

Objective Design Standards for 1–4 Family and 1–3 Story Multifamily Development

Workshop #1 Summary Notes

Date: April 15, 2025. 1:30 PM – 3:00 PM

Key Topics:

Document Structure & Applicability

OHA: Why two separate documents exist despite overlaps in standards?

Staff: Separate documents help users (staff and applicants) easily navigate standards suited to their project types. Small-scale developers, homeowners and Planning staff would benefit from this split because it results in more user-friendly guidance.

OHA: Why apply ODS to single-family homes if state law requires them only for 2+ units?

Staff: The City plans to allow ministerial approval for single-family homes, requiring objective standards per the Housing Element. Objective standards are also required for single-family homes with ADUs.

Context-Based Porch Standards

Staff: explained context porch requirements: if 60% of buildings in context have covered/recessed entries, new development must include them.

OHA: Questioned raising the threshold from 50% (used in 1-2 unit manual) to 60%.

Staff: 60% aligns with other multiple planning code references to identifying “majority” as it relates to Immediate Neighborhood Context for clarity and consistency. 60% helps to identify strong context when it is present more definitively and decisively, while 50% is not as definite and may be more open to interpretation, especially in more architecturally diverse neighborhoods or areas.

PB: Asked if all porches need to be recessed.

Staff: No, the recess is optional. Porches and other type entries can be recessed or include a projection or a combination of a recess and projection, as long as the entries are covered.

PB: Why not allow stoops?

Staff: Stoops are not prohibited completely, but they are de-prioritized in favor of grade-level entries for ADA/accessibility reasons, especially for multifamily development. This is very important for the Accessibility advocates who maintained this priority throughout the project.

Context Area Definition

OHA: Concerned about revised definition which limits context to the immediate block face and across a facing street rather than nearby/corner properties across the side streets. Thinks this narrows contextual understanding and weakens consistency with existing standards.

Staff: Revision made for clarity, focus on the context where it is the strongest, and ease for staff and applicants in following the requirement and verifying compliance. This approach keeps context strong without overextending analysis to areas across side streets (often wide streets) with potentially very different character and zoning. Context within the block face is easier on applicants and more desirable for staff verification. Staff thinks that this revised approach (block face focus) strengthens the context application, and it is consistent with how Existing Context is determined along the Corridors.

Roof Form Standards

OHA: Asked how 50% roof form standard applies to narrow lots. CB: Suggested clarification of measurement (e.g., using front 30 feet instead).

Staff: 50% is a minimum, aiming for flexibility without sacrificing contextual fit.

PB: Noted many appealing buildings lack sloped roofs; pitched roofs not always necessary or cost-efficient. Prefers flat roof design.

Articulation & Blank Walls

OHA: Noted problems with blank walls above windows in the top section of buildings along the roofline; suggested detailing or horizontal moldings to break monotony. Advocated avoiding overly tall, top-heavy facades without detailing. However, also emphasized that well-designed flat facades can meet standards without excessive articulation.

Staff: It is difficult to write objective standards for “good detailing”. Also the detailing may be a reflection of more traditional styles. Modern examples built in Oakland often do not show much detailing and prefer a cleaner look of these building portions. City wants to be open to any styles, including the modern styles, that may have or need less detailing. Also, it is often a matter of taste: some people may prefer buildings without detailing above the top row of windows or at the top portion of the building. It is a matter of preference and should be left to a designer.

OHA: Emphasized importance of addressing blankness at building tops and need for upper-level minimum transparency of 25%.

Staff: consider possibly extending the 15' maximum blank wall stretch to above ground floor walls. Requiring residential transparency is problematic. If desired, it can be addressed in the Planning Code, not ODS.

Building Style and Flexibility

OHA: Warned against over-reliance on articulations leading to stylistic bias.

Staff: Standards aim to be style-neutral; our intent is flexibility. Visual examples from which some standard options were derived reflect current Oakland developments.

Building Entrances & Windows

OHA: Questioned poor design choices (e.g., trash cans in front gates) on one of the supporting images.

Staff: Likely due to trash day; gate and pedestrian path shown is separate from driveway.

Additions to Historic Buildings

OHA: Opposed language discouraging replication of historic elements; could create confusion.

OHA: Proposed allowing matching materials and detailing for clarity and alignment with Historic Preservation Element.

Staff: The goal is to avoid exact replication of unique detailing – this may be difficult and require skills or trade no longer available; welcomed written detailed comments for consideration to improve clarity.