

Current Planning Quick Reference Guide

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SANDAG

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Purpose

This guide is intended to support professional planners, permit technicians, and housing and community development staff as they navigate housing development reviews in California. Planning requirements vary by jurisdiction, municipal code, adopted plans, and project type. Staff should consult local regulations and applicable state law when processing development applications.

Key Development Review Terms

Planning and development review often involves terminology that may be unfamiliar to newer planners. The following terms are among the most common concepts encountered during project review, including application processing, regulatory compliance, and development approvals. The definitions in **Table 1** below are intended to provide plain-language explanations and identify the legal or planning framework that supports each concept. Understanding these terms can help planners navigate project review more confidently and communicate more effectively with applicants, colleagues, and decision-makers.

Table 1: Definitions of Key Development Review Terms

Term	Plain-English Definition	Technical Reference
Completeness Review	<p>The initial review of an application to determine whether all required materials have been submitted before detailed project review begins.</p> <p>Why It Matters: Completeness review answers the question: “Do we have the required information to begin reviewing this project?” It is different from determining whether a project complies with regulations.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Permit Streamlining Act (Gov. Code §§ 65920–65964.1)
Consistency Review	<p>The process of evaluating whether a project complies with applicable plans, zoning regulations, and objective development standards.</p> <p>Why It Matters: Consistency review answers the question: “Does the project comply with applicable requirements?” This review often includes evaluating use, density, height, setbacks, parking, and other objective design standards.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Housing Accountability Act (Gov. Code § 65589.5)
Discretionary Approval	<p>A project approval that requires judgment or decision-making by staff, a hearing officer, Planning Commission, or City Council.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> CEQA applicability (Public Resources Code § 21080(a); CEQA Guidelines §§ 15357, 15369) Permit Streamlining Act (Gov. Code §§ 65920–65964.1)

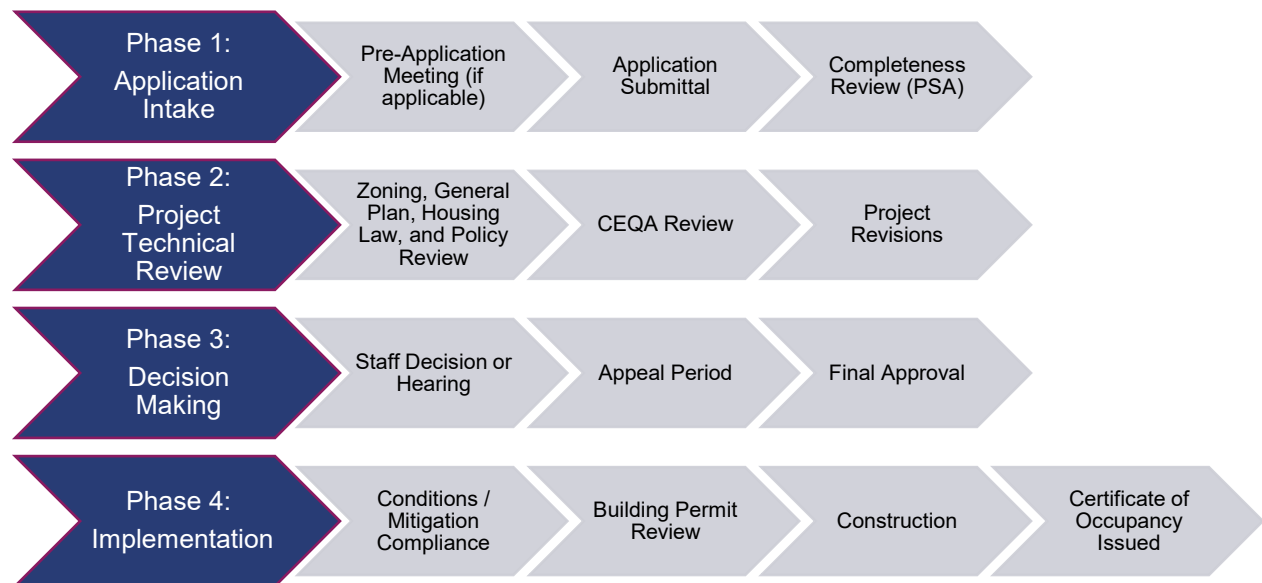
Term	Plain-English Definition	Technical Reference
	<p>Why It Matters: Discretionary approvals typically require findings and may be subject to environmental review under CEQA.</p> <p>Examples: Conditional Use Permit, Design Review Permit, Site Development Permit, Variance.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Housing Accountability Act (Gov. Code § 65589.5)
<p>General Plan Consistency</p>	<p>The requirement that development decisions and land use regulations be consistent with the goals, policies, and land use designations of the General Plan.</p> <p>Why It Matters: The General Plan serves as the community's blueprint for future development and guides many planning decisions.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General Plans (Gov. Code § 65300 et seq.) • Zoning Consistency (Gov. Code § 65860)
<p>Ministerial (By-Right) Approval</p>	<p>A project approval that is granted when a project complies with applicable objective standards and requirements. No personal judgment or discretionary findings are required.</p> <p>Why It Matters: Ministerial projects generally do not require public hearings and are typically exempt from CEQA review.</p> <p>Examples: Many ADUs and certain qualifying housing projects processed under state streamlining laws.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CEQA Guidelines §§ 15268, 15369 • Public Resources Code § 21080(b)(1)
<p>Objective Standard</p>	<p>A requirement that can be measured or verified without personal opinion or judgment.</p> <p>Why It Matters: Many California housing laws require planners to rely on objective standards during project review.</p> <p>Examples: Maximum building height, required setbacks, parking ratios, lot coverage requirements.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gov. Code § 65589.5(h)(9)

