



**STAFF REPORT  
HOLLISTER PLANNING COMMISSION  
MEETING DATE: March 26, 2026  
REPORT # Community Development-2026-10**

**AGENDA ITEM: RECOMMENDATION TO THE CITY COUNCIL FOR THE ADOPTION OF OBJECTIVE DESIGN STANDARDS (ODS) FOR MULTIFAMILY AND RESIDENTIAL MIXED-USE DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS IN THE DOWNTOWN MIXED-USE (DMU) ZONING DISTRICT**

**DEPARTMENT HEAD:** Rod Powell, Assistant City Manager

**STAFF CONTACT:** Ambur Cameron, Senior Planner

**RECOMMENDED ACTION:** Adopt a Resolution recommending that the City Council adopt the Objective Design Standards for multifamily and residential mixed-use development projects within the Downtown Mixed Use (DMU) zoning district.

**CEQA:** Exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) pursuant to Guidelines Section 15060(c)(2) and 15061(b)(3), as it is an administrative action that does not authorize development or result in any reasonably foreseeable environmental impacts.

**PROJECT DESCRIPTION:** In recent years, the State of California has enacted a series of housing laws aimed at increasing the state's housing inventory by reducing barriers to housing production. These laws limit a city's authority to deny certain eligible residential development projects based on standards that are subjective in nature and, instead requires that such projects be reviewed using "Objective Design Standards". Objective design standards are defined under State law as, "standards that involve no personal or subjective judgement by a public official and are uniformly verifiable by reference to an external and uniform benchmark or criterion available and knowable both the development applicant or proponent and the public official prior to submittal" (California Government Code, Section 65913.4).

Until the City of Hollister ("City") adopts and codifies its own Objective Design Standards, the City is limited in enforcing compliance with only the objective development standards already in place within the City's General Plan, Municipal Code, and Zoning Ordinance. These development standards provide broad objective requirements, such as building height and setback standards, but do not provide guidance related to the overall design of residential or residential mixed-use projects.

Under California Code Section 65913.4, a Housing Development Project becomes subject to the Objective Design Standards when it is proposed on a site zoned for residential or mixed-use development and includes a multifamily project with two or more dwelling units or a mixed-use residential project in which at least two-thirds of the total floor area is dedicated to residential uses.

Staff proposes the adoption of Objective Design Standards specific to multi-family residential and residential mixed-use development projects with the following intended goals:

- Respond to state housing laws aimed at streamlining applicable projects and promoting affordable housing;
- Maintain the City's local control in reviewing eligible residential projects by ensuring a consistent standard of residential design quality throughout the City's downtown;
- Preserve the character of City's downtown by balancing the form and design of existing development with new construction techniques and typologies;
- Encourage human-scaled buildings that adhere to zoning regulations and promote high quality site and building design;
- Emphasize a pedestrian-oriented environment where the design of buildings and the public realm are cohesive and complementary of a diverse range of uses;
- Provide a clear set of design criteria to guide multi-family residential and residential mixed-use development projects; and
- Establish an objective framework by which a qualifying project (e.g., an infill residential project with affordable units requesting to be processed ministerially under Senate Bill 35) would be evaluated.

If the City does not adopt the proposed Objective Design Standards, the City would have limited review authority to shape the design of future multi-family and residential mixed-use projects and would only be able to review such projects against existing objective standards in the Zoning Ordinance and General Plan, which are extremely limited.

**ANALYSIS:** Staff are proposing the adoption of the Objective Design Standard (ODS) as a standalone document. Zoning Ordinance Amendment (ZOA) 2026-1 – a separate item on the Planning Commission's agenda – has been drafted to formally adopt and codify the ODS by incorporating the document by reference. Incorporation by reference allows the ODS to carry the same legal authority as if were fully contained with the Zoning Ordinance, while still existing as a separate, standalone document.

