July 23, 2018

**SUBJECT**  
Neighborhood Compatibility and Design Review Process for Major Additions and New Single-Family Homes & Potential Mount (Mt.) Carmel Historic District

**RECOMMENDATION**  

**BACKGROUND**

In Redwood City, hundreds of property owners improve their homes every year. Most of these improvements are relatively minor, and include kitchen remodels, new roofs, window replacements and other interior renovations. In addition, each year, there are also dozens of major additions to single-family homes, as well as complete tear down and rebuilds of homes on existing single-family lots.

Generally, during a good economy, the City issues more permits (both small and large), than during down economic years. Given that we are going into our eighth year of a growing economy, the City has received continued requests for large additions or tear downs and rebuilds, particularly in neighborhoods with high property values. Attachment 1 to this report details the number of large additions and new home re-builds that have been constructed over the past 11 years. These larger projects usually generate more neighborhood concerns than smaller projects. Concerns generally focus on compatibility issues, such as the size and architectural style of the home compared to neighboring homes.

Most recently, a number of Mt. Carmel neighborhood residents have expressed concerns about several new homes proposed in their neighborhood. The comments have focused on the size of the homes, the style of the homes, the approval process, and the need to take the potentially historical nature of the Mt. Carmel neighborhood into greater consideration during the review of new homes.
The purpose this City Council Study Session is two-fold:

1) For City staff to provide an overview of the current single-family design review process and for the City Council to provide feedback on how it could be improved on both a short term and long-term basis, and

2) For the City Council to provide comments related to beginning a historical study of the Mt. Carmel neighborhood.

Following this study session, staff will move forward with a series of actions, many of which will come to the Council for approval. The action plan will also be widely circulated, and made available to the general public.

ANALYSIS

Neighborhood Compatibility and Design Review for Single-Family Home Projects

Current Process

All single-family home projects must undergo a zoning code compliance review to ensure all objective zoning code standards are met and a building code review to ensure compliance with the building code. Furthermore, larger projects, which include any home proposing an addition to a second story or a new second story, or construction of a new two story home, must go through a more detailed Architectural Permit (AP) process. New one-story homes or one-story additions do not require an Architectural Permit. Staff provide “Tips for Success” for property owners considering modifications to a single family home; this is attached to this report as Attachment 2.

Although no neighborhood notification is required by code, historically staff has required that neighbors be notified of proposed projects prior to submittal to the City. The homeowner must submit signed letters from adjoining neighbors stating that they have seen the plans, or the applicant must send the plans and project description via certified mail. This process can assist in communication between neighbors and addressing any issues early on. Staff provides

The Architectural Permit must be approved by the Zoning Administrator (Planning Manager), but generally does not require a public meeting (except for some projects proposed on sloped lots). The Zoning Administrator’s decision is appealable to the Planning Commission. In addition, certain projects may also require Historical Resource Advisory Review Committee review as well.

For projects that require an Architectural Permit, there are two types of standards provided in the Zoning Ordinance: objective and subjective. Objective standards are typically numerical, and can be measured and applied consistently across a variety of
contexts. An objective statement would be “the house meets the setbacks, height and parking standards for the zoning district.” It is desirable for cities to use objective standards for development, as they are clearly measurable and ensure fairness. Subjective standards often address values such as quality, attractiveness, style, and character. For example, a subjective statement is that the house “conforms to the character of the neighborhood.”

**Objective Standards**

The Zoning Ordinance has the following objective standards for home construction and additions:

- **Setbacks (Varied):** The distance of the wall of the house to the property line. There are required setbacks for the first and second story.
- **Maximum Lot Coverage of 40%:** The amount of lot that may be covered by the house. This does not control the size of the second story, which are subject to setback requirements.
- **Maximum Height of 28 ft. or 2.5 Stories:** The total height of the building as measured from grade as well as the number of floors.
- **Parking of One Covered and One Uncovered:** The total number of parking spaces that must be provided on the lot.
- **Minimum Pervious Surface Percentage:** At least 40% of the overall lot, and 60% of the areas within the front yard setback must be permeable to stormwater.

**Subjective Standards**

To approve the Architectural Permit, the Zoning Administrator must make the required findings that are subjective statements of merit. These findings are general and applicable to all new development in the City, including industrial and commercial development. As illustrated below in Table 1, the findings focus on the quality of the building itself (House Design), with one finding relating to Neighborhood Character.

