements.

The updated purpose statement within the proposed ordinance (SBMC §30.220.040) is:

"...to protect and preserve the City's natural and historical character and to enhance its visual and aesthetic quality. The SFDB ensures that single-unit residential development is compatible in scale and design with the surrounding neighborhood and that public visual resources are protected through the design review process."

This focused purpose statement clarifies the purpose and intent of the Board and reduces the potential for confusion as to the Board's purview. Further, per SFDB's direction, staff propose to consolidate the goals in the Guidelines from a list of twelve wide-ranging goals to six focused goals:

- A. Ensure development is compatible with the site and the neighborhood;
- B. Enhance neighborhood character by fostering quality and diversity in architectural styles;

¹⁵ One of the four board members had to be a licensed architect to establish a quorum. In June 2023, the licensed architect requirement to establish SFDB quorum was removed due to project delays and cancelled meetings as a result of not having a quorum.

- C. Promote high standards in architectural and landscape design and the construction of aesthetically pleasing structures;
- D. Ensure new development does not significantly impact adjacent historic resources;
- E. Ensure new development does not significantly impact the beauty of Santa Barbara's natural and built resources; and
- F. Promote visual relief throughout the community and preserve public scenic views of the ocean and mountains.

Updated SFDB Findings

The SFDB's codified findings to approve a project are related to the SFDB's goals as stated in the Council-adopted guidelines; this Project proposes to align the SFDB's goals and findings more closely with one another and to simplify the text of the findings. The resulting Neighborhood Compatibility Findings (formerly Neighborhood Preservation Findings) have been reduced from 7 items to 5, and the length of text has been reduced by half, making it less tedious for board members to make findings and therefore easier to craft a solid motion.

Board members indicated discomfort with certain findings that relate more closely to public health and compliance with codes and environmental review than project size, design, and aesthetics. They pointed out that it is staff's job to ensure projects meet applicable regulations related to health and safety, such as building and fire codes and other considerations that outside agencies have control over such as air quality or hazardous materials. Therefore, staff propose to remove the findings that reference those elements which are outside the Board's purview and comfort zone.

During targeted outreach to appellants of SFDB projects, we heard that these neighbors felt strongly that the SFDB insufficiently address the Good Neighbor Guidelines and considered the "Good Neighbor Finding" to be a throw away finding. They expressed a desire for the SFDB to be more explicit in their motions about how a project meets the "Good Neighbor Guidelines" finding identified below:

"The project complies with the Good Neighbor Guidelines regarding privacy, landscaping, noise and lighting."

Staff do not propose to change this finding; however, we believe it is imperative to hold additional trainings for SFDB members to ensure a shared understanding of the Good Neighbor guidelines and to help improve the Board's motion making.

Lastly, the Hillside Design District Findings and Grading and Vegetation Removal Findings have been consolidated for simplicity.

Refer to Section 30.220.040.E of the proposed ordinance (Exhibit A) for the updated findings and Exhibit J – Proposed and Current SFDB Findings for a comparison of the current and proposed findings.

Addressing Feedback on the Concept of Neighborhood Compatibility

General feedback from board members, applicants, and members of the public is that the concept of neighborhood compatibility is ambiguous and not sufficiently defined. Some expressed interest in having a simple, unambiguous definition to help in the evaluation of projects. In the early stages of this Project, staff heard from past and present board members about the challenges of applying the concept of neighborhood compatibility, specifically defining the geographic boundaries of a neighborhood and assessing a project's massing and appearance based on the residences within that boundary. The SFDB's assessment of parcel size, specific site conditions, and home orientation to the streetscape and nearby development, shapes the geography of the defined "neighborhood." The current Guidelines provide SFDB some guidance about defining neighborhood, but there remains a strong desire for greater clarity – an objective definition. From our survey, applicants and homeowners shared their frustrations with the Board's application of the concept of neighborhood compatibility, saying that board members tend to be biased toward a specific architectural style. We also heard statements such as the zoning ordinance is clear, but the concept of neighborhood compatibility is not clear, especially when it comes to Board Member's personal design opinions. Rather than coming up with an objective definition, staff added direction in the Guidelines based on our conversations and research. The Guidelines have been updated to include an introduction regarding compatibility, character, and style to clarify that compatibility does not mean uniformity, that multiple styles may be appropriate, and that those involved in the planning process should rely on the robust guidance in the Single Family Residence Design Guidelines regarding neighborhood compatibility.

Refer to the Introduction of the Draft Proposed SFDB Guidelines (Exhibit F) for this contextual note.

Expanded Administrative Approval Standards

The expansion of administrative approvals to reduce the number of SFDB projects at a public hearing is discussed in detail above under Project Goal 1. In addition, staff added a new step-by-step Procedures subsection has been added to the Administrative Approval Standards section to enhance usability.

Refer to Section 6 of the Draft Proposed SFDB Guidelines (Exhibit F) for the updated Administrative Approval Standards.

