

Date: January 9, 2025

To: Supervisor Ray Mueller
District 3, San Mateo County

From: Coastside Design Review Committee

Re: Demonstration of Project Scale Policy and Story Poles

Background

San Mateo County's Demonstration of Project Scale Policy revised in July 2024 ([link](#)) describes two options for proposed projects to satisfy the policy: 1) the construction of story poles and 2) the use of visual methods such as digital imaging simulations, computer modeling, and other visual techniques. Since the policy has been in place since 2020, most projects have elected to use visual methods to demonstrate project scale. This option has not only resulted in numerous community complaints via written correspondences and in-person speakers but has also yielded incomplete and potentially misleading representation of the projects.

The CDRC had previously recommended in October 2020 to change County policy to require story poles ([link](#), pages 23-26), after much research, including evaluations of similar story pole requirements in other counties and cities. Our current committee members concur with the October 2020 recommendation and, in summary, propose the following changes:

1. **Mandatory Use of Story Poles:**

We request that the County require the use of story poles for all new construction over 500 square feet and for any second or third-story addition that alters the roofline of an existing structure. Story poles are a simple yet effective tool to visually communicate the size and scope of a proposed building or addition, allowing residents and design review boards to better understand the potential impacts on the surrounding area, including issues of privacy, light, and aesthetics.

2. **Exemption from Design Review for Small, Single-Story Buildings:**

We propose that all new construction that is 16 feet in height or under and 500 square feet and under to be exempt from the formal design review process. While still adhering to applicable building codes and safety standards, this would streamline approvals for smaller, less intrusive projects, helping to reduce unnecessary delays for homeowners while maintaining community oversight for larger, more impactful projects.

These changes would not only help clarify the visual and spatial impact of new developments but also foster better communication between developers and the community, enhancing transparency and reducing concerns about potential adverse effects on our neighborhoods.

We believe these updates will help strike a balance between promoting responsible growth and preserving the character of our local communities.

Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Objective changes as follows:

- New construction of 500 square feet or less will be exempt from design review.
- Story poles are to be required for all new construction over 500 sq feet.
- Story poles are to be required for all two-story or greater additions to existing homes that modify the roof-line.
- Single-story additions 16 feet or under are exempt from story poles.
- Story poles shall not require survey or certification.

We expect these changes to be included in the design standard update for public comment and review at a later date and written in alignment with the current story pole specifications.

Respectfully,
Coastside Design Review Committee

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