
DATE: April 17, 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 the draft regulations (part 1) for Building Design, Site Design, and Accessory Structures.

NOTICING/PUBLIC OUTREACH

- Ad in the Foster City Islander – April 2, 2025
- Foster City website at www.fostercity.org – March 27, 2025
- Planning Listserv Email – March 27, 2025
- Housing Element Listserv Email – April 10, 2025
- Electronic marquee at Leo Ryan Park – April 3, 2025, through April 17, 2025
- Email to responders of the survey – April 8, 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, as follows:

- *H-B-4-a Update Architectural and Solar Guidelines for Single Family Homes - December 2025*
- *H-D-4-f: Objective Design Standards for Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs) - December 2024*
- *H-D-6-e: Multi-Family Objective Design Standards - December 2023*
- *H-D-6-f: Senate Bill (SB) 9 Objective Design Standards - December 2023*

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 LCI.

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 (see Attachment #2.)

There are numerous considerations when reviewing applications for property improvement and development. While the Zoning Code primarily includes objective standards such as setbacks and heights, some provisions require subjective interpretation by decision-makers. For example, Section [17.52.070](#) Exception process states that an exception to the requirements of this chapter may also be granted administratively by the community development director if all of the following findings are required to be made:

“The proposed fence, wall or hedge configuration/height would be compatible with the design, appearance and scale of existing building and structures in the neighborhood.”

Similarly, the City's existing design guidelines and policies, which aim for overall compatibility and a preferred aesthetic, also involve subjective interpretations despite containing some objective standards. Additionally, the guidelines and policies are intended to be considered “guidelines” and not as performance standards or “rules.” As such, they depend on the subjective judgment of decision-makers, which can lead to lengthy review periods and occasionally result in additional conditions of approval that may increase project costs.

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.

Table 1: Typical Characteristics of Design Guidelines Versus Design Standards

DESIGN GUIDELINES	DESIGN STANDARDS
Subjective	Objective
Recommendations, which may not be enforceable as regulations	Requirements, which are enforceable as regulations
Open to interpretation, difficult to measure or verify	Measurable and verifiable
Use words such as “should” or “may”	Use language such as “shall,” “must,” or “is required to”
Adopted by resolution	Adopted by ordinance

Table 2: Examples of Subjective Guidelines and Objective Standards

SUBJECTIVE GUIDELINES	OBJECTIVE STANDARDS
<i>The height, width, and general proportions of a building should conform generally with other buildings in the vicinity. Ratio of wall surface to openings, and the ratio of the width and height of the windows and doors, should also be consistent with other buildings in the vicinity. The scale and massing of a structure will be a primary consideration</i>	<p>Maximum height permitted: 25 feet.</p> <p>Maximum coverage permitted: 50%</p> <p>- Section 17.12.040 Area, bulk, yard and height regulations</p> <p>Windows and doors shall not cover more than 75% of the wall surface of the building.</p>

<p>- Foster City Architectural and Solar Guidelines</p>	
<p><i>Do not be so large or ornate as to overwhelm the existing home</i></p> <p>- Foster City Architectural and Solar Guidelines</p>	<p>Maximum height permitted: 25 feet.</p> <p>Minimum yards required: Front: 20 feet Side: 5 feet Rear: 20 feet</p> <p>- Section 17.12.040 Area, bulk, yard and height regulations</p> <p>The maximum upper story size shall be no more than 50 percent of the lot coverage calculation.</p>

The figure below illustrates an objective standard from Section [17.04.020](#) Definitions:

“Height of building” means the vertical distance from the average level of the highest and lowest points of that portion of the lot covered by the building to the highest point of a flat roof or parapet for a building with a flat roof; the average height of a sloped roof; and is exclusive of accessory components such as, but not limited to, mechanical penthouses, tower structures, chimneys, and mechanical equipment screens.

