

Site Plan Review

Site plans are scale drawings that show the detailed layout of a development proposal, including lot lines, roads, existing and proposed building footprints, major landscape features (e.g., topography, trees, and environmentally sensitive areas), and utility rights-of-way (e.g., sewer, water, and cable). Planners review site plans and maps to determine if they are consistent with the standards of the zoning ordinance. Reviewers check proposals to see if they provide for necessary public facilities and protect topographical features and adjacent properties through appropriate siting of structures and landscaping. Site plan review is generally carried out to guarantee compliance during the zoning permitting process or to determine if a variance is necessary.

Statutory and Discretionary Review. Beyond simply checking for compliance with the zoning ordinance, two other types of site plan review introduce degrees of leeway in determining if a development proposal is appropriate at a specific location. Statutory review evaluates how multifamily or nonresidential proposals fit within a larger site. Under statutory review, even if reviewers recommend improvements, the development must be approved if it meets the standards of the zoning ordinance.

Discretionary site plan review occurs where planning officials have the authority to decide whether a proposed land use appropriately relates to the surrounding area. Discretionary review applies usually to the approval of planned unit developments or conditional uses, or to the granting of special permits. Under discretionary review, developers are expected to meet reasonable conditions for project approval, sometimes at their own expense. Conditions may deal with a host of issues, including adequacy of parking, traffic access, provisions for pedestrians and vehicles, landscaping buffers, exterior lighting, or the size, location, and design of signs.

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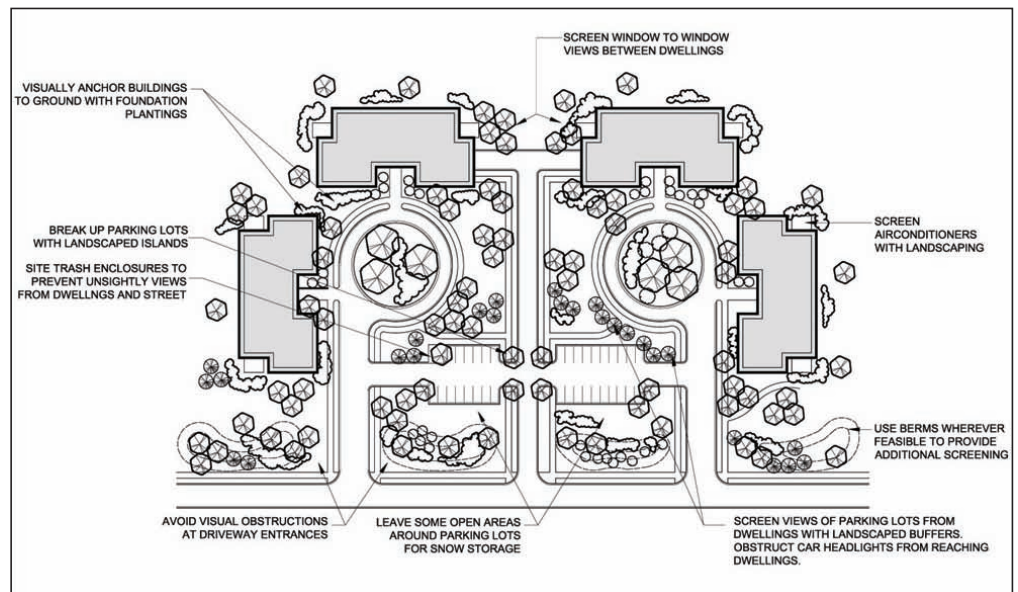
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PRACTICING SITE PLAN REVIEW

Site Plan Review Boards. The planning commission usually performs site plan review, sometimes conducting the review in the course of a public hearing. In some communities, a board of the city council may act as the reviewing body. The reviewers must consider large amounts of complex and sometimes very technical information in a short amount of time. Reviewers employed in fields other than engineering, architecture, or real estate may require training to better understand site plans and applicable standards. An effective review process is the product of a well-trained review board with the ability to anticipate a range of impacts, including vulnerability to natural hazards and impacts on traffic and infrastructure.

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Site plans can be used to encourage many community objectives. This example of a multifamily development offers landscaping suggestions.

The Review Process. The review begins with a thorough check of the site plan to make sure it contains the required details. The review board will reject a site plan that fails to provide all the information needed to determine the impacts of the development. The commission, possibly with help from agency staff, checks that the plans are to scale and that the proposal complies with the objective standards laid out in the zoning ordinance. The review determines if the various lot size, width, setback, building height, and parking requirements are satisfied. The review also questions how the proposal interacts with the adjacent off-site properties. Does the development inhibit or improve traffic flow in the area? Will the project degrade or enhance nearby natural features?

