



CITY OF
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CITY OF WALNUT CREEK

Design Review Process Manual

APRIL 21, 2022

PURPOSE OF THIS MANUAL

This manual is intended to assist applicants with the design review process for the City of Walnut Creek. It is the City's goal to provide all applicants with a clear and common understanding of the process at the early stages of their project to allow for predictability and efficiency in the process. It is recommended that all applicants also consult with the Planning Division to be sure their project conforms to the procedures and submittal requirements provided below.

This manual is meant to accompany the City's [1996 Design Review Guidelines](#) and the [2018 Addendum for Multi-Family Residential Developments](#) and complement other citywide guidance such as the City's 2025 General Plan, applicable Specific Plans, Walnut Creek Municipal Code (WCMC), and other relevant documents.

WHAT PROJECTS ARE SUBJECT TO DESIGN REVIEW?

Any construction or alteration of the exterior of any building, structure, or sign, or substantial alteration of any landscape or hardscape feature, including parking layout, will require Design Review approval prior to the issuance of a Building Permit or Site Development Permit.

What Projects are **NOT** subject to Design Review?

- Some single-family dwellings and additions to single family dwellings based on exceptions provided in [WCMC Section 10-2.4.1203.1](#).
- Accessory dwelling units (ADUs) or junior accessory dwelling units (JADUs) (note that additional regulations for ADUs and JADUs can be found in the [City's ADU Ordinance](#)).
- SB 9 dwelling units (note that additional regulations for SB 9 can be found in the [City's SB 9 Ordinance](#)).
- Exterior paint color change to a building constructed prior to the enactment of the Design Review regulations in 1973. Or, Design Review is not required if the Planning Division determines the change in color is in substantial compliance with the original Design Review approval.

WHO SHOULD I CONTACT WITH QUESTIONS?

Planning Division:

Duty Planner

dutyplanner@walnut-creek.org

(925) 256-3558

Building Division:

Building Tech

buildingtech@walnut-creek.org

(925) 943-5834

Engineering Services:

Duty Engineer

dutyengineer@walnut-creek.org

(925) 943-5839

WHO IS RESPONSIBLE FOR CONDUCTING DESIGN REVIEW?

There are two types of decision making processes a Design Review project can follow, depending on the project scope: review at the Staff Level or by the Design Review Commission (DRC). The Design Review Commission has delegated certain types of projects to Staff for review. Upon review of the project application, Staff will determine the appropriate level of review.

Design Review Commission:

The Design Review Commission is responsible for reviewing and approving all new developments and major renovations of existing buildings within the City of Walnut Creek (see Phase 2, Path 2C and 2D). The Commission is comprised of five members including three registered architects. The Commission generally meets the first and third Wednesdays of each month.