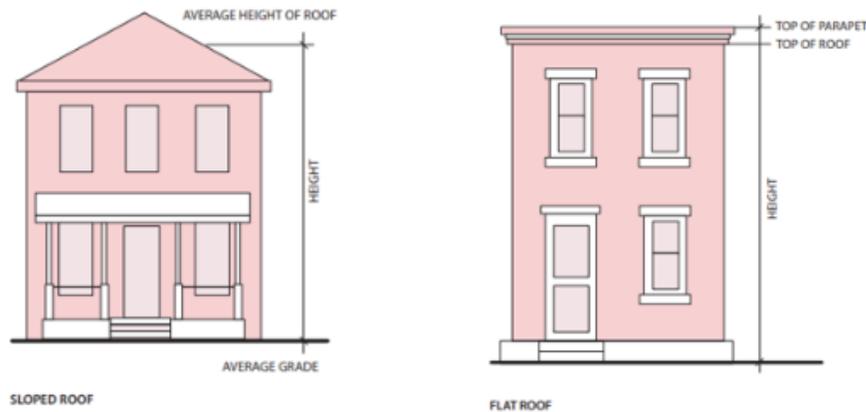


Figure 1: Height of Building; Source: FCMC Section [17.04.020](#) Definitions

Planning Commission Study Session #1, July 18, 2024

A [Planning Commission study session](#) was held on July 18, 2024, providing a review of existing single-family design guidelines, policies, and applicable zoning code regulations for the purpose of developing single-family objective design and development standards.

In the staff report, staff also detailed the responses from the Community Survey, which was opened 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](#)).

After Study Session #1, there were some staffing issues, so the efforts related to developing Single-family objective design and development standards were put on hold. Staff has picked up these efforts again and has drafted regulations for Site Design, Building Design, and Accessory Structures for a Single-family home.

ANALYSIS

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 part of 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 residential structure may have a detached garage or storage shed for garden tools as accessory structures.

- Location and setbacks
- Coverage
- Height
- Materials
- **Other Features**
 - Placement of Mechanical Equipment (e.g., air conditioning units)
 - Yards
 - Landscaping and Lighting
 - Fences

DRAFT REGULATIONS (Part 1)

In this study session, staff has prepared draft regulations for Site Design, Building Design, and Accessory Structures (see Tables 3, 4, and 5) to obtain feedback from the Planning Commission and the public.

See Attachment 1, which includes draft regulations for specific components of Single-family homes, including relevant existing standards or guidelines and feedback from the survey and/or Planning Commission.

Table 3: Draft Regulations for Site Design

SITE DESIGN	
1	Entry location and street connectivity
a	The principal entry for all new primary units shall be one of the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Located and oriented to face the public or private street. ii. Located inside an entry courtyard with the entrance to the entry courtyard facing the public or private street. iii. Located on the side of the primary unit, provided that the required side setback from the front setback line to such entrance shall not be less than ten feet.
b	On corner lots, the principal entry may be oriented toward either street.
c	The design of the principal entry shall be in conformance with Section “Primary Entry.”
d	A walkway measuring a minimum of thirty-six (36) inches in width shall be provided from the driveway or sidewalk to the primary entry.
2	Curb Cuts and Driveways
a	Curb cut requirements. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Curb cuts shall be permitted only to provide access to approved garages, carports, and parking spaces.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ii. The width of a curb cut serving one (1) parking space or two (2) parking spaces in a tandem configuration is limited to a minimum of ten (10) feet and a maximum of twelve (12) feet, excluding aprons. iii. The width of a curb cut serving two (2) or more parking spaces in a side-by-side configuration is limited to a minimum of ten (10) feet and a maximum of twenty (20) feet, excluding aprons. iv. The nearest edge of a driveway curb cut shall be at least three (3) feet from the nearest property line, the centerline of a fire hydrant, light standard, traffic signal, utility pole, or other similar facility.
b	<p>Street Facing Garage Driveway requirements.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Driveways shall be a minimum of twenty (20) feet deep, measured from the front property line parallel to the public or private street, and a maximum of twenty (20) feet wide. ii. Driveways on corner lots shall be located at least twenty (20) feet from the property lines at the intersection of the corner or pedestrian crosswalk. iii. Driveways abutting a side property line shall include a minimum two (2) foot wide landscape area.
c	<p>Side-Entry Garage Driveway requirements.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> I. A minimum distance of twenty-five (25) feet shall be required, measured from the face of the garage entrance to the side property line. II. A landscape buffer a minimum of two (2) feet in depth shall be provided between the driveway and the primary building. III. A turning radius of at least twenty-five feet shall be required for any garage where the access does not directly face the street.
d	<p>Shared driveway or adjacent driveway.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Shared driveways between two (2) properties shall provide a distance of fifty-two (52) feet between the faces of garage doors facing each other and provide reciprocal easements to ensure shared access. Other configurations for driveways shared between two (2) properties shall be as approved by the City Engineer. ii. If there is a shared driveway between the two (2) properties, and one (1) of the property owners wishes to separate the driveway, the property owner shall ensure that both the driveways, upon separation, meet the requirements of this Chapter.