**Table 1: Architectural Permit Findings for House Design and Neighborhood Character (Section 45.4)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>House Design</th>
<th>Neighborhood Character</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. Design variety and avoidance of monotony.</td>
<td>C. Structure conforms to the general character of other structures in the vicinity</td>
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<tr>
<td>B. House is proportional to building site</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>D. The house does not have excessive ornamentation</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>E. The building site retains natural</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
### House Design

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>features</th>
<th>Neighborhood Character</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>F. The parking provided is accessible</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. Permeable surface areas are sufficient</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Findings G. and H. are not applicable to single-family residential projects.

In addition to all objective standards being met, the above findings must be made in order for the project to be approved. In order to make the neighborhood character finding, staff typically considers the following site layout and architectural design factors:

- Placement, size and prominence of garage
- The “step-back” of the second story from the first story
- Plate height of each story (total distance from floor to ceiling)
- House width
- Placement and size of front porch
- Front setback as compared to neighboring properties

The degree to which each of these factors is stressed depends upon the neighborhood, particularly the homes closest to the property.

It is important to note that architectural style can be challenging to regulate, both objectively and subjectively. Style is a collection of characteristics including roof pitch, window shape, length of eave, and exterior materials, which together do not lend themselves to objective measurement. Homeowners also have strong personal preferences on architectural style, whether it be Craftsman, Ranch, Mediterranean, Eichler, or contemporary. Contemporary tends can be the most controversial style (both in Redwood City and surrounding communities), with residents having strong feelings about its attractiveness and value to the community.

There are often several rounds of revisions prior to Zoning Administrator review. Often, property owners are required to alter the site plan, and/or adjust the architectural style of the building. Property owners often are initially reluctant to make any changes suggested by staff. One example of an original submittal versus an approved project is provided in Attachment 3. Staff believes this project was significantly improved by the Architectural Permit process. On the other hand, there are times when nearby neighborhood residents feel revisions did not go far enough, and the neighborhood compatibility finding was not met. In one recent case, neighbors appealed the Zoning Administrator approval of a project, and the Planning Commission agreed with the
appellant (see Attachment 4 for an example on Iris Street). This project “went back to the drawing board” and is now undergoing a second Architectural Permit review.

Additional Review for Historic Homes

For years in Redwood City, the Architectural Permit process has required that a property owner submit an historic report when proposing to demolish or substantially change a potentially historic home. Although this is not required by Zoning Ordinance or Building Code, staff has used this report to determine compliance with the California Environmental Quality Act.

More recently, staff has revised this process in two ways, as reflected in the process below. First, staff now hires the historical consultant (at the applicant’s expense) to determine whether a home built before 1940 could be considered historic. Second, the historic report is reviewed by the Historic Resources Advisory Committee (HRAC). Staff chose the 1940 date as it represents an earlier period of development, prior to the mass subdivisions and development that occurred in Redwood City, and nationwide, post-World War II. The City’s General Plan also recognizes pre and post-World War II as two distinct periods in architecture and development.

Below is an outline of the process for review of potentially historic homes:

**Step 1: Determine Existing Age**

City staff uses tools such as County tax assessor records and Geographical Information System databases to determine if the house was built prior to 1940. If so, Steps 2 through 5 would apply. Otherwise, the demolition or remodel can proceed on the Standard Home Track, beginning with Step 7 (Figure 2, Step 7a).

**Step 2: Application Submittal**

The homeowner/applicant submits a request for an Architectural Permit, including the plans for the remodel or new house, to the City with a deposit of $5,000 and the one-time fee of $1,264.

**Step 3: Prepare Historic Report**

Using funds from the deposit, City staff will hire a consultant to prepare a historic report addressing national, state, and local criteria for potential historic designation. The results will be shared with the applicant. The function of the report is to inform CEQA analysis for any new discretionary project (a project requiring an Architectural Permit.)

**Step 4: HRAC Hearing**
Regardless of the report results, a Historic Resources Advisory Committee (HRAC) meeting will be scheduled. Notice will be provided to property owners and residents within 300 feet of the subject site ten days in advance of the hearing. Newspaper and website notification is also required. For this review, staff will prepare a brief informational memo that will accompany the historic report.

**Step 5: HRAC Report Review**

HRAC will review the report for adequacy and may make a conclusion as described in Figure 2, based on the facts in the report.

![Figure 2: Historic Resources Advisory Committee Review and Processing Tracks](image)

**STANDARD HOME TRACK**

**Step 7a: Submit Design for an Architectural Permit.**

If the home is not potentially historic, the standard AP process is followed for new homes and additions. The standard process requires notification of adjoining neighbors.