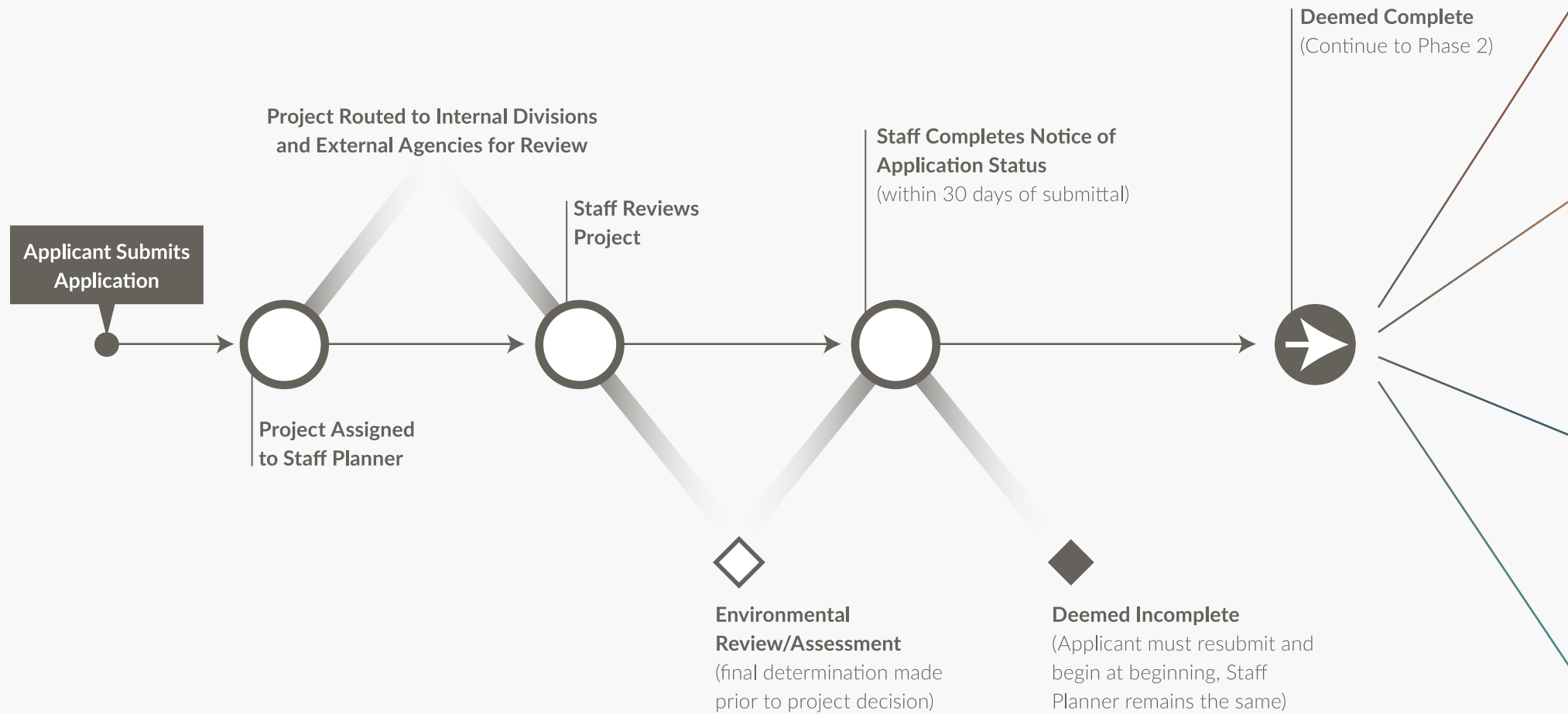
Staff Level Review:

The Design Review Commission has delegated review and approval authority of some small projects to the Planning Staff (for full text, see Resolution No. 1367). As project manager, the coordinating Project Planner will assume the primary role for reviewing these small design review applications. Some items that may be reviewed and approved at the Staff Level include, but are not necessarily limited to (see Phase 2, Path 2B):

- Custom single-family homes when:
 - » Prepared by an architect licensed by the State of California;
 - » There are no unique or special conditions to the site; or
 - » There is no known or potential for neighborhood controversy.
- Projects or additions 500 square feet or less in size which complement and enhance the existing buildings on site (regardless of whether plans have been drawn by a licensed architect).
- Storefront remodels having only a minor effect on the existing building (e.g. changing a door, expanding a window, paint change, etc.).
- Awnings, when in conformance with the [adopted awning guidelines](#).
- Minor revisions to approved landscaping plans when they are equivalent or superior quality to the original plan.
- Addition of outdoor decks which do not eliminate parking or landscaping.

