
DATE: June 5, 2025

STUDY SESSION STAFF REPORT

AGENDA ITEM NO. 9.1

TO: FOSTER CITY PLANNING COMMISSION

PREPARED BY: LESLIE CARMICHAEL, CONSULTANT PLANNER
SOFIA MANGALAM, COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT
DIRECTOR

CASE NO.: RZ2024-0005

PROJECT LOCATION: CITYWIDE

REQUESTED ACTION/PURPOSE

The purpose of this study session is to provide the Planning Commission and the public an opportunity to review and provide input on part 2 of the draft Single-family Objective Design and Development Standards (ODDS), which include proposed regulations for Yards, Attached Accessory Structures, Windcreens, Landscaping and Lighting, Fences, and Eichler Homes.

NOTICING/PUBLIC OUTREACH

- Ad in the Foster City Islander – May 21, 2025
- Foster City website at www.fostercity.org – May 15, 2025
- Planning Listserv Email – May 15, 2025
- Housing Element Listserv Email – May 15, 2025
- Electronic marquee at Leo Ryan Park – May 22, 2025, through June 5, 2025
- Posted at all of the City's official posting location – May 16, 2025
- Email to responders of the survey – May 15, 2025

BACKGROUND

On [March 20, 2024](#), the City Council approved the adoption of a General Plan Amendment consisting of revisions to the 2023-31 Housing Element, and on April 18, 2024, the City received a [letter from the Department of Housing and Community Development \(HCD\)](#) stating that the adopted housing element is in substantial compliance with State Housing Element Law. [Chapter 4, Constraints, of the City's Housing Element](#), summarizes a wide variety of constraints to the production and affordability of housing. These include governmental factors such as land use controls, development standards, and fees as well as nongovernmental factors, such as the price of land, cost of construction, and environmental constraints. Table 4-1 ([page HE-50](#)) identifies the links between the constraints, issues, and contributing factors and highlights the key actions proposed to

address these constraints. It notes that uncertainty of the City's expectations can result in additional processing time and cost for housing production, and includes meaningful actions with targets and timelines.

The Housing Element Programs relevant to this staff report include:

- *H-B-4-a Update Architectural and Solar Guidelines for Single Family Homes*
Update the Architectural and Solar Guidelines to implement the City's Architectural Review requirements contained in Chapter 17.58 of the Foster City Municipal Code to ensure that development preserves the architectural character and scale of the neighborhoods and community and is well designed.
Responsible Agency: Community Development Department
Timeframe: Update Architectural and Solar Guidelines by December 2025

The Housing Element is an 8-year plan and every year the City must report on the status and progress in implementing the Housing Element by submitting the Annual Progress Report (APR) to HCD and Office of Land Use and Climate Innovation (LCI.) HCD also created the Housing Accountability Unit to enforce Housing Elements and ensure that jurisdictions follow through with their Housing Element commitments by implementing their goals, policies, and programs. Work on Single Family ODDS demonstrates the City's commitment to implementing program H-B-4-a.

Current Design Review Process for Single-family Homes

When reviewing applications for additions and other property improvements in the Single-family Residence District and Single-family Residence/Planned Development District (R-1 and R-1/PD), the City relies on both objective development standards and subjective design guidelines. These are outlined in the Foster City Municipal Code, Title 17 Zoning, design guidelines such as Architectural and Solar Guidelines, and various policies, including the Room Addition Impact Evaluation for Waterfront Properties (P-1-2000) and Homeowners' Association (HOA) Prototypes. These standards regulate the design of additions, other property improvements to single-family homes, and the construction of new single-family homes. Most applications for property improvement and development such as additions to existing buildings and structures, and new homes and structures, are reviewed for compliance with numerous code sections, policies and design guidelines discussed above.

Design Guidelines Versus Design Standards

Objective design standards are defined under State law as "standards that involve no personal or subjective judgment by a public official and are uniformly verifiable by reference to an external and uniform benchmark or criterion available and knowable by both the development applicant or proponent and the public official prior to submittal" ([California Government Code, Section 65913.4](#)).

