Why Do Site Plan Review?

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The short answer is that site plan review makes for better development.

It is a way to ensure that development proposals meet development policies and regulations as well as commonly accepted design practices within a community. It allows the community to look at elements above and beyond those established by the zoning ordinance.

Zoning regulations create the three-dimensional building envelope and set basic site layout standards. But by their nature, these regulations cannot be site specific—instead, they establish general regulations for every parcel within a particular district. Site plan review allows a community to look at the specific location of the use or structure; the layout of the site, including pedestrian and auto circulation; and the materials used throughout the development—from the building materials to the landscaping. It drills down through the intent of zoning regulations to the level of a specific parcel.

Site plan review allows both quantitative and qualitative assessment based on standards, principles, and guidelines with various levels of discretion. The end result of the process is the implementation of community design and development policies, which have been tailored to fit the realities of a site. The process verifies that new development conforms to the comprehensive plan policies, zoning and subdivision regulations, and community design policy—whether articulated specifically through design guidelines or downtown plans, or through context assessment (i.e., the development’s compatibility with its neighbors). Site plan review also creates a forum where technical planning issues can be resolved.

The first step in creating a site plan review process for any community is to determine what it intends to review. This is decided on the basis of two key factors—the current physical development state of the community and the type of zoning ordinance in place.

Clearly there are very different concerns and issues between a built out community dealing primarily with infill development versus a community dealing with significant greenfield development. While a built out community may be primarily concerned with issues of preservation, a community with room to grow may be concerned with issues of placemaking. The site plan review process must be sensitive to the policies of the community. For example, when a built out community maintains a historic central business district, a site plan review process will need to...
address those elements of the district that define its character or context, including building form, established patterns of circulation, and pedestrian orientation. On the other hand, when a community has significant greenfield development, the process must be tuned to its responsibility to establish a character for new areas. If the desire is to establish mixed use traditional development, the site plan review process must also include review of the planning policies behind such a traditional development pattern.

The second factor is the type of development regulations already in place. A traditional Euclidean ordinance will not address form and context regulations, while a form-based code or hybrid code (where form-based and traditional controls are mixed) will require a review that addresses development in a more three-dimensional context. The regulations in place are important because they help determine the scope of ordinance review—who should review the ordinances, what type of expertise is needed, and what types of development applications should be reviewed.

Site plan review has evolved in response to a growing interest in form-based zoning, anti-monotony regulations, design guidelines in zoning ordinances, and the increased attention paid to building form and scale in development regulations. In recent years, site plan review has come to include reviews of building form and scale—a review that takes place within a three-dimensional context. For a built out community, the review process proves invaluable as it assesses whether or not a proposal is the proper type of infill development (i.e., sensitive to its neighbors and to its larger context). Site plan review can bridge the gap between by-right development with no review and evaluation by a design review commission.

WHAT GETS REVIEWED?
The first step in setting up the process is stipulating what should be reviewed. There are a number of different options based upon the type of development typically seen in the municipality and the reach of the regulations. Some communities require all building permits and planned unit developments to be reviewed, whether single-family residential or commercial, while others exempt single-family and two-family developments. Some require all special use permits to receive site plan review. In other cases, it may be that all development within a certain district should be reviewed. The community should make this decision based upon development trends, staff capacity, and the types of regulations in place.

WHO DOES THE REVIEWING?
Site plans arrive at the staff planner’s desk first, and it is the planner who moves the application through the review process, including securing the input of other professionals. Additional municipal staff must review other aspects of the development—including the municipal engineer, who deals with traffic, stormwater management, and utility issues; the parks department, which considers overall plantings as well as microclimate; and police and fire, which must review site access and circulation and assess the impact of calls for service to the site. The planner must then convey the community’s considerations and concerns in an organized way to the developer. Often, the site plan review process begins with staff prior to a formal initiation of the process with the approval body. Depending on the guidelines and development regulations in place, the review body must have the right expertise to assess the development applications. When a municipality adopts a form-based or hybrid code, it becomes especially important for the site plan reviewer to understand and assess the form and design criteria included in the development regulations.

