

# Agenda Report

November 24, 2025

**TO:** Honorable Mayor and City Council  
**FROM:** Planning & Community Development Department  
**SUBJECT: ZONING CODE AMENDMENT TO IMPLEMENT OBJECTIVE DESIGN STANDARDS FOR HIGH DENSITY RESIDENTIAL DEVELOPMENT**

## **RECOMMENDATION:**

It is recommended that the City Council:

1. Find that the the proposed Zoning Code Amendment is exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) pursuant to Section 15061(b)(3), the "Common Sense" exemption, where it can be seen with certainty that there is no possibility that the activity in question may have a significant effect on the environment;
2. Make the Findings for Approval for the Zoning Code Text Amendment (Attachment A); and
3. Direct the City Attorney to prepare an ordinance for the Zoning Code Amendment within 90 days consistent with the provisions set forth in the agenda report.

## **PLANNING COMMISSION RECOMMENDATION:**

On October 8, 2025, the Planning Commission considered the proposed Zoning Code Amendment at a publicly noticed hearing (Attachment B) and unanimously recommended that the City Council approve the Zoning Code Amendment as presented by staff, with the following amendments:

1. Refine the terms "Simple Form" and "Articulated Form" to describe proposed standards;
2. Include a range of permitted colors;
3. Require balconies on street-facing facades to project no more than two feet from a façade, have opaque railings, and high quality materials; and
4. Allow for an alternate design review process for sites above two acres in size.

Staff is supportive of the Planning Commission recommendations.

## **BACKGROUND:**

In 2019, Senate Bill 330 (the Housing Crisis Act) became law, specifying that local jurisdictions shall not impose or enforce new design standards established after January 1, 2020 for multi-family residential and mixed-use projects, unless such standards are objective in nature. As defined by California Government Code Section 65589.5(h)(8), “objective” means “involving no personal or subjective judgement by a public official and being 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.”

Changes in State Density Bonus law additionally require cities to allow the greatest maximum density allowed for a site in the Land Use Element, Zoning Code, and/or applicable Specific Plan when calculating density bonus. Therefore, densities up to 87 units per acre plus available density bonuses are permitted in many areas of Pasadena. In response, the City Council directed staff to develop objective design standards applicable to high density residential and mixed-use projects (at densities greater than 48 units per acre) and augment existing development standards in the Zoning Code, recently adopted Specific Plans, and existing design standards. The standards are intended to address the design and aesthetics of higher-density development while accommodating legislative requirements.

Pasadena has numerous objective development and design standards for multi-family and mixed-use projects in the Zoning Code and Specific Plans, which are generally quantifiable and not open to interpretation (e.g., maximum lot coverage, maximum building height, and minimum building setbacks). Design-related standards tend to address site planning elements that contribute to the layout, appearance, and features of buildings (e.g., building modulation requirements, façade break requirements, and upper floor step-back requirements). However, it was identified through this effort that there are opportunities to incorporate additional objective design standards such as building entries, façade detailing, fenestration, massing, and materiality requirements.

## **Development of the Objective Design Standards:**

The proposed objective design standards will apply to high density residential and mixed-use projects with densities greater than 48 units per acre and will supplement existing standards and design guidelines adopted prior to January 1, 2020 that remain effective. Staff initially retained Moule & Polyzoides to assist in the review and development of standards. Their insight, along with the extensive work of the Central District Specific Plan Planning Commission Subcommittee, was key to the development of draft standards.

The effort studied existing objective standards currently applied by the City, such as the City of Gardens and Urban Housing requirements, and the recently adopted objective standards of the Specific Plans (such as floor area ratio, height, open space, building modulation, frontage, setbacks, and step backs), building upon or modifying some of



these standards, and creating new standards where gaps existed in addressing design concerns. The intent is that these standards are “in addition to” already existing standards to address key design concerns and they will not result in a lengthy, complicated document for implementation.

### **Study Sessions/Workshops:**

Prior to the October 8, 2025 public hearing with the Planning Commission, Staff held a total of nine meetings with the Planning Commission and/or the Design Commission which were open to the public, including presentations where staff provided information to commissioners for discussion and direction, workshop-style sessions to discuss potential standards and seek clarification and guidance from commissioners, and a walking tour of various sites in Pasadena to get an in-person, human-scale feel for existing buildings and elements that made them successful at a pedestrian level. A summary of the meetings is below:

January 25, 2023 – Planning Commission study session to introduce the objective design standards, provide background information, and options for amending the Zoning Code.

March 4, 2023 – Walking tour of 10 high-density residential and mixed-use sites throughout the City. The tour included the Planning Commission, staff, consultant, and the public. Participants noted successful and unsuccessful elements such as material quality, private and common open spaces such as balconies and paseos, residential entrance treatments such as stoops, roof forms, and parking entrance design.

April 12, 2023 – Planning Commission study session at the Art Center College of Design to review comments received during the walking tour and introduce potential types of objective standards.

September 13, 2023 – Planning Commission study session to discuss objective design standards, massing analyses and building typologies for sample sites.

January 24, 2024 – Planning Commission study session to discuss a draft Table of Contents and review in-progress objective design standards such as building bulk/mass, garden spaces, and responding to the public realm.

July 23, 2024 – Design Commission study session to provide background, discuss existing standards and guidelines, and review sample draft standards.

December 4, 2024 – Planning Commission public hearing to consider adoption of objective design standards.

May 10, 2025 – Planning Commission workshop to discuss existing objective design standards within the specific plans and the evolution of the City of Gardens standards,

review a range of architectural elements and styles both within and outside Pasadena and discuss potential standards that could supplement existing regulations.