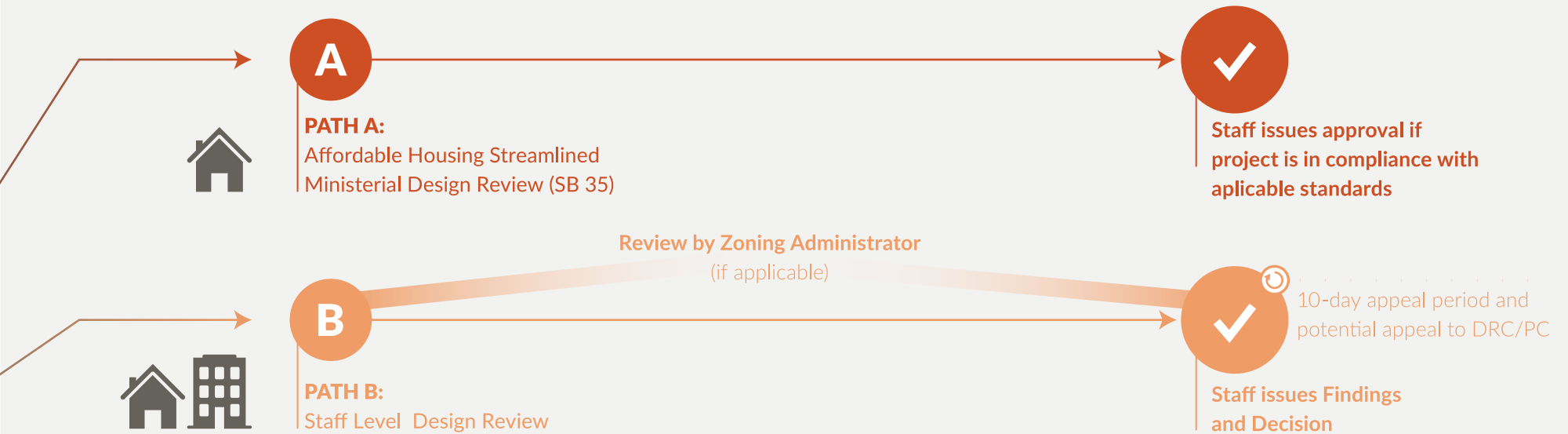
* ADUs and SB 9 dwelling units are not subject to Design Review.

THE DESIGN REVIEW PROCESS

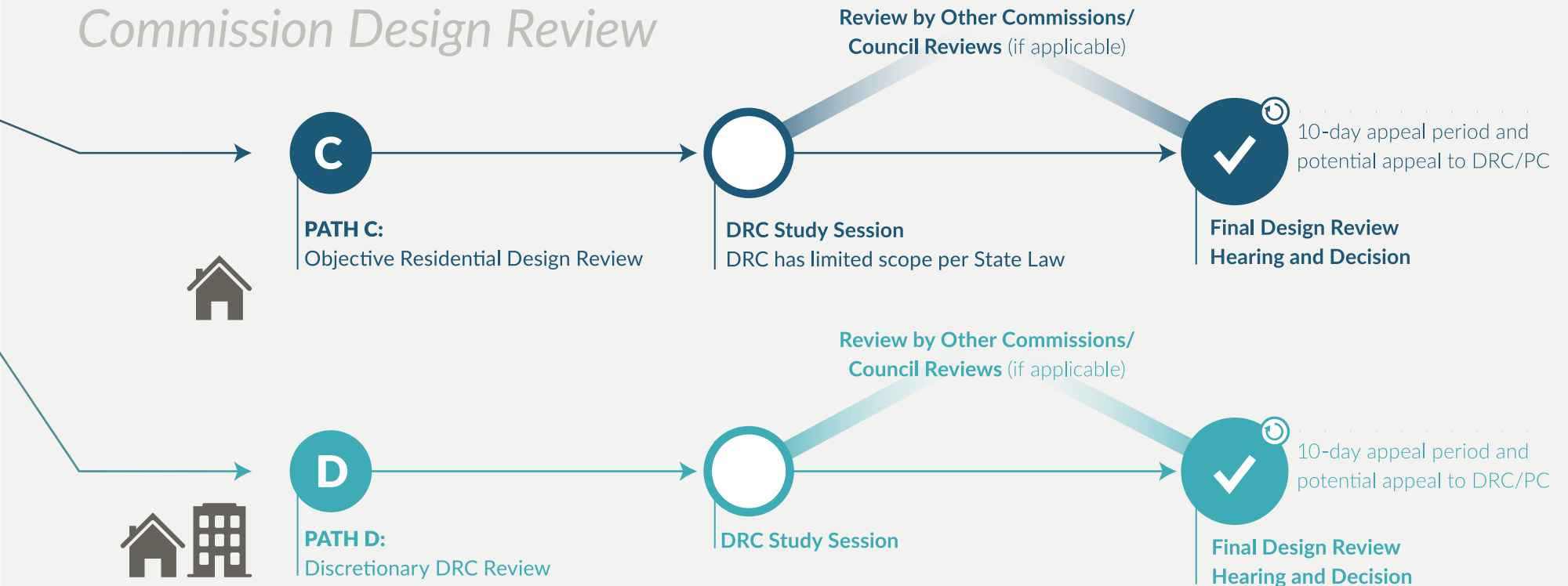


PHASE 1: Staff Review and Analysis

Staff Design Review



Commission Design Review



PHASE 2: Project Processing

WHAT IS THE DESIGN REVIEW PROCESS?