Why adopt objective design standards for single-family homes?

Objective standards offer residents, property owners, and developers clear development and design standards for design, articulation, and massing expected within Foster City neighborhoods. These standards will be informed by the City's current Architectural and Solar Guidelines, Planning Commission Policies, Foster City Municipal Code, as well as community input. Additionally, they will feature clear language and graphical illustrations to guide property owners and developers. The standards will convey expectations to homeowners/applicants. This approach removes obstacles to residential permitting by shortening application timelines and clearly outlining requirements from the outset of the design phase.

COMPONENTS OF A SINGLE-FAMILY HOME DESIGN

Single-family Design and Development Standards refer to architectural and site layout characteristics of the home. The following are the components of a single-family home design, including:

- **Site Design** - In single-family home design, site design encompasses the planning and layout of the property, including the placement of the house, landscaping, and other site features:
 - Entry Location and street Connectivity (Orientation)
 - Curb cuts and driveways
- **Building Design** - Building design for single-family homes involves creating a functional, aesthetically pleasing, and sustainable dwelling that reflects the homeowner's lifestyle and preferences, while adhering to local regulations and design guidelines.
 - Building Massing (for solar impacts)
 - Articulation (to create visual interest)
 - Materials and Colors
 - Roof Forms
 - Garages
 - Principal Entry
 - Balconies
 - Windows and Doors
 - Gutters, Downspouts, and Flashings
 - Interior Layout (not subject to objective standards)
- **Accessory Structures** - An accessory structure is a structure that is on the same parcel of property as a principal structure, and the use of which is incidental to the use of the principal structure. For example, a detached garage or storage shed for garden tools may serve as accessory structures.
 - Location and Setbacks
 - Lot Coverage
 - Height
 - Materials
- **Other Features**
 - Placement of Mechanical Equipment (e.g., air conditioning units)
 - Yards
 - Landscaping and Lighting

- Fences

Previous Study Sessions

- [Planning Commission Study Session #1, July 18, 2024](#)

A Planning Commission study session was held on July 18, 2024, to review existing single-family design guidelines, policies, and applicable zoning code regulations and develop single-family objective design and development standards.

In the staff report, staff also detailed the responses from the Community Survey, which was open from May through September 2024. There were 43 responses from residents, three (3) written and forty (40) electronic responses. Please refer to the staff report for details ([link to staff report](#)).

Please refer to the link for meeting minutes for reference ([link for meeting minutes](#)).

- [Planning Commission Study Session #2, April 17, 2025](#)

On April 15, 2025, a second Planning Commission study session #2 was held to review part 1 of the draft regulations for Building Design, Site Design, and Accessory Structures. At the meeting, the Planning Commission reviewed and discussed the part 1 draft regulations and provided guidance on the following:

Principal Entry and Courtyards:

The Commission generally supported flexibility in defining "principal entry", including permitting front courtyards and side-facing entries. There was consensus that, when located inside a courtyard, there should be no requirement for the front door to face the street. There was no clear consensus on requiring a 5-foot wall or gate to define a courtyard, and some Commissioners expressed concerns that this could be overly restrictive or unnecessary for recessed entry designs standard in Foster City.

Garage Design and Landscaping:

The Commission supported limiting garage frontage to 50% of the front elevation to encourage better street presence and aesthetics and requiring articulation on the street-facing side of new or modified garages. While there was general agreement that landscaping near garages could enhance aesthetics, opinions were mixed on whether a two-foot landscape buffer between the driveway and building should be required. After the discussion, a majority supported the buffer, recognizing its potential safety benefits, with staff noting that flexibility and exceptions could still be considered.

Solar Impacts:

Most Commissioners supported including solar impact standards in the Municipal Code as objective standards, with a preference for using height-based triggers (such as 18 feet) rather than relying on the number of stories. Commissioners emphasized the importance of minimizing shading impacts on neighboring properties while raising concerns about the potential cost and complexity of solar studies. The inclusion of these

standards will be further discussed following public feedback and cost analysis.