Term	Plain-English Definition	Technical Reference
		<p>Statutory Definition: “Objective” means involving no personal or subjective judgment by a public official and being uniformly verifiable by reference to an external and uniform benchmark or criterion available and knowable by both the development applicant or proponent and the public official.</p>
<p>Project Approval</p>	<p>The formal decision to approve a project after required reviews have been completed and applicable findings or conditions have been applied.</p> <p>Why It Matters: Project approval occurs after completeness review and consistency review have been completed. Depending on the project, approval may be ministerial, discretionary, or legislative.</p>	<p>Varies by project type and local development code.</p>
<p>Specific Plan</p>	<p>A planning document that provides detailed land use policies, development standards, and implementation measures for a particular geographic area.</p> <p>Why It Matters: Specific Plans often contain more detailed requirements than the General Plan and may supplement or modify base zoning standards.</p> <p>Examples: Downtown plans, transit-oriented development plans, corridor plans, and waterfront plans.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gov. Code §§ 65450–65457

Common Development Review Workflow

Most development projects follow a similar review process, although the exact steps, approvals, and timelines vary by project type, jurisdiction, and applicable regulations. **Figure 1** below provides a simplified overview of a typical development review workflow, beginning with application submittal and continuing through project review, decision-making, and implementation. The workflow is adapted from the Permit Streamlining Act (Gov. Code §§ 65920–65964.1), CEQA (Pub. Resources Code § 21000 et seq.), and common local development review procedures used by California jurisdictions.

Figure 1: Common Development Review Workflow



Source: Civic Solutions, adapted from the Permit Streamlining Act, CEQA, and common California development review practices.

Five Laws Every Planner Should Know

1. Housing Accountability Act (HAA)

What is the Housing Accountability Act?

The Housing Accountability Act (HAA) (Gov. Code § 65589.5) limits a local agency's ability to disapprove, reduce the density of, or impose infeasible conditions on qualifying housing development projects that comply with applicable objective standards. The law is intended to support housing production by limiting local discretion in certain housing approval decisions.

Why does it matter to planners?

Planners are often responsible for reviewing housing applications, preparing staff recommendations, and evaluating project compliance with local regulations. The HAA affects how planners review qualifying housing projects by requiring decisions to be based on objective standards and supported by substantial evidence. Understanding the HAA can help planners avoid recommending conditions or actions that may create legal risk for their jurisdiction.

What should planners watch for during project review?

When reviewing housing projects, planners should pay particular attention to:

- Whether the project complies with applicable objective standards.
- Whether proposed conditions of approval are supported by adopted regulations or identified project impacts.
- Whether comments and recommendations are based on measurable standards rather than subjective preferences.
- Whether findings supporting a denial, reduction in density, or conditioning of a project are supported by substantial evidence in the record.