The next step for jurisdictions that have established discretionary site plan review is to inform the applicant if changes need to be made. This should be done in writing with specific references as to why the proposed development does not meet community standards.

Site Plan Review Guidelines. Some jurisdictions require that specific guidelines or regulations be adopted before conducting a site plan review. A good site plan review manual graphically illustrates the criteria for quality development. The guidelines should be specific enough to make clear to both regulators and developers what is necessary to comply with land-use standards. It is valuable to include a checklist for applicants to follow to ensure their plans are complete and meet broader community goals.

Best Practices for Site Plan Review.

Site plan review helps communities to get the most out of new developments. The following strategies can advance community objectives while helping reviewers comply with the ordinance:

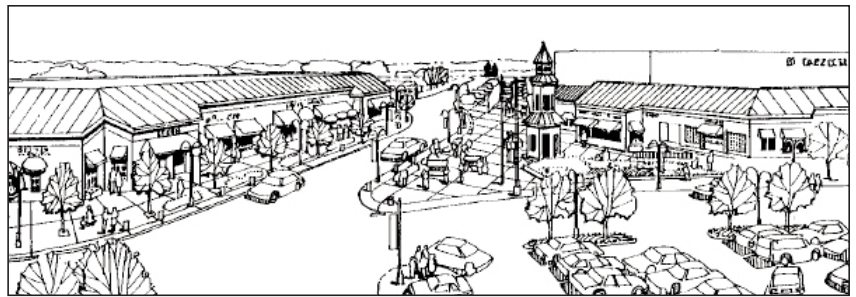
- Where possible, locate compatible uses adjacent to one another.
- Minimize serious changes to the existing topography and vegetation.
- Restrict development in a floodplain, on steep slopes, in wetlands, and in all other sensitive areas.
- Make provisions for pedestrian and bicycle travel.
- Suggest landscaping or screening to hide parking areas.

SITE PLAN REVIEW CONSIDERATIONS

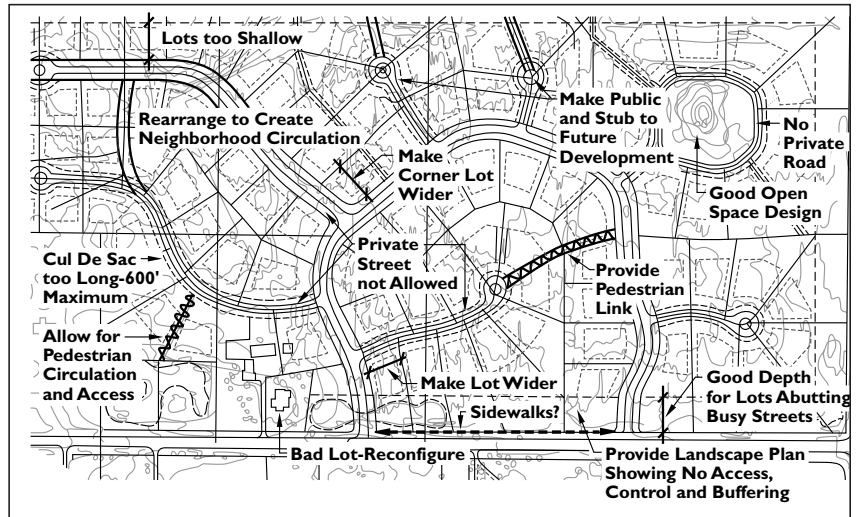
Site Plan Review and the Law. State enabling statutes grant jurisdictions the authority to conduct site plan review under the power to enact zoning. Some states restrict the use of site plan review criteria to the quantitative, nondiscretionary development standards in the jurisdiction's ordinance. Others allow or imply in the zoning power statute that communities can establish and apply qualitative, discretionary standards in site plan review. A handful of states even have special legislation that expressly authorizes site plan review to apply discretionary conditions to uses permitted by right. In all cases, it is important to remember that the intent of site plan review is to ensure quality development authorized by the jurisdiction's land-use regulations. Site plan review should not deny property rights, but can require that developers pay for improvements to protect the public interest.

Consistency with the Comprehensive Plan. A number of states require that local land-use regulations and implementation actions, including site plan approvals, must be consistent with the state-mandated local comprehensive plan. It is at the site plan level where comprehensive plan policies can exert a significant influence. A site plan review process helps to ensure that major new developments are consistent with their surroundings and contribute to the community's long-term vision. ■ Patrick C. Smith

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Site plans for large retail stores in Fort Collins must incorporate patios, seating areas, bus shelters, or other amenities to create a pedestrian-friendly environment.



An example of a marked up site plan.

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