C. Conclusion

Additional Project benefits include:

- Upholding SFDB Objectives: Ensures the aesthetic quality of neighborhoods and participation of neighbors for larger projects.
- Faster Approvals: Homeowners should see quicker approval times for simple projects.
- Less Bureaucracy: Reduces unnecessary public hearings which results in fewer delays in homeowners' ability to make improvements and more money to put toward their project.
- Staff Efficiency: City staff and the SFDB will focus on more complex projects, improving overall workflow and reducing board member burnout.
- More Homeowner Flexibility: Homeowners will have greater freedom to improve their homes without unnecessary hurdles.

- Zoning Ordinance cleanups for clarity and consistency.

Additional Zoning Ordinance Clean-ups

Along with amendments to streamline single family development, this Project proposes multiple clean-up amendments to the Zoning Ordinance for clarity and consistency. The clean-up items include: clarifications to land use regulations and development standards for commercial and office zones, manufacturing zones, residential zones, and coastal-oriented zones; clarifying amendments to standards for nonconforming structures, site development, and uses; clean-ups and clarifications to the section on common procedures for processing Planning Applications; and updates to definitions; and moving written standards into table format. Most of these items are related to State law and Housing Element updates, and some are clean-up items identified by staff to address errors and needed clarifications based on application of the code.

D. General Plan Policy Consistency Analysis

Municipal Code Section 30.235.100 (General Plan Consistency Required for Zoning Amendments) requires approval of a Zoning Ordinance Amendment to be found consistent with the General Plan.

Staff has determined that the proposed amendments to the Title 30 Zoning Ordinance are consistent with General Plan policies and programs. See Exhibit K – General Plan Policy Consistency Analysis – for details.

VII. NEXT STEPS

The project will return to Planning Commission for a formal recommendation to City Council in early 2026. Following that recommendation, the project will move to Ordinance Committee (anticipated early Spring 2026) and City Council Introduction and Adoption hearings (anticipated late Spring 2026).

The project webpage is available at <https://santabarbaraca.gov/SFDB-Amendments>. If the Project is adopted, a revised Design Review Checklist will be created to assist applicants and staff. Additional outreach and training will be scheduled for design boards, staff, and applicants.

VIII. ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW

Staff have determined that this project qualifies for a categorical exemption from further environmental review pursuant to California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) Guidelines Section 15305, based on the City's adopted CEQA implementation ordinance per SBMC Section 22.100.070 (List of Ministerial Projects and Categorical Exemptions), Subsection C.5. Class 5: Minor Alternations in Land Use Limitations, Subsection C. Adoption or amendment of land use or development ordinance, regulations, standards, or guidelines that substantially maintain existing land use intensity or density.

The Single Family Streamlining Project does not change the density allowed under the General Plan Land Use or Zoning designations or increase the intensity of use. The related amendments to Municipal Code Chapters 22.22, 22.68, 22.69, and Title 30 are either administrative in nature and outline permitting procedures for single-unit residential projects; or add, cleanup, or clarify zoning standards; or add SFDB-related definitions. Based on review of the Project, there would

be no significant project-specific or cumulative impacts on the environment due to unusual circumstances, and the Project does not have the potential to damage scenic highways or historic resources. Accordingly, the action is consistent with the description of a Class 5 categorical exemption under CEQA Guidelines Section 15305, and none of the exceptions under Section 15300.2 apply.

IX. RECOMMENDED FINDINGS

The Planning Commission finds the following:

- A.** The Single Family Streamlining Project, including Design Board Process Improvements, associated amendments to the Single Family Design Board General Design Guidelines and Meeting Procedures, and proposed amendments to the Municipal Code, is categorically exempt from environmental review pursuant to California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) Guidelines Section 15305: Minor Alterations in Land Use Limitations; and
- B.** The Single Family Streamlining Project, including Design Board Process Improvements, associated amendments to the Single Family Design Board General Design Guidelines and Meeting Procedures, and proposed amendments to the Municipal Code, is consistent with the General Plan.

EXHIBITS

- A. Proposed Title 30 Ordinance Amendments
- B. Proposed Title 22 Ordinance Amendments
- C. Table of Proposed Ordinance Amendments
- D. Project Background and Public Outreach Summary
- E. SFDB Applicant Survey Responses Report
- F. Proposed Single Family Design Board Guidelines
- G. Summary of Changes to SFDB Guidelines
- H. Summary of SFDB Project Data Analysis
- I. Planning Commission Minutes – March 21, 2024
- J. Current and Proposed SFDB Findings
- K. General Plan Policy Consistency Analysis

Contact/Case Planner: Ted Hamilton-Rolle, Acting Design Review Supervisor
(ThamiltonRolle@SantaBarbaraCA.gov)
630 Garden Street, Santa Barbara, CA 93101
Phone: (805) 564-5507