Building and Roof Articulation:

The Commission agreed to require at least two architectural treatments on front elevations and limit rear wall planes to a maximum of 20 feet without variation. There was also support for requiring articulation in roof forms for new construction. Commissioners emphasized flexibility in roof pitch and material choices to avoid restricting modern or creative designs and agreed that deviations should be allowed without triggering a full Planning Commission review.

Materials and Colors:

The Commission broadly opposed limiting the number of materials used on a home's exterior, preferring to support creative and modern designs. There was interest in maintaining a prohibited materials list (e.g., vinyl siding, overly reflective finishes) while allowing greater use of store-bought structures like sheds. On color, most Commissioners opposed restrictions on specific colors, or the number of colors used, citing enforcement challenges and a desire to avoid HOA-style regulations. However, no formal consensus was reached on maintaining the existing prohibitions on fluorescent colors and multicolor patterns; the topic was tabled for future discussion, pending public input.

Windows:

Commissioners supported requiring consistency in window styles and grids only on the front and street-facing elevations while allowing flexibility on the rear and sides of the house. There was a concern that requiring uniformity across all elevations would be unnecessarily burdensome and costly, especially for replacement projects. Staff and Commissioners also discussed exempting sidelight windows from any matching requirement.

Balconies:

The Commission supported allowing Juliette balconies on side elevations without additional setbacks, treating them similarly to large windows since they typically do not include a standing area. Regarding larger balconies, the Commissioners agreed that minimum size requirements were unnecessary, as existing building code standards already ensure safety and functionality.

Accessory Structures:

The Commission supported modernizing regulations around accessory structures, aligning setbacks with ADU standards by reducing side and rear setbacks from 5 feet to 4 feet and reducing separation from primary structures from 10 feet to 5 feet. They endorsed increasing the maximum height to 10 feet plus 12 inches for roof trim, and supported expanding permissible materials to include prefabricated sheds and similar structures, provided safety standards are met. The 50% total lot coverage limit was reaffirmed, and a separate rear yard limit was deemed unnecessary. The Commission agreed that the 18-inch vertical rise limitation within 6 feet for decks and patios should only apply to waterfront properties. Regarding accessory structures in front yards, Commissioners generally supported allowing arbors and trellises but requested further

discussion about carports and temporary structures such as pop-up canopies. Staff suggested applying limits similar to those used for RV parking.

After the study session, staff solicited feedback from the Community through an online form until May 8, 2025. Staff only received three (3) responses (see Attachment #3).

ANALYSIS

Part 2 of the draft regulation includes standards for Yards, Attached Accessory Structures, Landscaping and Lighting, Fences, Windscreens, and Eichler Homes (see tables 1 through 7).

Attachment #1 includes draft regulations for specific components of Single-family homes discussed above, including relevant existing standards or guidelines and feedback from the Community Survey that was conducted from May through September 2024, and/or Planning Commission from previous discussions.

Table 1: General Definitions

GENERAL DEFINITIONS	
a	Building, accessory. "Accessory building" or accessory structure means a building on the same property as the main building, but its use is secondary and incidental to the use of the main building.
b	Building, main. "Main building" means the building containing the primary use of the lot and is not an accessory building.

Table 2: Draft Regulations for Yards

YARDS	
Definitions	
a	Yard, Required. "Required yard" means the portion of the yard that is required to be unobstructed from the ground upwards to meet the required setback.
b	Yard, Front. "Front yard" means a yard extending across the front of the lot between the side lines and measured from the front property line of the lot to the wall of the main building closest to the street. The front yard shall include all the yard area between the main building and the front property line of the lot.

c	Yard, Rear. “Rear yard” means a yard extending across the full width of the lot farthest from the street and measured between the rear line of the lot and the nearest line of the wall of the main building.
d	Yard, Side. “Side yard” means a yard between the sideline of the lot and the nearest line of the wall of the main building and extending from the front yard of the lot to the rear yard.
e	Flag lot. Flag lot is a lot with access to a public or private street by a strip of land not more than 30 feet in width at the widest point and at least 30 feet in length, and the largest portion of the lot is situated behind adjoining lots which front on a public or private street.

