

Objective Standards for Housing Development in Humboldt County

Previously, the County of Humboldt utilized Design Review Guidelines in communities, which involved subjective standards. Projects were subject to discretionary processes and public hearings, where interpretation of the guidelines could lead to changes that made projects unfeasible. The guidelines lacked objective, measurable criteria, leaving interpretation up to decision-making bodies and public opinion. This resulted in uncertainty for developers and delays in project approval.

To address these issues, the County has replaced the subjective guidelines with **Objective Site and Design Standards (ODS)**, which apply countywide. The new standards are clear, measurable, and verifiable, such as height limits, setbacks, and parking requirements. These objective standards reduce ambiguity and streamline the approval process, offering greater predictability for developers and ensuring more consistent decision-making.

The ODS document is available online, and the Planning Department facilitates ODS Feasibility Meetings with applicants to ensure that projects comply with the standards, simplifying zoning clearances and improving the efficiency of the approval process. These meetings help reduce review times and encourage stakeholder participation.

The adoption of the ODS represents a significant step toward a more streamlined, efficient development process for residential projects, improving clarity and reducing delays caused by subjective interpretations. The ODS document will be updated annually or as necessary.

Alignment with General Plan Policies & Housing Strategy

The move toward objective standards is part of a broader strategy to promote **efficient land use** and support the development of **affordable housing** for lower-income households. This aligns with the following General Plan policies to:

- Encourage compact development and multifamily housing.
- Direct growth to enhance quality of life.
- Support residential infill development near services.

Encouraging new development in areas designated for growth in the General Plan allows for coordinated infrastructure, transportation, and economic development planning. This enhances access to opportunity and promotes sustainable, efficient land use.

Legal Compliance & Key State Housing Laws

Humboldt County's adoption of objective standards aligns with several key **State Housing Laws** designed to streamline the development process and support housing affordability:

- **California Housing Element Law (Gov. Code § 65580-65589.8):**
The Housing Element of the General Plan must be updated every eight years and demonstrate the county's commitment to meeting housing needs. By adopting objective

standards, the county improves clarity and predictability in residential development, as required by the Housing Element (Policy H-P28). This policy mandates the use of objective standards to improve the zoning process for developers and the community.

- **California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA):**
Objective standards help clarify compliance with environmental regulations under CEQA. The use of measurable criteria reduces subjective interpretation, making the environmental review process more predictable and reducing delays.
- **SB 35 (2017) - Streamlined Housing Approval Process:**
SB 35 mandates streamlined approvals for qualifying housing projects, particularly affordable housing, if a local jurisdiction fails to meet housing goals. By adhering to objective standards, Humboldt County ensures compliance with this bill, which aims to accelerate approvals for housing projects.
- **AB 1397 (2017) - Objective Design Standards:**
This bill requires local governments to adopt objective design standards to prevent arbitrary decision-making. Humboldt County's new standards help eliminate subjectivity in the design review process, promoting consistency and predictability.
- **Affordable Housing and Zoning Reform (AB 1505, AB 2345):**
These laws require local governments to adopt zoning reforms that support affordable housing. Objective standards help remove barriers to affordable housing development, such as unreasonable design requirements or excessive parking mandates.
- **SB 9 (2021) – Housing Development on Single-Family Lots:**
SB 9 allows duplexes and lot splits on single-family parcels, increasing housing density. By updating zoning ordinances to accommodate this type of development, Humboldt County aligns with state requirements and helps address housing shortages.

Conclusion:

By adopting **Objective Site and Design Standards (ODS)**, Humboldt County has taken a critical step towards streamlining housing development, improving clarity for developers, and aligning with state policies aimed at addressing the housing crisis. These standards provide a predictable and efficient framework for residential projects, making it easier to meet the County's housing goals, particularly for affordable housing, while also ensuring compliance with state laws.

Objective Design Standards are criteria for how development *must be designed* (e.g., building form, site layout, porch placement, façade articulation) that:

- **Involve no personal or subjective judgement by a public official;**
- Are **measurable and knowable in advance** by both developers and reviewers; and
- Can be used to *ministerially* approve certain housing projects (without discretionary hearings).

Under California law, *only objective standards* may be applied to projects seeking streamlined or ministerial approval under laws like **Senate Bill (SB) 35**, **SB 330**, and the **California Housing Accountability Act** — meaning local governments cannot use subjective criteria (e.g., “fits neighborhood character” unless spelled out objectively) to deny or reduce a qualifying project.

How It Shows Up in Humboldt County Policy

The **Humboldt County Housing Element** and related planning documents include policy direction to adopt *objective standards* for zoning and design. For example:

- The **2019 Humboldt County Housing Element** defines an *objective standard* as a zoning, subdivision, or design review regulation that involves *no subjective judgement* and is uniform and verifiable before submittal.
- It also encourages amending the zoning code to improve clarity and predictability in residential development by adopting clear standards.

These policies are part of broader implementation measures meant to help the county comply with **state housing law**, streamline housing approvals, and make the design review process more transparent and less discretionary.

What *Objective Design Standards* Typically Include

While Humboldt County’s specific *ODS* document may still be under preparation or adoption, the concept generally covers measurable requirements for:

- **Building placement and massing** (e.g., setbacks, orientation)
- **Site design** (e.g., landscaping, pedestrian access, civic spaces)
- **Façade and architectural elements** (e.g., minimum window area, entrance design)
- **Landscaping and screening** (types, sizes, spacing of plantings)

The idea is that if a project meets these objective criteria, it can move through permitting *without subjective design review or discretionary hearings*.

 **How This Relates to Local Code**

Humboldt County’s existing **zoning code** already contains some form of design review requirements (e.g., Design Control Combining Zone — “D” combining zone) that involve discretionary review.

Adopting *Objective Design Standards* would mean replacing or supplementing those subjective components with clear, measurable standards that meet **state law requirements** for housing developments subject to streamlined or ministerial review.