



Design Guidelines

Design guidelines help ensure that new development is aesthetically and functionally compatible with the current or desired character of a neighborhood or community. Design guidelines are criteria that specify the form of new development. They can address a range of elements, such as site layout, scale, architectural features, circulation and parking configuration, open space, landscaping, and related topics. Balanced guidelines should promote good design without imposing prohibitively costly requirements on new developments. They can serve to facilitate community acceptance of affordable housing projects or increased densities.

In many communities, design review is conducted by an appointed design review board of volunteers that include architects, landscape architects, urban designers, and other design professionals, and other community representatives. Some jurisdictions have administrative design review that is handled by staff, typically planning or urban design staff.

WHAT ISSUES DO DESIGN GUIDELINES ADDRESS?

Design guidelines represent community aspirations for future development. They can play a significant role in winning community support for affordable and more dense or diverse housing. The process of creating design guidelines can facilitate community conversations about housing issues such as addressing concerns that affordable or new forms of housing are unattractive and not compatible with the neighborhood. Developing design guidelines should be a public process that offers residents an active role in shaping their environment.

TOOL PROFILE

Objectives

[Housing in Centers and Near Transit](#)

[Missing Middle Density](#)

[Build Community Support](#)

Type of Tool

Other Regulatory Tools

Project Type

Single family

Multifamily

Ownership

Rental

Affordability Level

Market-rate incentives and tools

Jurisdictions use a variety of names for their design elements, including “guidelines,” “standards,” and “criteria.” Although the terms are sometimes used interchangeably, design “standards” and “criteria” are typically mandatory elements that must be present in order for the project to be approved. “Guidelines” are typically used to present suggested design elements that are not necessarily mandatory.

In addition, a design element is an optional element of a comprehensive plan ([WAC 365-196-445](#)). Many jurisdictions have included urban or community design elements in their comprehensive plans, which can offer a holistic design vision for larger areas or citywide.

WHERE ARE DESIGN GUIDELINES MOST APPLICABLE?

Design guidelines can be implemented by any jurisdiction. They are most applicable to areas where affordable housing or innovative development is underway or being considered. Because they are particularly helpful in mitigating concerns about unsightly or disconnected development, design guidelines are helpful in communities with concerns about new development.

RESOURCES

MRSC: [Design Review](#) (2020)