Determining Yards on Irregular Lots

a	For lots with more than four (4) sides, the front and rear yards shall be as defined by Chapter 17.04 and yards that are not the front yard and not the rear yard shall be considered side yards unless shown to be otherwise on the original building permit plans.
b	On a flag lot the front and rear yards shall be as defined in Chapter 17.04, with the front yard being the portion closest to the street. The front yard setback shall be 20 feet or the length of the narrow portion of the lot, whichever is greater. All yards other than the front and rear yards shall be considered side yards unless shown to be otherwise on the original building permit plans.

Projections into Yards

a	<p>Architectural features. Architectural features on the main building, such as bay windows, cornices, eaves and canopies, may extend into the required yard subject to the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Architectural features such as bay windows, fireplace chimneys, cornices, eaves, trellis, open or covered porches, may extend a maximum of two (2) feet into any required side yard and five (5) feet into any required front or rear yard. ii. Notwithstanding the provisions above, where any setback conflicts with the California Building Code, the more restrictive shall apply.
b	<p>Open porches or outside stairways. Open, uncovered, landing places or outside stairways, may extend a maximum of two (2) feet into any required side yard and five (5) feet into any required front or rear yard, provided they do not exceed six (6) feet in height (excluding railings) above ground level.</p>

c.	Projecting Balconies. Projecting balconies located on rear elevations may extend a maximum of five (5) feet into the required rear yard.
Vision Triangles	
a	No accessory structure or other obstruction more than 40 inches in height shall be located in the corner vision triangles of corner lots established in Section 17.52.030.
Front Setback in Previously Developed Areas	
a	Where the existing front yard is less than the stated requirements of the R-1 zoning district, the required front yard shall be the average depth of the front yards on the improved lots adjoining the side lines of the subject lot.
Detached Accessory Structures in the Front Yard	
a	The only detached accessory buildings or structures allowed within the front yard shall be a single trellis that is set back a minimum of 20 feet from the front property line and not more than twelve (12) square feet in area.
Mechanical Equipment in Yards	
a	<p>Mechanical equipment such as air conditioning condenser units, heat pumps, water heaters, or other mechanical/plumbing equipment may be located in side or rear yards when all the requirements below are met:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. The equipment is located behind and lower than a fence or wall; and ii. The equipment is set back a minimum of three (3) feet from the property line; and iii. The noise levels produced by the mechanical unit are in compliance with the provisions of subsection B, Noise Limits (Table 1) of Section 17.68.030, Noise, of Chapter 17.68, General Performance Standards; and iv. The mechanical unit is in compliance with Building Code requirements, including but not limited to setbacks.

Table 3: Draft Regulations for Attached Accessory Structures

ATTACHED ACCESSORY STRUCTURES	
a	An accessory structure is considered attached if any component of the structure is within 12 inches of the main building.

b	<p>All attached accessory structures shall comply with setbacks and other requirements for the main building, except that a patio cover unenclosed on at least two (2) sides to serve the ground floor shall be allowed to extend into the required rear yard, provided that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. The size of the patio cover shall not exceed 50% of the rear yard measured from the rear of the main structure to the rear property line; and ii. Such patio cover shall not extend more than 20 feet from the rear of the main structure; and iii. A minimum setback of five (5) feet from the rear property line shall be maintained.
c	<p>All attached accessory structures shall meet the following standards:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. No use of any structure extending into the rear yard area shall be permitted above the first floor. ii. No attached accessory structure shall be enclosed to form a living or storage area unless it complies with all requirements and standards for a room addition. iii. The only plumbing facilities to be permitted on any patio area shall be a water faucet and drain, gas for cooking, and rainwater runoff disposal plumbing, and there shall be no other plumbing of any kind. iv. Ingress and egress shall be directly from the living unit which the patio is designed to serve.