The Design Review process is comprised of Two Phases: Phase 1 Staff Review and Analysis, and Phase 2 Project Processing. These are described below and illustrated in the Design Review Process Diagram ([link](#)).

Phase 1: Staff Review and Analysis

Staff Review and Analysis is applicable to all Design Review projects including Staff Level, DRC, or Streamlined Ministerial Design Review. Phase 1 is comprised of the following five steps:

1. Applicant Submits Application

All Design Review applications shall be submitted electronically to the Planning Division at dutyplanner@walnut-creek.org. When submitting an [application](#), please include all applicable items listed in the ["Application Checklist."](#) The Duty Planner will briefly review the submittal to make sure required information is provided. Incomplete, inaccurate and unorganized submittals may result in significant delays. A signed application and fee payment are required for an application to be considered submitted.

** The applicant shall submit a completed Environmental Checklist (CEQA Guidelines - Appendix G) to Staff for review prior to the application being deemed complete.*

2. Project Assigned to Staff Planner

After the project is filed with the Planning Division, it will be assigned to a staff Project Planner. The assigned Project Planner will be your primary contact and staff liaison throughout the Design Review process.

3. Project Routed to Internal Divisions and External Agencies for Review

The Project Planner will route the project to all applicable internal divisions (including Engineering, Building, Traffic Engineering, Transportation, etc.) for their comments. Applications are also routed to relevant outside agencies (PG&E, Central San, EBMUD, Fire District, the County and adjacent cities, etc) as a courtesy. While the Project Planner will work toward a timely reply from outside agencies on your project, the applicant assumes the burden of obtaining all necessary outside agency requirements or permits.

4. Thirty-Day Notice of Application Status

The Project Planner will provide the applicant with a Notice of Application Status letter within 30 calendar days from the application submittal date. This letter will indicate whether the application is complete for processing or whether additional information is required to complete the application. If additional information is required, the applicant shall resubmit to the Project Planner for review until the project has been deemed complete. (Each re-submittal commences another 30-day review period.)

5. Environmental Review and Assessment

Virtually all Design Review applications are required to have an assessment to determine if the project would result in any potentially significant environmental impacts. An environmental assessment can result in one of the following three actions:

- a. **Project Exemption** – the project meets certain requirements to be considered Exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) as set forth specifically in State Resources Code Section.
- b. **Negative Declaration/Mitigated Negative Declaration** – subsequent to an Initial Study, a formal statement issued by the City that either, 1) the project will not result in a “significant effect” on the environment (ND) and therefore does not require the preparation of an EIR, or 2) the project as mitigated, will not result in a significant effect on the environment (MND). Such mitigation measures identified must be incorporated into the project and the applicant must agree to those mitigation measures.
- c. **Environmental Impact Report (EIR)** – subsequent to an Initial Study, a detailed, formal report describing and analyzing the significant effects that the project will have on the environment. The EIR must be adopted by City Council.

All initial environmental assessments are presented as recommendations to the reviewing body/authority for the project. The reviewing body makes the final environmental determination at the time that it reviews the project.

WHAT IS UNDER THE PURVIEW OF DESIGN REVIEW?

- All elevations of proposed new or remodeled buildings or structures
- Pedestrian and vehicular circulation
- All proposed new or remodeled landscaped areas, including layout, plant species, irrigation, and the manner by which the landscaping will be maintained
- Proposed roads, walks and paths
- Site grading
- Location of off-street parking
- Location, height and design of all fences or walls
- Color and material palette
- Exterior site and building lighting, and the light cast by the building's interior, its signs, etc., which is visible from adjacent or neighboring properties
- Signs (location, dimension, illumination, etc.), including all identifications and direction signs and graphics visible from the exterior of a proposed structure
- All provisions for and design of the following appurtenances if visible from the exterior such as stairs, balconies, refuse enclosures, etc.



PHASE 2: Project Processing

Once a project is deemed complete, it moves on to Phase 2 of the process (Note: A Design Review Study Session for preliminary review may be scheduled prior to a project being deemed complete.) A project in Phase 2 will move through one of four potential review paths: Phase 2A, 2B, 2C, or 2D based on the project scope and level of review required as described below and illustrated in the [Design Review Process Diagram \(Page 4\)](#).