July 9, 2025 – Planning Commission and Design Commission joint study session to present an overview of State law, existing standards, observations of existing development at various densities in Pasadena and design progression over time, and potential standards to be considered by commissioners.

## **ANALYSIS**

### **Proposed Standards:**

To promote simplicity and elegance in new building designs and based on extensive review of existing buildings of similar scale to what is expected for new residential and mixed-use buildings in areas that permit densities above 48 dwelling units per acre, staff recommends two sets of Objective Design Standards: Design Type 1 (previously referred to as “Simple Form”) and Design Type 2 (previously referred to as “Articulated Form”), either of which may be selected by an applicant. These standards are intended to result in different building typologies and cannot be mixed to create a hybrid set of standards. Each set of standards is organized into six categories:

- Massing and Articulation;
- Base, Middle and Top Building Design;
- Fenestration and Solid-to-Void Ratio;
- Building Entries;
- Building/Craftsmanship Elements; and
- Materials and Colors.

A summary of the proposed standards, inclusive of Planning Commission recommendations, is provided in Attachment B. A map of areas permitting high-density residential and mixed-use development is provided as Attachment C.

### **Sustainability:**

Staff also proposes objective design standards to further address sustainability by requiring the incorporation of cooling strategies to promote pedestrian comfort and energy efficiency. Currently, only projects subject to the City’s Climate Action Plan Consistency Checklist (i.e., projects that require discretionary review and are not exempt from CEQA, as well as projects utilizing a Class 32 exemption for in-fill development projects) are required to include passive design techniques aimed at increasing energy efficiency by reducing solar heat gain. Staff recommends incorporating more explicit sustainability standards for projects subject to the proposed Objective Design Standards. These include:

- Requiring building facades to include a specific percentage of structural elements such as awnings, canopies, overhangs, fins, and covered balconies along east,



west, and south-facing frontages to provide shade for pedestrians as well as reduce solar heat gain within buildings. Buildings using the Design Type 2 standards would not be permitted to use fins and/or canopies but would be permitted to incorporate the other listed elements.

- Alternatively, an applicant may opt to provide rooftop gardens as a percentage of the roof area, or additional tree canopy within required setbacks or common open space in lieu of the structural elements listed above, as alternative strategies to reduce solar heat gain and building energy consumption.
- Allowing rooftop gardens to count towards an existing Common Open Space requirement at a rate of 1.5 to 1.0 (the same as Adaptive Reuse development). For example, a 1,000 square foot rooftop garden would count as 1,500 square feet of required open space.
- Projects outside of Specific Plan areas will be required to provide the same amount of tree canopy in Common Open Space areas as required by the Central District Specific Plan, at a ratio of one 24-inch box tree per project, or one for every 500 square feet of common open space, whichever is greater. For projects with two or more trees, a minimum of 50 percent of trees planted shall be shade trees. Trees shall be selected from the City's Protected and Native Species list.

## **Design Review Process**

Staff proposes to streamline the design review process for projects subject to the Objective Design Standards, allowing such projects to go through a two-step Preliminary Consultation and Consolidated Design Review process in lieu of the current three-step, Preliminary Consultation, Concept Design Review, and Final Design Review process.

Staff proposes to incorporate the Planning Commission recommendation to allow projects on sites of two acres or more to choose either the streamlined two-step design review process or forego the proposed objective design standards and use the existing three-step design review process. This is based on the unique characteristics of these sites that may require additional creativity and flexibility. While there are relatively few of these sites in the City, the Commission felt it was important to allow for design creativity for these large, unique sites if preferred by an applicant.

All projects, regardless of lot size, will remain subject to all other applicable standards in the Zoning Code as well as design guidelines adopted prior to January 1, 2020.

## **Checklist**

Following adoption by the City Council, staff will develop a checklist to supplement the codified development standards, with graphical illustrations to visually demonstrate the standards and their application. The checklist is intended to assist applicants, the public, and staff in determining whether or not a proposed project meets all objective design standard requirements.

### **ENVIRONMENTAL ANALYSIS:**

The action proposed herein is exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) pursuant to State CEQA Guidelines Section 15061(b)(3), the “Common Sense” exemption that CEQA applies only to projects which have the potential for causing a significant effect on the environment. Where it can be seen with certainty that there is no possibility that the activity in question may have a significant effect on the environment, the activity is not subject to CEQA. Such is the case with the proposed Zoning Code text amendments to create objective design standards for high-density residential development.

### **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION:**

The proposed Zoning Code Amendment would establish objective design standards for new high density residential and mixed-use development (above 48 dwelling units per acre) in response to State law regarding adoption of objective design standards and changes to Density Bonus law regarding the application of maximum permitted densities in the General Plan. The proposed standards include specific design types intended to guide building design towards forms that are contextually appropriate within Pasadena, implement sustainability elements intended to further the goals of the City’s adopted Climate Action Plan, and streamline design review processes for development depending on the size of the project site. Staff recommends adopting the proposed amendment to achieve the above-mentioned objectives.

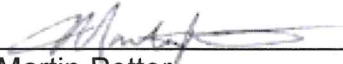
**FISCAL IMPACT:**

This action will not have a direct fiscal impact.

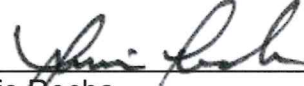
Respectfully submitted,

  
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Attachments: (4)

Attachment A – Findings for Zoning Code Amendments  
Attachment B – Summary of Proposed Development Standards  
Attachment C – Map of areas permitting High Density Residential and Mixed-Use Development  
Attachment D – October 8, 2025 Planning Commission Staff Report (without attachments)