Table 4: Draft Regulations for Landscaping and Lighting

LANDSCAPING AND LIGHTING	
Front Yard Paving	
a	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Front yard paving shall maintain a minimum setback of two (2) feet from any side property line. ii. Where the garage entry faces the street, front yard paving (including the driveway) shall not exceed 65% of the front yard. iii. For side entry garages, the area between the side of the garage facing the street and the front property line parallel to the street shall be entirely landscaped.

Landscaping	
a	<p>All portions of front yards, except those occupied by walkways and allowable motor vehicle parking and storage areas, shall be landscaped according to the following standards:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. A minimum of one (1) tree with an estimated mature height of at least twelve (12) feet. ii. The ground area shall be covered with plantings, mulch, or inorganic ground cover. iii. Property shall be maintained in conformance with Chapter 9.52 Property Maintenance.
Exterior Lighting	
a	<p>Exterior lighting shall be subject to the following restrictions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Light fixtures shall be mounted no higher than the roof eave. ii. All lights fixtures mounted more than four (4) feet from grade shall be directed downward. iii. A motion-activated light may be used if the beam is directed downwards, shielding the light from reaching adjacent properties. iv. No permanently installed outdoor lights that blink, revolve, flash, or change intensity shall be permitted. v. Ground mounted lighting such as bollard lighting shall be limited to four (4) feet tall. vi. Seasonal or holiday lighting shall be limited to sixty (60) days.

Table 5: Draft Regulations for Fences and Walls

FENCES	
Fences in Front Yard – Nonwaterfront Properties	
a	<p>Front yard fences or walls on non-corner lots are allowed to be six (6) feet in height if:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. The fence or wall is set back a minimum of twenty feet from the back of sidewalk; and

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ii. The fence's location is not closer to the street than the house's primary front wall nearest to the street from which the fence is extended; and iii. All items stored or temporarily placed behind the fence shall be lower than the height of the fence. iv. Gates to a front courtyard would be subject to existing regulations for front yard fences.
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Fences in Side and Rear Yards – Non-Corner Lots in Nonwaterfront Properties

a	<p>A. In all residential zoning districts, fences may be permitted in the side or rear yards of noncorner lots if all of the following conditions are met:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. The fence does not exceed six (6) feet in height; and ii. The fence is constructed of materials shown in Section 17.52.040; and iii. All items stored or temporarily placed behind the fence shall be lower than the height of the fence. iv. Exception. Wood fences not exceeding seven (7) feet in height may be permitted in any side and rear yard area if all fence material above six (6) feet in height is approximately 50% open.
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Fences and Walls – Waterfront Properties – Side Yards of Noncorner Lots.

a	<p>In all residential zoning districts, fences and walls may be permitted in the side yards of noncorner lots if all of the following conditions are met:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. The fence or wall does not exceed six (6) feet in height; and ii. The fence or wall is constructed of materials shown in Section 17.52.040; and iii. All items stored or temporarily placed behind the fence or wall shall be lower than the height of the fence or wall. iv. Exception: Wood fences not exceeding seven (7) feet in height may be permitted in any side yard area if all fence material above six (6) feet in height is approximately 50% open.
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Materials

a	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Materials for the construction of permanent fences and walls along property lines shall be limited to the following:
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	<p>redwood, cedar, brick, slumpstone, stucco, plaster, cement, wrought iron, or similar materials as determined by the community development director.</p> <p>ii. Additionally, clear tempered glass or clear Plexiglas shall be allowed on within rear and side yards of all properties and along property lines of waterfront properties only.</p> <p>iii. Chain-link and wood or synthetic slats (e.g., vinyl slats) and vinyl may be allowed for commercial, industrial or institutional uses, depending on location and design.</p>
Fences in Front Yards of Corner Lots	
a	<p>In all residential zoning districts, fences may be permitted in the front yard area of corner lots if all of the following conditions are met:</p> <p>i. The fence does not exceed 40 inches in height; and</p> <p>ii. The fence is constructed of materials allowed by Section 17.52.040.</p>