Path A: Affordable Housing Streamlined Ministerial Design Review per State Law (SB 35)

If the project is an affordable housing development that qualifies for Streamlined Ministerial Design Review under SB 35, then the project will be evaluated by Staff for compliance with all applicable objective plans, regulations, policies, development standards and Objective Design Standards. If the project is in compliance, Staff will issue an approval within the required timeline.



Path B: Staff Level Design Review



The Project Planner will draft a Findings and Decision document with staff decision on the project. If approved the document would contain all relevant findings and conditions of approval. There is a 10 calendar-day appeal period from the time the decision is mailed.





Path C: Objective Residential Design Review

For general information on SB 330, please refer to the following [link](#) and the information box to the right.

1. **Once the project has been determined to be complete**, then Staff has 30 days (for projects with 150 units or less) or 60 days (for projects with more than 150 units) to determine compliance with all applicable plans, regulations, policies, development standards and Objective Design Standards. If Staff determines the project is not in compliance, they shall provide the applicant with written documentation identifying the specific provision(s) and an explanation of the reason for the inconsistency. The following are potential situations that may occur based on Staff's various determinations:
 - a. **Situation #1:** If Staff determines the project to be in compliance with all applicable and objective plans, regulations, policies, development standards, and Objective Design Standards, then the project goes to Design Review Commission for final consideration. Unless findings of specific, adverse impacts can be made, the project will be approved subject to reasonable conditions that do not limit overall density.
 - b. **Situation #2:** If Staff determines the project is not in compliance with all applicable and objective plans, regulations, policies, development standards, and Objective Design Standards, then the applicant has three options for how to proceed:
 - The project applicant can make revisions to bring the project in compliance, at which point the applicant then follows the path outlined in Situation #1.
 - The project applicant can choose not to make revisions to the project, forfeits the benefits of Objective Residential Design Review and the project will proceed to the Discretionary Design Review Process (Path D).
 - If the project applicant disagrees with Staff's determination of non-compliance, they may request the Planning Manager make a final recommendation on the project's compliance. If the Planning Manager determines the project is in compliance, then the project will follow the path outlined in Situation #1, otherwise the project will follow the standard Discretionary Design Review Process (Path D).

BENEFITS OF OBJECTIVE RESIDENTIAL DESIGN REVIEW

Path C was created in response to a new package of State Housing Laws, including SB 330, which set limitations on local review authority. The following is a summary of the benefits of Objective Residential Design Review:

1. Preliminary Application available to vest applicable standards and policies, including objective design standards;
2. Timely determination of consistency with said applicable standards and policies;
3. Review and decision within 5 Public Hearings;
4. Limited approving body authority to deny a project that complies with objective standards and policies.

** Please contact Planning Staff for additional regulations and implications of applicable State Housing Laws.*



Path D: Discretionary Design Review Commission Review



1. **Project Scheduling:** Formal consideration before the Design Review Commission can be tentatively scheduled for a Study Session after the initial 30-day review period, but cannot be scheduled for final review before the project has been deemed complete and an assessment of environmental status. Scheduling depends on several factors:
 - a. Resolution of outstanding design issues
 - b. Resubmission of required plan revisions
 - c. The number of other projects pending Design Review
 - d. Commission schedule
2. **Design Review Commission Hearings:** All of the following are Public Hearings that require public noticing.
 - a. **Study Session:** Projects are customarily scheduled at least once before the Design Review Commission at a Study Session for preliminary review and feedback on design, site planning, architectural, and landscape design. No formal decision on the project is considered at a Study Session.
 - b. **Review by Other Commissions/City Council:** If the project requires other entitlements (such as General Plan Amendments, Rezones, Tentative Maps, Conditional Use Permits (when Design Review is also required) etc.) it may require a positive recommendation from the Design Review Commission before the Planning Commission or City Council can make a final decision on the entitlement. The Design Review Commission will provide feedback on the general project scope, as well as a recommendation on the requested entitlement.
 - c. **Final Design Review:** All Design Review applications require final design review approval from the Design Review Commission prior to filing for a Building or Site Development Permit. Final approval is typically the last forum for formal public consideration of a discretionary permit for a development project.
3. **Commission Actions:** Any action taken by the Design Review Commission is final unless appealed to the Planning Commission. A request by the applicant for final approval by the Design Review Commission may result in one of the following actions taken by the Commission at a Public Hearing:
 - a. **Approval:** After the project is considered and the resolution adopted by the Commission, there is a 10 calendar-day appeal from the time the resolution is officially mailed to the applicant.
 - b. **Conditional Approval:** In approving a project, the Commission may impose conditions of approval not shown on the submittal exhibits.
 - c. **Continuance:** If there are outstanding issues at the conclusion of a hearing, the Commission may continue the item to a future meeting for additional discussion (plan revisions are typically required).
 - d. **Denial:** If the Commission determines that the project is inappropriate and not in the best interest of the community, or if the applicant will not agree to a continuance to resolve outstanding design issues, the Commission is obligated to deny the project.