Maintaining the ODS outside of the Zoning Ordinance is necessary because it allows for the inclusion of graphics, diagrams, and other visual materials that support and clarify the Objective Design Standards. The types of illustrations cannot be accommodated within the traditional text-based format of the Zoning Ordinance.

**BACKGROUND:** In recent years, the State has adopted several housing laws requiring jurisdictions to use objective standards when conducting streamlined review of qualifying housing projects. Senate Bill 330 (SB 330), known as the Housing Accountability Act and initially adopted in 2018, created the framework for residential development projects to only need to comply with adopted, objective, design standards in order to be approved. Since 2018, the State has continued to adopt new legislation each year that qualifies additional types of residential and mixed-use projects for streamlined, ministerial review against objective standards.

The City of Hollister currently has very few objective standards written into our General Plan and Zoning Ordinance. This means that when residential project applications are submitted, the City cannot require changes to the design of the project or use non-compliance with a subjective standard as a reason to deny a housing project. Adoption of ODS will allow the City to retain some level of control of the design for new residential

projects (such as massing, orientation, location of open space and walkability features, etc.).

Objective design standards involve no personal or subjective judgement and are uniformly verifiable by reference to an external, measurable benchmark or criterion. In contrast, subjective standards require personal interpretation or subjective judgement by a public official, as these standards are unmeasurable and/or lack the specificity needed to provide clear direction. The following example illustrates the difference between an objective and subjective standard:

<i>Buildings greater than two stories shall be designed to differentiate a defined base; a middle or body; and a top, cornice, or parapet cap.</i>	This standard is <b>objective</b> because it provided a clear requirement that specifies what type of building the standard applies to (two-story or more) and how the design criteria can be achieved (base, middle, cap).
<i>Buildings shall be articulated to be consistent with the neighborhood character.</i>	This standard is <b>subjective</b> because it is not measurable, thereby requiring judgement by a public official.

The proposed Objective Design Standards are consistent with State housing law and directly implement several goals and policy actions identified in the City’s 2023-2031 Housing Element. The Housing Element includes a comprehensive housing plan intended to guide the efforts to meet its Regional Housing Needs Allocation (RHNA) and support streamlined housing production.

The ODS implements Housing Goal H2, which seeks to maintain and enhance existing neighborhoods and blend well designed new housing into neighborhoods and communities. Policy action H2.1: *Objective Design Standards* directs the City to establish and implement objective standards and update citywide design review procedures to support efficient project review. Related actions include adopting the ODS through zoning amendments, updating design review procedures, and promoting the new standards through public-facing materials and outreach.

Under Housing Goal H3, which emphasizes efficient land use and a diversity of housing types to implement “smart” and sustainability development principles, Policy Action H3.1 *Variety of Housing Choices* call for implementing mixed-use development standards through the City’s zoning amendments and General Plan update. The ODS support this goal by providing clear, predictable expectations for higher-density and mixed-use housing.

In addition to aligning with the Housing Element, the ODS are consistent with the Hollister 2040 General Plan Update. Multiple elements of the General Plan emphasize high-quality design, orderly development, and the creation of safe, attractive, and walkable

neighborhoods. With the Land Use and Community Design Element, Action LU-2.4 and Action LU-3.1 call for the development of multifamily and mixed-use design standards to ensure high-quality development as the City grows. Goal LU-16 further directs the City to maintain Hollister's small-town character by ensuring that new development is attractive and well designed, while Action LU 16-16.1 calls for citywide design guidelines or objective standards for residential, commercial, and industrial uses, including streetscape improvements.

The General Plan's Circulation Element also reinforces the importance of objective design criteria. Goal C-3 promotes a safe and connected pedestrian, bicycle, and micromobility network, and Action C-3.6 calls for adopting objective standards for sidewalk and pedestrian trail design in new developments.

Together, the Housing Element and General Plan Policies demonstrate that adoption of the Objective Design Standards directly supports the City's long-term vision for high-quality design, streamlined housing production, enhanced walkability, and cohesive community character throughout Hollister.

