Featured Tool: 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.

**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 serves to inform the community about housing issues, particularly addressing the myths 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 citizens an active role in shaping their environment.

**Where are design guidelines most applicable?**

Design guidelines can be implemented by any jurisdiction. They are most applicable to communities 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 where resistance to new development is strong.

**What do I need to know about using or developing design guidelines?**

Creating design guidelines in your community may be a time-consuming process involving neighborhood inventories and research, drafting guidelines and conducting public review, as well as on-going administration and review of individual developments. Outreach to builders may be necessary to ensure compliance and understanding after guidelines are developed.

Implementing design guidelines can raise community buy-in for other potentially controversial strategies too. Strategies that increase density, mix new housing types and affordability levels and add affordable housing developments to areas where none exist are well served by education and outreach programs. They are particularly aided by design guidelines, because they reassure the public that the development is considerate of existing neighborhood form.

Design requirements receive criticism for increasing the price of a development—particularly for affordable units—during project review. While this strategy may be time-intensive, the payoff is well-designed housing that is accepted and valued by the community. Complaints that design guidelines and review add additional cost to development can be mitigated by removing speed bumps elsewhere in the development process. Streamlining the permitting process for affordable and innovative housing can offset time costs in the development process.
Required design elements are not necessarily more costly to developers if expectations are clear during the project design. Well-crafted and defensible design guidelines unambiguously specify required features and clear procedures for review. This can save the developer from delay and redesign costs.

Design guidelines should not be used for affordable development alone; instead, they must apply to specific housing types or designated neighborhoods. Guidelines that address only affordable homes are not barred outright but would likely meet legal challenges if implemented. You can address affordable housing by shaping guidelines for the types and/or location of housing you anticipate, but the aim should not be to single out design for affordable homes.

Preparation Design Guidelines and Implementing review

Preparing design guidelines and a review process involves the following considerations and decisions:

Assess the local context and character where the design standards will apply.

An important early step is to document the design features and feel of neighborhoods or study areas. This can provide a foundation to build design guidelines. Planners and neighborhood volunteers can start surveying neighborhoods to create a catalogue of housing styles, building materials and site layouts commonly found in the area. Unique and notable features important to the current character or future vision will be emphasized in the guidelines. Different design guidelines can be created for each unique neighborhood, zone, or housing type.

Develop guiding principles or a vision for the neighborhood or site around which the guidelines will be formed.

Gaining insight into the design features most helpful for future residents is important. Speaking with members of target populations or residents of affordable housing is a good way to learn what potential residents feel are successful components of an affordable or innovative housing development. Consulting with housing advocates in your area would also be helpful. Developing guiding principles and a vision statement through community outreach efforts (e.g., charrettes, focus groups) can help form design guidelines that are unique and well supported.

Involve citizens and business leaders who will benefit from or use the guidelines and review process.

Soliciting input from residents in each area is key to enacting well-received guidelines. In turn, healthy participation is more likely to result in wider acceptance for affordable or innovative housing. Engaging developers, architects, and other real estate and design professionals during the design guideline preparation process will also help ensure the guidelines are fair and feasible.

Develop and test the design guidelines with an eye to market viability and feasibility.

You will need to ensure that the guidelines fit within your development code, while also making sure that development under the guidelines is not cost prohibitive. Collaboration between design experts and community planners will prevent creating guidelines that work at cross-purposes with planning or development goals. For example, guidelines that discourage affordability or density, like large parking requirements, or those that contradict zoning and development regulations should be avoided. Builders, developers, architects, property owners and citizens will also have opinions on how best to develop guidelines that achieve the community’s goals while remaining sensitive to time and design costs. Key decisions each jurisdiction will need to make while developing guidelines include:

- Flexible versus prescriptive standards
- Development size or type threshold for design review
- Administrative versus citizen-based design review procedures (see Implement design guidelines... below)

Flexible versus prescriptive standards. In addition to specific design content, consider whether the guidelines should take the form of a menu of options that meet a specified goal (e.g., developers must provide four of six design elements that enhance pedestrian experience) or a prescriptive list of required features. Both forms have their strengths: a menu approach allows for more flexibility and creativity in meeting the guidelines, while developers may prefer a prescriptive list so they know exactly what they need to do to satisfy design requirements. Engage with stakeholders to decide which would work best for your community now and into the future.
**Threshold for review.** Consider the scope of development to which the design guidelines apply. When an existing development is being renovated, the guidelines could apply incrementally, only to the improvement, or require that the entire development meet design requirements. The latter approach could discourage some improvements, because a smaller improvement could trigger a larger, more expensive renovation to all elements of the site. Bringing existing structures up to the standards of new design guidelines may be done more easily by doing it incrementally.

Setting the threshold for when a development should be subject to the design guidelines process is an important consideration. For residential projects, thresholds are commonly set by the number of units or project value. Categorical thresholds for specific neighborhoods, zones, or planned unit developments are also possible.

**Implement the design guidelines through an administrative or public review process.**

Design guidelines create the foundation for design review. Whether the design review is performed administratively by planning staff or by a citizen board is an important decision to consider. A citizen-based approach allows the local residents and professionals to have a “hands-on” role in shaping the character of their community. A design review board or panel should represent all major stakeholders in the process, including residents, developers, architects/planners, housing advocates and neighborhood groups. Administrative review can be a simpler, less expensive process for development applications. A well-crafted administrative review still involves public participation through advertised comment periods for the public to respond to staff findings. Establishing appeal processes for either approach will ensure that the public has adequate recourse pending any dispute over the process.

**Model Policies, Model Regulations, Other Information**

- **U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development:** [Affordable Housing Design Advisor](#)
- **American Planning Association:** [A Case Study from Washington State: Making Your Design Review Process Defensible](#)
- **Department for Communities and Local Government, London, UK:** [Preparing Design Codes: A Practice Manual](#)