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Some of the options for site plan review responsibilities include the following:
- Because site plan review often falls to the staff, an internal site plan review committee can be made up of those staff members that deal with the various elements of the site, including the zoning administrator, municipal manager, planners, chief engineer, and building official.
- Some communities vest responsibility with the plan commission, which is charged with implementation of the comprehensive plan and municipal planning policy and is therefore able to review the application in light of those policies as well as some technical detail. Staff is usually asked to assist in the technical review of the application.
• A site plan review committee can include municipal staff (a zoning administrator or historic preservation commission representative, etc.) as well as "externals" with specific expertise, such as architects, planners, and developers, to provide an independent review of the application.

Another option is to create different degrees of site plan review responsibility—an administrative site plan review process and a major site plan review process. With an administrative site plan review, certain types of development can be reviewed and approved by the staff more quickly. This can streamline the review process for some simple development applications. Typically, eligible projects include additions (up to a certain size) for existing buildings, drive-through facilities, and telecommunications equipment.

REVIEW PROCESS
It is necessary to lay out a clear review process and provide a timeframe for review and approval within the municipality’s development regulations. What is important is to try to minimize the review time so as not to slow down the development review process. Therefore, applicants should be given an opportunity to meet with staff to discuss the application on an informal level before they submit a formal application and invest significant dollars in the project.

The site plan review process codified in a zoning ordinance should include an optional preapplication process so the applicant is aware it exists. It is also important that an ordinance describe the different components of a site plan review application. Often it is useful to allow the zoning administrator or other official to waive certain unnecessary submittal requirements. For example, if single-family houses are subject to site plan review, it is often impractical to require a landscape plan—though for nonresidential development, a landscape plan is essential.

In some communities, there are a number of commissions, such as those for historic preservation and landscaping, that must sign off on an application before site plan review approval can be granted and a building permit issued. Bouncing back and forth between different commissions can strain everyone’s patience and create confusion in the review process. If this is the case, it may be beneficial to create something such as a concept plan review meeting where representatives from all the committees involved meet with the developer and assess the concept before the process formally begins. Reviews are consolidated in the hands of the body granting approval of the site plan—for example, the plan commission—and presented to the applicant before the process formally begins. Typically, for a process such as this, no application fee is involved and the submittal is a basic concept plan with enough information for each commission to make informed comments.

Site plan review, like any municipal activity, requires authorizing legislation. While some communities conduct what is an essentially site plan review as an activity related to reviewing special uses or zoning variance requests, the site plan review process should be codified into the overall development review process and included as an administrative provision within the zoning ordinance.

REVIEW STANDARDS
Preliminary site plan review begins with assessment of compliance with the zoning ordinance—with setback and bulk requirements, the proposed use (whether permitted or special), and site development requirements, such as parking, landscaping, and sign standards. This type of review is conducted as part of any new development, even those by-right developments that do not require site plan reviews. It should be at the heart of every development review process.

Traditionally, zoning compliance review is not discretionary. It is usually an administrative function and, as much as possible, need not involve members of lay boards or commissions. However, as zoning ordinances move toward issues of design and context, the site plan review process becomes more central to implementing certain zoning regulations that are not quantitative. For example, design standards that speak to facade articulation and reduction of mass cannot, by their nature, be objective criteria. Someone will have to make the decision that a proposed development either does or does not meet the intent of the design standards. When a community does not have a design review commission, the site plan review process is the forum where it is determined whether the development complies with the intent of the community.

Generally, site plan review standards address five major elements:

Land Use
An evaluation of land use is often the starting point in a plan review. A number of key questions must be asked to determine the land-use rationale is correct. For example, does it meet the requirements of the comprehensive plan and the specific property’s zoning? Does it reflect current or anticipated development trends? Will it be a good neighbor to adjacent uses? Does it add to or detract from a desired pattern of development? Can the topographic and other physical constraints of the site accommodate the proposed use?