**APPLICABILITY:** The proposed Objective Design Standards (ODS) would apply to qualifying multifamily and residential mixed-use development in the City of Hollister's Downtown Mixed Use (DMU) Zoning. Multifamily projects of two or more units or mixed-use projects where at least two-thirds of the total floor area is dedicated to residential uses would be subject to the ODS.

Projects are not eligible if the site contains prime farmland or farmland of statewide importance, a designated wetland, a Very High Fire Hazard Severity Zone or State Responsibility Area, a hazardous waste site, an earthquake fault zone unless compliant with seismic safety standards, or a 100-year flood hazard area unless adequate flood-protection measures are in place. The ODS do not apply to single-family homes, accessory dwelling units (ADUs), or non-residential development.

Qualifying projects must also comply with all applicable objective development standards contained in the General Plan and Zoning Ordinance, including height, density, and setback requirements. In the event of conflict these documents and ODS, the ODS shall prevail unless an adopted site-specific master plan provides otherwise.

**COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT:** On March 13, 2025, the Planning Commission received an informational presentation from Placeworks regarding the development of Objective Design Standards (ODS) for multifamily and residential mixed-use development projects in the City of Hollister Downtown Mixed Use (DMU) zoning district. The Commission discussed preliminary concepts and provided feedback to help guide preparation of the draft ODS.

As part of the broader outreach strategy, the City conducted public outreach to ensure meaningful opportunities for community participation. Approximately 13,284 postcards were mailed to tenants and property owners throughout Hollister inviting community members to attend the ODS workshop held on December 2, 2025 at Paine's Restaurant and to participate in an online survey. The workshop was structured as an open house

from 4:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m. with formal presentations at 4:30 p.m. and 7:00 p.m. to share project background, objectives, and early design concepts, and receive community feedback.

To further promote participation, City of staff posted event announcements across the City's social media platforms and website. In addition to the workshop, staff developed a Community Objective Design Standards Survey, available on the City's ODS webpage from early November through the end of December. The survey provided an accessible way for residents to share input on design priorities, community character, and preferences for future development.

Recently, at the February 26, 2026 Planning Commission Meeting, Commissioners receive an informational report and presentation on the Draft Objective Design Standards (ODS) from Placeworks and were asked to provide general feedback on the overall approach and content of the standards, including whether there are missing items, items that are insufficiently addressed, or if any items are overly detailed or perspective.

During the study session, the Planning Commission recommended changes to add information about prohibited materials for fencing. This has been incorporated into the ODS under Chapter 3. Small-Scale Residential ODS, Section 3.5.3 Walls and Fences, Standard 3.5.3.2 Prohibited Materials. The project team has used this input to make finals amendments and incorporated them into the final document, along with figures and imagery.

**RESULTS OF COMMUNITY SURVEY:** Between early November and the end of December 2025, the online survey collected 72 responses. Participants provided input on preferred design elements and amenities for new housing projects in Downtown Hollister. Respondents expressed strong support for walkable street designs and well-maintained sidewalks that accommodate all ages and abilities. Many favored new development that incorporates architectural elements consistent with existing Downtown styles, emphasizing cohesive and context-sensitive design. There was also broad support for green spaces and outdoor seating areas to enhance storefront activity and visual interest.

Feedback on landscaping and street trees was mixed, with some concerns about long-term maintenance. Parking availability and enforcement were also common concerns. Respondents generally supported increasing parking options and emphasized that any new parking structures should complement adjacent buildings and be screened from primary street frontages.

The full survey results are included as Attachment 3.

**DOCUMENT STRUCTURE:** The ODS are organized into three distinct chapters to ensure clarity and ease of use. This structure is designed to guide users through the entire process – from understanding the regulatory context and project applicability to applying detailed design standards from various residential development types. Each chapter builds upon the last, offering a logical progression that supports both first-time users and experienced practitioners as they navigate Hollister's design expectations.