Table 4: Draft Regulations for Building Design

BUILDING DESIGN	
1	Building massing, articulation, materials, and color
a	<p>Building massing to minimize solar impacts to neighbors. Room additions or new single-family homes shall conform with the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. It does not eliminate all direct sunlight to any living/family room, dining room, or kitchen in an adjacent house.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ii. It does not reduce more than 2 hours of direct sunlight to a living/family room or kitchen, or if it reduces more than 4 hours of direct sunlight to a bedroom in an adjacent house. iii. It does not reduce the amount of time that an adjacent house's window receives direct sunlight by more than 50% at any season where an impact occurs (requires a comparison of the hours that a window receives direct sunlight in an existing and proposed condition). iv. If a living/family room, dining room, or kitchen in the adjacent house has multiple windows, the solar impact will be based on the aggregate impact.
b	<p>Front Elevation Articulation. The front elevation shall include a principal entry designed in conformance with Section XX and at least two (2) of the following treatments:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Change in color and/or material ii. Window iii. Recess or projection of at least two (2) feet in depth and four (4) feet in width. iv. Attached trellis or pergola.
c	<p>Rear Elevation Articulation. No rear elevation shall run in a continuous plane of more than twenty (20) feet on any specific story without at least (1) of the following treatments: i. Change in color and/or material ii. Window iii. Entry dooriv. Patio, deck, or balcony v. Attached trellis or pergolavi. Recess or projection of at least two (2) feet in depth and four (4) feet in width.</p>
d	<p>Materials.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Materials used for all elements of building exteriors (excluding roofs) shall be limited to three (3) different materials. ii. The applicant shall refer to the list of prohibited materials established by the Community Development Department from use on building exteriors. The list may be amended from time to time to accommodate new materials and colors.
e	<p>Color. Primary elevation walls and garage doors are prohibited from using primary colors and secondary primary colors on all elevations. Accent features and trim are exempt.</p>
2	Roofs
a	<p>Articulation.</p> <p>Roof surfaces on new houses that face a public or private street and are wider than 30 feet shall be vertically articulated at least once every 30 feet on at least one of the stories with at least one of the following techniques:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. A change in height of at least four (4) feet. ii. A roof dormer iii. A change in roof orientation iv. A change in roof form that projects at least two (2) feet above the main roofline. v. Openings in the roof, such as openings with exposed rafters.
b	<p>Roof Pitch.</p>