Helpful Resources

[California Department of Housing & Community Development \(HCD\) Accountability and Enforcement Unit](#)

Provides information on HCD's role in monitoring housing law compliance, offering technical assistance, and reviewing housing accountability inquiries or complaints.

[Technical Assistance and Enforcement Letters Dashboard](#)

Includes HCD technical assistance letters and enforcement actions issued to California jurisdictions, offering examples of how HCD interprets and applies state housing laws, including the HAA.

[HCD Housing Accountability Act Technical Assistance Advisory](#)

Explains key HAA concepts, including objective standards, substantial evidence, project feasibility, and limitations on local government discretion.

2. Permit Streamlining Act (PSA)

What is the Permit Streamlining Act?

The Permit Streamlining Act (Gov. Code §§ 65920–65964.1) establishes procedures and timelines for processing development applications. Among other requirements, the PSA generally requires agencies to determine whether an application is complete within specified timeframes and establishes deadlines for project review and decision-making.

Why does it matter to planners?

Planners are often responsible for application intake, completeness review, interdepartmental coordination, and project tracking. The PSA affects how projects move through the review process by establishing timelines that help ensure applications are reviewed efficiently and predictably. While the PSA is often discussed in the context of housing projects, it can also apply to other development applications requiring local review and approval.

What should planners watch for during project review?

When processing development applications, planners should pay particular attention to:

- Whether completeness review deadlines are being tracked.
- Whether any request for additional information is clear, written, and tied to adopted application requirements.
- Whether resubmittals are reviewed within applicable timelines.
- Whether project review and decision-making deadlines are being monitored after the application is deemed complete.
- Whether communications, completeness determinations, resubmittals, and project status updates are documented in the project record.
- Whether reviewing departments are coordinated early to avoid unnecessary delays or repeated requests for information.

Helpful Resources

[Permit Streamlining Act \(Gov. Code §§ 65920–65964.1\)](#)

Provides the statutory text establishing application completeness procedures, project review timelines, and agency responsibilities during development review.

[HCD Housing Law Fact Sheet: Portions of the Permit Streamlining Act \(April 2026\)](#)

Provides a practical overview of PSA requirements, including completeness determinations, processing timelines, preliminary applications, and common compliance issues encountered during project review.

[HCD Housing Accountability Unit \(HAU\) Portal](#)

Provides an online portal for submitting technical assistance requests and potential housing law violations to HCD for review, including issues related to local project processing and compliance with state housing laws.

3. Housing Element Law

What is Housing Element Law?

Housing Element Law (Gov. Code §§ 65580–65589.11) requires every city and county to adopt and maintain a Housing Element as part of its General Plan. The Housing Element must identify how a jurisdiction will meet its Regional Housing Needs Allocation (RHNA). Housing Elements are reviewed by HCD and must be updated on a periodic schedule established by State law.

Why does it matter to planners?

Housing Element programs frequently result in zoning updates, objective development standards, housing-related ordinances, and other regulatory changes that affect project review. In addition, a jurisdiction's Housing Element compliance status may affect how certain housing projects are processed under State law. Understanding the Housing Element helps planners understand why local housing policies, zoning regulations, and housing-related implementation programs exist.

What should planners watch for during project review?

When reviewing development projects, planners should pay particular attention to:

- Whether a project site is identified in the Housing Element sites inventory.
- Whether Housing Element programs apply to the project site or review process.
- Whether applicable zoning, overlays, objective standards, or ordinances were adopted to implement the Housing Element.
- Whether the jurisdiction's Housing Element compliance status may affect project processing or available streamlining pathways.

Helpful Resources

[HCD Housing Law Fact Sheet: Housing Element Law \(April 2026\)](#)

A compilation of Housing Element statutes, legislative intent, and policy background that provides planners with a detailed overview of Housing Element Law and its implementation.

[HCD Housing Elements Hub](#)

The primary State resource for Housing Element planning, including guidance documents, Housing Element checklists, technical assistance materials, and housing planning resources.

[HCD Annual Progress Reports \(APR\) Data Dashboard](#)

Tracks housing permits, housing production, and progress toward local housing goals reported annually by jurisdictions.