**Step 8b: Decision on New Design.** The Zoning Administrator (ZA) makes a decision on the project (no public hearing is generally

**HISTORIC TRACK**

**Step 7b: Design for an Historic Home**

If determined to be eligible for listing as a historic resource, any addition or remodel project must meet the Secretary of Interior Standards. Both HRAC and Planning Commission (PC) shall submit the project for review.

**Step 8b: Recommendation and Decision on New Design.** A public hearing notice shall be published for both HRAC and PC review of the project that demonstrates
Mt. Carmel Historic District

The General Plan organizes the City into generalized neighborhood types that embody certain architectural styles, densities, and street treatments. According to Figure BE-3 of the General Plan, the Mt. Carmel neighborhood is generally in the Historic Influence Low Density Neighborhood Typology area.

Although there is no policy that specifically states that the Mt. Carmel District should be studied as a historic neighborhood, the narrative on Page BE-208 states the following, “The potential exists for creating additional historic districts within the city, particularly in areas around Downtown and El Camino Real, as well as in early neighborhoods located southwest of El Camino Real.”

In addition, Mt. Carmel’s neighborhood typology has the following General Plan goal and polices:

- **General Plan Goal (BE-5):** Retain the unique character of the Historic Influence Low Density Neighborhoods”

- **Policy BE-5.1:** Require that new construction, additions, renovations, and infill development be sensitive to neighborhood context, historic development patterns, and building form and scale (for example, second stories, detached garages, setbacks, enhanced front entrances).

- **Policy BE-5.2:** Require that residential units be designed to sustain the high-level of architectural design quality that characterizes Redwood City’s Historic Influence Low Density Neighborhoods.
- **Policy BE-5.3**: Strengthen neighborhood identity with new development that is architecturally compatible with surrounding structures.

Given the various related policies, the demand for new and larger homes, and the lack of objective standards within the Zoning Code that would help implement some of these policies, the City Council could opt to move forward with the historical study of the Mt. Carmel district would be appropriate.

**Next Steps:**

**Potential Changes to Design Review (Citywide) for Council Consideration:**

- **Short-Term**: When making the subjective “neighborhood character” finding, the Zoning Administrator could stress additional architectural and site planning factors in order to make the finding. For example, garage placement, floor area ratio and architectural style could be considered. Of course, the degree to which these attributes are stressed will vary depending on neighborhood, or even the particular block within the neighborhood.

- **Short-Term**: Require greater neighborhood notification for homes that require an Architectural Permit. It is important to note that notification is an extremely time intensive process, so fee increases may be required to recover the cost of staff time and other work may not be prioritized because of new noticing requirements.

- **Medium/Long-Term**: In order to best assist staff in their review, and guide property owners, Residential Design Guidelines could be created and adopted. It is important to note that effective residential design guidelines requires community outreach, and would be assisted by any historical neighborhood studies (i.e., Mt. Carmel Study below)

- **Medium/Long Term**: Additional zoning code changes may also be required. For example, the findings for adoption could be changed, a floor area ratio cap could be adopted, or other objective standards could be added.

**Potential Changes to Historical Review of Single-Family Homes Citywide and Mt. Carmel Historical Study for Council Consideration:**

- Continue with the recent process change that requires that City staff (via a consultant) to prepare a historical report when major changes or a complete tear down is proposed of a home that was originally constructed in 1940 or before. In addition, require that the HRAC review this report and determine whether the report’s findings are adequate.

- Begin the Mt. Carmel Neighborhood Historical Study process. The first step would be creating a scope of work and then putting the scope out to consultants
to bid on. The Council would ultimately approve the scope of work and consultant contract. Staff would keep the neighborhood up to date via neighborhood notices.

Based on Council comments, staff will move forward with a series of actions, many of which will come to the Council for approval. The action plan will also be widely circulated, and made available to the general public.

**ALTERNATIVES**

The City Council may wish to suggest other changes to the single-family home design review process, and/or historical review process.

**FISCAL IMPACT**

A significant amount of staff time is spent on single-family design review, as well as historical review. Any and all of the suggested changes within the report will require additional staff time, and will affect the delivery of other projects. Based upon City Council feedback at the study session, staff will return with proposed activities, cost estimates, timelines and workload impacts associated with conducting the Mount Carmel historical review and Residential Design Guidelines.

**ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW**

This study session does not qualify as a project per the California Environmental Quality Act, therefore environmental review is not required at this time. However, many of the actions noted in this report will require review per CEQA.

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ATTACHMENT 1: Architectural Permits Issued For Single Family Residences
ATTACHMENT 2: Tips for Success for Single-Family Home Architectural Permit
ATTACHMENT 3: Examples of Revisions Made During Architectural Permit Process
ATTACHMENT 4: Iris Street