	Roof pitch shall be consistent on all pitched roof sections.
c	<p>Materials and colors. For all roofs, the Community Development Department shall establish a list of approved roof materials and colors. The list may be amended from time to time to accommodate new materials and colors.</p> <p>The roof material on a single structure shall match on all sides.</p>
3	Garage size, location, articulation, and style
a	<p>Garage Frontage. Where a garage is located facing the front yard, and the lot width is sixty (60) feet or less, the garage frontage, including the door width and space between multiple doors, shall not exceed fifty (50) percent of the width of the front façade of the building.</p> <p>For lots wider than sixty (60) feet, the garage facade, including the door, shall not exceed forty (40) percent of the front facade of the building.</p>
b	<p>Size.</p> <p>i. Single car garage. The interior space of a single-car garage shall be a minimum of twelve (12) feet by twenty (20) feet and contain an area unobstructed by objects such as mechanical equipment and the door-swing of an entry door of at least ten (10) by eighteen (18) feet.</p> <p>ii. Two-car garage. The interior space of a two-car garage shall be a minimum of twenty (20) feet by twenty (20) feet clear of an area unobstructed by objects such as mechanical equipment and the door swing of an entry door.</p>
c	Facilities, including but not limited to mechanical systems and electrical storage batteries, may extend up to three (3) feet into the required unobstructed area above a height of 42 inches from the floor.
d	<p>Location.</p> <p>The street facing garage shall be a minimum of 20 feet from the front property line unless otherwise permitted within a planned development (PD) district or by Section 17.54.070.</p> <p>Side-entry garage shall provide at least twenty (20) feet from the nearest point of entry from the public ROW or private to the nearest point of the garage entrance unless otherwise permitted within a planned development (PD) district or by Section 17.54.070.</p>
e	<p>Garage opening size.</p> <p>The primary garage entry/doors shall be sized as follows:</p> <p>i. Single car or tandem garage shall have a minimum opening width of eight (8) feet and a maximum opening width of nine (9) feet.</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ii. The two-car (side-by-side) garage shall have a minimum opening width of sixteen (16) feet and a maximum opening width of eighteen (18) feet.
f	<p>Articulation.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Garages shall incorporate either a recess of at least twelve (12) inches from the surrounding wall plane or an overhang at least twelve (12) inches deep. ii. Side entry garages shall incorporate at least one of the following along the street frontage:-Landscaping with a mature height of at least twenty-four (24) inches.- Windows.-Decorative trellis.
g	<p>Style.</p> <p>All garages, whether attached or detached, shall match the architectural style of the primary residence, including, but not limited to, roof pitch, color, and materials.</p>
4	Principal Entry
a	<p>Principal entries shall be defined by at least one of the following elements:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Articulated with a roof form that projects at least three (3) feet from the front elevation. ii. A covered porch with a minimum three (3) foot depth and four (4) foot width. iii. Recessed entry of at least three (3) feet in depth and four (4) feet in width that creates a covered landing area. iv. An entry to a landscaped courtyard leading to the primary entrance that is enclosed with walls, fences, or gates at least five (5) feet in height.
b	Any Architectural feature associated with a primary entryway that projects into yards shall comply with the requirements of Chapter 17.54.
5	Balconies
	All balconies are subject to the development standards of this chapter and the following:
a	Balconies shall not be located on any elevation facing a side yard unless there is a separation from the edge of the balcony to the nearest wall plane of the adjacent home of not less than twenty (25) feet.
b	Projecting balconies located on rear elevations shall not be closer than fifteen (15) feet to the property line which it faces.
6	Windows
a	<p>Windows (new and replacements) shall match in terms of color and materials, window type and style, and the use of grids, except as modified below:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. All windows on the front and street side elevations of all homes shall match in terms of color, materials, window type, and style.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ii. On side (not street facing) and rear elevations, windows shall match in terms of color and materials but may vary with respect to the use of grids and style.
b	<p>Front and street-side elevation window articulation.</p> <p>Windows located on the front elevation facing the street shall be articulated with at least one (1) of the following details:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Frames or trims. Window frames or trim shall fully wrap the perimeter of the window and be a minimum of two (2) inches in width. Segments of window frames around the perimeter may vary in width to match the architectural style of the home. ii. Sills. Windowsills shall project out from the wall plane a minimum of one (1) inch. iii. Shutters. Shutters shall be sized to cover one hundred (100) to one hundred fifty (150) percent of the window and match the exact window shape. iv. Recess of at least two (2) inches.
c	<p>Window projections.</p> <p>Windows that project from the wall plane of any elevation are subject to the following standards:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Windows that extend to the floor/ground shall count as floor area and lot coverage and shall not extend into the required setback. ii. Windows that do not extend to the floor/ground shall be considered an architectural feature and may extend into the required setback in conformance with Chapter 17.54 Yards.
7	Awnings
a	<p>Location and extension from wall.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Retractable awnings are prohibited in front yards and shall only be located in the side and rear yards. ii. Fixed-in-place awnings are prohibited in front yards and shall only be located in the side and rear yards and may only extend five (5) feet or less from the wall.
b	<p>Awning housing or support structures.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. The retractable awning shall be flush mounted on a wall and painted to match the wall color or flush mounted low on the first-floor roof near the roof edge or along the first-floor eave. ii. Fixed-in-place awnings shall be flush mounted on a wall and completely hidden within or under the awning. iii. Dimensions and shapes for all awnings shall be approved by the community development director. iv. Awning materials shall be non-glare and subject to review by the Fire Marshal. v. Colors for retractable awnings shall be solid colors only that match the color of the home; no stripes or patterns; no lettering, symbols, graphics,

