

A panoramic view of the Seattle skyline under a clear blue sky. The Space Needle is prominent on the left, and Mount Rainier is visible in the background on the right. The foreground shows green trees and a white banner with text.

Affordable Housing Design Review Amendments – MHA performance and ADR choice

Photo by John Skelton



Seattle Department of
Construction & Inspections

Land Use Committee

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Affordable Housing Design Review Amendments

- Intent: accelerate permitting of housing projects throughout the City, reducing costs and decreasing the time for new housing to be available.
- The legislation would be in place for 12 months. Results will be studied to inform recommendations for long-term updates.
- Adopting this legislation would allow more efficient and/or flexible permit review to address urgent housing needs, including for low-income people, while the additional study is underway*

*In 2021, City Council adopted Statement of Legislative Intent (SLI 004-A-001) directing SDCI to examine Design Review from a racial equity lens to make recommendations for improvements.

Summary of Amendments

1. Provide a Design Review exemption for development projects that elect to meet the City's Mandatory Housing Affordability (MHA) requirement with on-site performance.
2. Provide an option for any housing development proposal to be reviewed under Administrative Design Review (ADR) rather than by the Design Review Board under Full Design Review (FDR).
3. Allow the SDCI Director to waive or modify certain development standards for the MHA performance projects.
4. Allow applicants who opt for the ADR process to return to FDR also at their option.

MHA Requirements

- MHA ensures that new commercial and multifamily residential development contributes to affordable housing.
- This is done by requiring new developments to:
 - Include affordable housing (performance option); or
 - Contribute to the Office of Housing fund to support the development of affordable housing (payment option).

MHA Performance Exemption – Number of Projects Helped

- 10-15 MHA performance projects – estimated to be eligible during the 12-month effective period of this legislation
- Up to 30 projects - if the number of projects doubled with passage of this legislation

Design Review Background

Design Review:

- Required for mid- and large-sized commercial and multi-family buildings.
- Permanently supported housing is exempt.

Two types of DR:

- Administrative Design Review (ADR): Reviews completed by SDCI staff. Includes public comment but not a design review public meeting.
- Full Design Review (FDR): Reviews completed by SDCI staff using recommendations from the Design Review Board. Includes public comment and public meeting(s).
- Both types of DR are Type II Decisions (appealable to the Seattle Hearing Examiner).

Administrative Design Review Option

- Administrative Design Review projects generally are reviewed more quickly than Full Design Review projects.
- This may be due to factors such as not having to wait for an open design review board meeting.
- Opportunity to test whether ADR can be conducted more quickly than FDR for housing projects and evaluate ways to make Design Review more efficient.

Administrative Design Review Option Benefits

- ADR has shorter review times compared to FDR.
- Measuring overall calendar time of all steps from EDG through MUP issuance (ADR and FDR) showed:
 - FDR: 739 days (24.3 months)
 - ADR: 641 days (21.1 months)

Data analyzed by SDCI includes commercial and multi-family development from July 2018 to December 2022.

Effects of Administrative Design Review Option

- Estimates for the number of applicants that may elect ADR during the 12-month effective period of the proposed legislation:
 - 18 housing projects – if 34% of applicants elect ADR
 - 27 housing projects – if 50% of applicants elect ADR
- Some applicants will still prefer to go through FDR to get instant feedback from the Design Review Board.

During the COVID pandemic, under Mayoral emergency declaration, the City allowed development projects subject to FDR to elect ADR (interim Ordinances 126072 and 126188) and approximately 34% of applicants elected ADR.

QUESTIONS?

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