Table 6: Draft Regulations for Windscreens

WINDSCREENS	
a	<p>A windscreen shall be allowed in a side or rear yard subject to the following:</p> <p>i. Windscreens shall be constructed of clear tempered glass or other clear rigid material.</p> <p>ii. Windscreens may include a frame not to exceed 6 inches in width.</p> <p>iii. Maximum height shall be up to 10 feet above grade or above the top of a first-floor deck.</p> <p>iv. Windscreens shall maintain a setback of at least five (5) feet from any property line or public walkway easement.</p> <p>v. Windscreens shall be limited to two (2) sides, i.e., shall not enclose a space on three or more sides.</p>

Table 7: Draft Regulations for Eichler Homes

MODIFICATIONS TO EXISTING EICHLER HOMES
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Roofs	
a	The shape, pitch, and height of the original roof shall be preserved except that covers over atria may not exceed 10 inches of additional height.
b	If part of the original design, exposed beam ends, and overhanging eaves shall be preserved.
Windows	
a	Clerestory and transom windows or openings on front facades above carports or garages shall not be infilled.
b	Windows added to the front façade shall match existing front façade windows in terms of type, opening style, frame color, and frame width.
c	The following window styles or treatments are prohibited on front facades: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Shutters ii. Projecting bay or garden windows iii. Mullions or divided lites (grids)
Mechanical Equipment	
a	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Mechanical equipment shall not be roof mounted. ii. Any exterior conduits shall be painted to match the surrounding surface. iii. Conduits or ducts located on the roof shall be no higher than six (6) inches above the roof surface and on roofs that are less than 2:12 pitch.
Additions	
a	<p>First-floor room additions are subject to the following requirements:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Located in the side or rear of the existing house. ii. Set back a minimum of 10 feet from the front facade of the house. iii. Roof form shall duplicate the roof form of the existing house. iv. Height shall be no taller than one story with maximum floor height (to top plate) of eight (8) feet.

	v. Shall comply with all other adopted design standards for Eichler houses.
b	<p>Second-floor room additions are subject to the following requirements:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Limited to the rear half of the roof. ii. Cladding shall match the primary material of the existing house. iii. Roof form shall duplicate the roof form of the existing house. iv. Floor height shall be limited (to top plate) of eight (8) feet. v. Shall comply with all other design standards adopted for Eichler houses.

Study Session Questions

Staff has prepared the following questions to assist the Planning Commission's discussion:

1. Does the Planning Commission have any feedback on the proposed regulations?
2. Is there any additional feedback that the Planning Commission would like staff to consider when drafting language for the regulations discussed above for single-family objective design and development standards?

After this study session, staff will post part 2 of the draft regulations and open it for public review. Based on the Planning Commission and public feedback, staff will finalize the regulations for Yards, Attached Accessory Structures, Landscaping and Lighting, Fences, Windscreens, and Eichler Homes, as discussed above, for further Planning Commission and City Council review.

CALIFORNIA ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY ACT (CEQA)

This study session is exempt per CEQA Guidelines Section 15061(b)(3), as there are no physical changes associated with this action.

NEXT STEPS

The next steps in the development of the ODDS are:

- Post part 2 of draft regulations for community feedback
- Prepare draft regulations (part 3) for Waterfront Properties, Architectural Review Process, and other related amendments to Foster City Municipal Code.
- Planning Commission Study Session#4 for draft regulations part 3 in September 2025 (tentative).

DOCUMENT LINKS

- [Architectural and Solar Guidelines](#)
- [City-wide Policies](#)
- [Land Use Subcommittee Meeting Memo](#)
- [Link to Community Survey](#)

ATTACHMENTS

Attachment 1 – Draft Regulations with comments

Attachment 2 – Presentation

Attachment 3 – Public Comments Feedback Forms Redacted