### Chapter 1: Introduction

This chapter establishes the foundation for the Objective Design Standards. It outlines the legal framework that necessitates objective standards, provides an overview of Downtown Hollister's historic character, identifies which projects are subject to the ODS, explains how the document relates to other City regulations, and describes the submission and review process.

### Chapter 2: Multifamily & Residential Mixed-Use ODS

This chapter presents the objective standards that apply to multifamily and mixed-use residential projects. It addresses site planning, pedestrian-oriented design, building form, architectural character, open space requirements, and landscaping – ensuring that new development contributes positively to the public realm and aligns with Hollister's context.

### Chapter 3: Small-Scale Residential ODS

This chapter focuses on standards for small-scale residential development, including single-family homes, duplexes, triplexes, and similar housing of types. It provides clear, objective criteria for site orientation, building design, compatibility with historic character, and landscaping supporting high-quality infill that respects neighborhood scale and identity.

### ODS Checklist

Provides a checklist for applicants and staff to go through each standard and evaluate whether the proposed project fulfills the standards.

### Exceptions

All applicable projects are required to comply with the Objective Design Standards (ODS). However, when appropriate, the Community Development Director may administratively approve minor deviations from the ODS. Minor deviations may be considered when the applicant demonstrates that the deviation would result in an improved site design or layout, or when a physical site constraint makes strict compliance with a specific standard infeasible. The Community Development Director has the authority to approve or deny such minor deviation requests based on the criteria and findings established in the ODS.

**MODIFICATIONS TO ODS:** Design principles and aesthetics are subject to change over time, making it essential for the ODS to remain adaptable. To address this, both the ODS and the newly proposed Zoning Ordinance provide a process for major and minor modifications to the Objective Design Standards. Major modifications include those that result in a significant change to a design standard. Major modifications will be required to be reviewed and approved by the Planning Commission at a noticed public hearing. Minor modifications include modifications necessitated by changes in State law that may limit the ability of local jurisdictions to regulate certain criteria; modifications to ensure consistency with policies, goals, and objectives of the City as declared by the City Council; and modifications that do not result in significant changes to existing design guidelines. Minor modifications will be reviewed and approved by Director of Community Development through issuance of an Approval Memorandum.

**CEQA:** The Objective Design Standards qualify for an exemption from the California

Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) because it constitutes an administrative action that does not result in a direct or reasonably foreseeable indirect physical change to the environment and therefore does not qualify as a “project” under State CEQA Guidelines Sections 15060(C)(2) and 15061(b)(3).

**CONCLUSION:** Adoption of the Objective Design Standards will allow the City to comply with State housing laws while maintaining local control over the design and quality of multifamily and residential mixed-use development in the Downtown Mixed Use (DMU) Zoning District. The standards provide clear, measurable criteria that support streamlined project review, reinforce the community’s design priorities, and help ensure that new development contributes positively to Hollister’s character, walkability, and long-term planning goals. Based on the analysis presented in this report, staff recommend that the Planning Commission adopt a Resolution recommending the City Council approval of the Objective Design Standards.

**FINANCIAL IMPACT:** There is no General Fund impact associated with this action. The development of the Objective Design Standards was fully funded through the City’s REAP 2.0 grant award administered by the Association of Monterey Bay Area Governments (AMBAG). All work completed to date, as well as remaining tasks associated with adoption, are covered by the grant allocation.

**PLANNING COMMISSION OPTIONS:** The Planning Commission may take one of the following actions regarding the proposed Objective Design Standards:

1. Adopt a Resolution recommending that the City Council approve the Objective Design Standards (Attachment 1).
2. Adopt a Resolution recommending that the City Council approve of the Objective Design Standards with amendments as directed by the Planning Commission.
3. Adopt a Resolution recommending that the City Council deny the Objective Design Standards.

Staff recommend that the Planning Commission select Option 1.

**ATTACHMENTS:**

1. Resolution Recommending Approval
2. Exhibit A - Objective Design Standards
3. ODS Community Survey Results Memo