On-Site and Off-Site Circulation
It is important to analyze the proposed circulation system for efficiency and impacts both on-site and off-site. What effect will this development have on adjacent road systems? Can the site be safely accessed using the proposed roads or driveways? Have pedestrian and bicycle connections to the adjacent area been included? Can transit users easily access the principal destinations within the site? Is there sufficient parking? Is the proposed internal layout likely to function safely and efficiently?

Utilities
Underground and aboveground utility systems should be evaluated for placement, efficiency, and ease of maintenance. For example, are all systems that might be placed underground proposed to be installed in such a manner? Is site drainage adequately addressed? If a stormwater retention pond is proposed, is it well sited and does it add visual or other amenity to the site? Are utilities easily accessible to service vehicles?

Public Safety
Any site must be accessible to police, fire, and other municipal services such as snowplowing. Does the development’s internal circulation system allow for safe equipment access?
In northern climes, is every parking lot designed to accommodate removed snow?

Urban Design

The design character of the proposed development should be assessed. Is it compatible with the existing and desired future character of the neighborhood and the community as a whole? For example, should the buildings be built up to the property line to continue a particular neighborhood urban design character? Are there landscape elements in the surrounding area that might be duplicated on this site to establish design continuity?

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• the organization of circulation systems to minimize potentially dangerous traffic movements, provide adequate and safe access to the site, separate pedestrian and auto circulation wherever practical, and minimize curb cuts
• the design of off-street parking lots or garages to minimize adverse impacts on adjacent properties and to promote logical, safe parking and interconnection with adjacent parking lots
• the design of landscaping, screening, and related improvements to provide harmonious transitions to adjoining lots and developments; to create a desirable and functional environment for motorists, pedestrians, occupants of residential dwellings, business owners, and employees; to screen incompatible uses; and to minimize the visual impact of the development on adjacent sites and roadways

THE END RESULT

Site plan review is not site planning. The reviewer’s role is to respond to plans submitted by others and make constructive suggestions about those plans and the programs for their completion.
site plans are prepared by laypersons or professionals who lack proper training. Proposals under review may have poor or impossible circulation and parking layouts or lots laid out in cookie-cutter fashion. Instead of throwing in the towel, planners must become educators. As trained practitioners, planners must educate the people preparing the site plans. Community planners do not have the time or authority to create those plans themselves.

In order to secure the proper result, the following principles should be followed in adopting and implementing a site plan review process:

- **Good site plan review** involves professionals of many disciplines. Site plan review should not be the sole responsibility of the staff planner. Good site plan review requires multiple technical skills—in addition to planning, expertise in landscape design, engineering, and public safety is necessary. A planner does not have to have all these skills, but should provide leadership to the team that does.
- **Good site plan review** involves professionalism and transparency and consistent architectural detail.
- **Good site plan review** is conducted from a variety of perspectives. These perspectives include city, neighborhood, immediate vicinity, and the site itself, as well as the individual lots or development parcels within the site, if applicable. The following questions might apply to a proposed shopping center:
  1. For the citywide perspective, site reviewers might ask: Does the shopping center meet the overall land-use policies of the comprehensive plan (e.g., is this location planned to accommodate a shopping center of the size and market orientation proposed)?
  2. At the neighborhood scale, does the proposed layout of the shopping center help to build the overall pattern of commercial development anticipated by the comprehensive plan? Is the center designed to accommodate transit and pedestrian access as well as auto access? If this is to be a community-oriented shopping center, are the proposed site entries oriented to streets designed to serve community-scale traffic, or are they focused on neighborhood streets, creating the potential for intrusion of more intense traffic into the adjacent neighborhood?
  3. To determine the impact within the immediate vicinity of the site: If the proposed shopping center is part of a larger commercial district, is the center designed to be linked to adjacent commercial uses via internal access roads and pedestrian ways? Have there been discussions with the owners of adjacent shopping centers regarding the necessary cross-easements to facilitate this linkage?
  4. Review at the site-plan scale also raises questions. As a community shopping center, it may contain a number of outlots to accommodate freestanding development in addition to the shopping center building. Is the internal site circulation road designed to serve these outlots as a collector street? How will the outlot development be incorporated into the overall commercial area design?
  5. Site plan review examines in detail the individual components of the plan. Do the details of the site plan accommodate safe, efficient, and desirable traffic flow? Is the parking lot landscaped? Is there an overall sign design program, and are the locations proposed for signs clearly visible to the site user?