	<p>or logos. Awning housing shall be painted to match the color of the adjacent wall or roof material on which it is mounted.</p> <p>vi. Colors for fixed-in-place awnings shall be solid colors only that match the color of the home; no stripes or patterns; no lettering, symbols, graphics, or logos.</p>
8	Gutters, downspouts, and flashings
	All gutters, downspouts, and flashings shall be painted to match the adjacent eave and/or wall surface.

Table 5 Draft Regulations for Accessory Structures

ACCESSORY STRUCTURES.	
	<p>This section shall apply to structures that are six (6) feet or taller in height, including but not limited to garages, carports, sheds, workshops, gazebos, trellises, and covered patios, that are detached from and accessory to the main building on the site and decks that are over eighteen inches in height.</p> <p>A detached accessory building may only be constructed on a lot on which there is a permitted main building to which the accessory building is related or on an adjacent lot under the same ownership.</p>
a	<p>Location. Accessory structures that are six (6) feet or taller in height shall be located in the rear half of the lot.</p>
b	<p>Setbacks. Accessory structures taller than six (6) feet in height shall be set back:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. A minimum of four (4) feet from any rear or non-street side property line. ii. A minimum of ten (10) feet from a street-side property line. iii. A minimum of five (5) feet from the primary dwelling. iv. Accessory structures over 120 square feet and/or including plumbing and/or wood-burning appliances in size shall conform to any building code requirements.
c	<p>Coverage. Accessory structures higher than the fence line shall be included in the calculation of maximum lot coverage and shall not occupy more than 30 percent of the required rear yard.</p>
d	<p>Height. The maximum allowable height of accessory structures is ten (10) feet.</p>
e	<p>Materials.</p>
f	<p>Plumbing. Plumbing to detached accessory structures shall be limited to cold, hot water, and gas in conformance with building code requirements.</p>

DECKS AND PATIOS	
a	Decks and patios raised eighteen (18) inches and higher shall maintain a minimum setback of twenty-four (24) inches from perimeter fencing/walls to allow a landscaped area for a privacy screen. Decks and patios raised three (3) feet and higher shall require a minimum five (5) foot setback.
b	Decks and patios taller than twelve (12) inches from grade shall provide skirting to screen off-site views of the underside of the structure unless located within a yard fully enclosed by a fence at least six (6) feet in height.

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 single-family objective design and development standards?

After this study session, staff will post the first draft and open it for public review. Based on the Planning Commission and public feedback, staff will finalize the regulations for Site Design, Building Design, and Accessory Structures 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 the draft regulations for community feedback
- Prepare draft regulations (part 2) for Yards, Landscaping and Lighting, Fences, Waterfront Properties and Eichler Design.
- Planning Commission Study Session#3 for draft regulations part 2 June 5, 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