APPEALS (APPLICABLE TO PATHS B, C, AND D)

Any action taken by Staff may be appealed to the Design Review Commission. Any action taken by the Design Review Commission may be appealed to Planning Commission. An appeal must be filed within 10 calendar-days from the time the adopted Findings and Decision or Resolution is officially mailed. An [appeal](#) of a decision may be filed only once, any consideration of an appeal will be the final decision on an application.



WHAT HAPPENS ONCE I RECEIVE DESIGN REVIEW APPROVAL?

Once the application has received Design Review approval (from Staff or the Design Review Commission), along with any other required entitlements, applicants may submit for Building and Site Development Permits.

HOW CAN I MAKE THE PROCESS RUN SMOOTHLY?

While there are no guarantees that a project will be approved by Staff or the Design Review Commission, the following tips should help make the process more efficient.

- 1. Review all applicable General Plan provisions, Specific Plan requirements, Zoning Development standards, and Objective Design Standards prior to submitting your application:** These documents are available through the City's website but if you need assistance, please contact the Duty Planner for copies of these documents.
- 2. Know your site's history and features:** Know your project site including all physical characteristics, previous building records, and any previous applications filed.
- 3. Hire quality design professionals:** The single most important aspect of your project is professional help you get in designing your project. Architects, landscape architects, engineers, and sign consultants are trained and practice in the development field. The quality of the plans and project presentation reflect on the applicant and the quality of the application.
- 4. Reach out to your neighbors:** All public hearings include notification to property owners within 300 feet of your project site. It is recommended that each application conduct their own outreach as well to address any neighborhood concerns early in the process and prior to any public hearings.
- 5. Apply for a Preliminary Review Team (PRT) Review:** For more complex projects, or for applicants seeking informal feedback prior to application submittal, it is recommended that the applicant file a [preliminary application to Planning Staff for a Preliminary Review Team Review \(PRT\)](#).

RESOURCES

Find links to documents referenced throughout the Process Manual in the section below:

- [1996 Design Review Guidelines](#)
- [2018 Addendum for Multi-Family Residential Objective Design Standards](#)
- [City of Walnut Creek Objective Design Standards Checklist for Multi-Family and Mixed-Use Residential Projects](#)
- [City of Walnut Creek Objective Design Standards Checklist for Single Family Residential Projects](#)
- [City of Walnut Creek Planning Application](#)
- [City of Walnut Creek Planning Application Checklist](#)
- [Downtown Awning and Canopy Guidelines](#)
- [Preliminary Review Team \(PRT\) Information Sheet](#)
- [SB 330 Preliminary Application Guidelines](#)
- [Walnut Creek Municipal Code, Section 10-2.3, Article 5 \(Accessory Dwelling Units\)](#)
- [Walnut Creek Municipal Code, Section 10-2.4, Article 5 \(Appeals\)](#)
- [Walnut Creek Municipal Code, Section 10-2.4, Article 12 \(Design Review\); Subsection 10-2.4.1203.1 \(Applicability of This Article to Single-Family Dwellings, Additions to Single-Family Dwellings, and Other Buildings on Single-Family Lots\)](#)
- [Walnut Creek Municipal Code, Section 10-1, Article 14 \(Qualified Senate Bill 9 Subdivisions\); Subsection 10-1.1401 \(Purpose\)](#)



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