**CONCLUSION**

A properly structured site plan review process can promote the orderly development and redevelopment of a community. By carefully considering each step of the process—from what is reviewed, to who should review it, to establishing a predictable and reasonable approval process—communities can ensure that development or redevelopment occurs in a manner that is harmonious with surrounding properties, is consistent with planning policies, enhances the value of property, and promotes the general welfare of the community.
work within this partnership,” said Kurt
“we saw Prop. 1 as a threat to our ability to
the Mat–Su salmon stocks as part of the Mat–
ing with more than 20 other groups to protect
Association, and an oil and gas developer,
Nature Conservancy, the Mat–Su Valley Board
some odd bedfellows, including the Alaska
conservancy. “When you have fragmented
habitat and unplanned development and you
don’t know with any degree of certainty how
it’s going to develop, it’s difficult for a broad-
based group like this partnership to reach our
goals.”

The landslide defeat on October 2 (70.6
percent opposed Proposition 1) was a strong
signal that the lessons from Oregon have res-
onated outside of that state. Opponents had
argued that Proposition 1 was poorly written
and vague and opened the Borough and
municipalities up to costly lawsuits and mon-
eyary claims. On the other side, one of the
cosponsors called the defeat a “stunning vic-
ory for socialism.”

Oregon voters will have a compromise
ballot measure to consider in November.
Measure 49 proposes to amend Measure 37—a
“fix” that a broad coalition of groups ham-
ered out earlier this year. The Oregon
Chapter of APA is supporting Measure 49.
Proponents claim that Measure 49:

“protects the property rights of small indi-
vidual landowners by immediately allowing
them up to three houses on their property,
if the law allowed it when they bought their
land. And it will pass those rights on to a
surviving spouse or to someone who pur-
ches the property from the current
owner—something that Measure 37 did not
do…. Additionally, property owners can
build up to 10 houses if they can document
a financial loss equal to the value of the
additional houses—as voters intended with
passing 37. If property is high-value farm-
land, forests, or places with limited water
supplies—as defined in the act, then only
up to three home sites may be added.
Bailot Measure 49 closes the loopholes
and protects the places that make Oregon
special, stopping the abuse of huge hous-
ing subdivisions, strip malls, and industrial
development where they simply don’t
belong. Following passage of Measure 49,
commercial and industrial development, as
well as large subdivisions, must proceed
through the existing land-use planning and
development processes.”

Effective messaging, in addition to the
strong coalition and consensus building,
appears to give Measure 49 a good chance
for passage in November. Some of the
Oregon stories show Hal Balin sharing how
Measure 49 restores farmland protection;
Stephen Williams explaining that Measure
37 was not meant for gravel pits; Peter

Hayes opining that Measure 49 protects tim-
berlands and the rights of timberland own-
ers; Richard Holcomb arguing that with the
loss of each acre of agricultural land goes
the economy of scale needed to succeed;
Carole Nelson questioning a Measure 37
subdivision in a floodplain; and Lori
Hamilton explaining that measure 49 puts
place before pocketbook.

The lessons planners might take away
from both the October election in Mat–Su
Borough and the upcoming election in Oregon
is that personal stories are critical to help vot-
ers understand what is at stake. Using the art
and science of planning to help the voters
understand the impacts of a “pay or waive”
measure on the future of their community
can make all the difference.

Lora Lucero, AICP, is editor of Planning and
Environmental Law, and staff liaison to APA’s
amicus curiae committee.
DOES YOUR COMMUNITY USE SITE PLAN REVIEW?