[SANDAG Annual Progress Report \(APR\) Housing Data Explorer](#)

Displays regional APR data, including housing permits, completions, and progress toward housing production goals.

[SANDAG Regional Housing Needs Allocation \(RHNA\) Dashboard](#)

Tracks San Diego County jurisdictions' progress toward meeting RHNA allocations by income category during the current Housing Element cycle.

4. Density Bonus Law

California's Density Bonus Law (Gov. Code § 65915) requires local governments to provide specified density bonuses, incentives or concessions, waivers, and parking reductions when qualifying housing projects are proposed. The law is intended to encourage affordable and special needs housing production by allowing eligible projects to exceed or modify certain local zoning standards.

Why does it matter to planners?

Density Bonus Law is frequently encountered during multifamily housing project review. Qualifying projects may request additional density, incentives, concessions, waivers, or parking reductions that would not otherwise be permitted under local zoning regulations. Planners need to understand how Density Bonus Law interacts with local development standards, entitlement procedures, and conditions of approval. Understanding the law can help planners evaluate requests consistently, identify required approvals, and avoid imposing conditions that conflict with State law.

What should planners watch for during project review?

When reviewing a project that includes a density bonus request, planners should pay particular attention to:

- Whether the project qualifies for a density bonus under State law.
- The project's base density and how the requested density bonus is calculated.
- The number and affordability level of proposed restricted units.
- Whether the applicant is requesting incentives, concessions, waivers, reductions of development standards, or parking reductions.
- How requested modifications interact with local zoning and development standards.
- Whether any findings supporting denial of a requested incentive, concession, waiver, or reduction are supported by the applicable legal standards and substantial evidence.

Helpful Resources

[HCD Housing Law Fact Sheet: State Density Bonus Law Overview \(April 2026\)](#)

Explains eligibility requirements, affordability thresholds, density bonus calculations, incentives, concessions, waivers, and parking reductions.

[ABAG State Density Bonus Law Resources](#)

Offers practitioner resources, model materials, and implementation guidance related to Density Bonus Law and local review.

[ABAG Density Bonus Model Program Guidelines](#)

Outlines a model framework that local jurisdictions can use to evaluate and process density bonus applications.

[SCAG Density Bonus Cost Reduction Explainer](#)

Clarifies the differences between incentives, concessions, and waivers, with examples relevant to project review.

5. California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA)

What is CEQA?

The California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) (Pub. Resources Code § 21000 et seq.) requires public agencies to evaluate and disclose the potential environmental impacts of discretionary projects before making approval decisions. Depending on the project, CEQA review may involve determining whether an exemption applies, preparing an environmental document, identifying significant impacts, and considering feasible mitigation measures.

The Governor's Office of Land Use and Climate Innovation (LCI), formerly the Office of Planning and Research (OPR), works with the California Natural Resources Agency to develop and maintain State CEQA Guidelines.

Why does it matter to planners?

CEQA is one of the most commonly encountered laws during development review and affects many types of projects, including housing, commercial, industrial, mixed-use, and public facility projects. Planners are often responsible for determining whether CEQA applies, coordinating environmental review, managing project timelines, and ensuring that required environmental documentation is completed before project approval. Understanding CEQA helps planners flag environmental review needs early and coordinate project processing more effectively.

What should planners watch for during project review?

When reviewing development projects, planners should pay particular attention to:

- Whether the project is discretionary or ministerial.
- Whether the project may qualify for a statutory exemption, categorical exemption, or housing-related streamlining provision.
- Whether additional environmental review is required before project approval.
- Whether project changes, technical studies, or mitigation measures may affect project design or timelines.
- Whether CEQA review is being coordinated with entitlement processing, public noticing, and hearing deadlines.
- Whether the administrative record clearly documents the CEQA determination and supporting analysis.

Helpful Resources

[Land Use and Climate Innovation \(LCI\) CEQA Portal](#)

Offers State CEQA guidance documents, technical advisories, legislative updates, and environmental review resources.

[Official CEQA Guidelines](#)

Establishes the administrative regulations agencies use to implement CEQA and conduct environmental review.

[CEQAnet Database Portal](#)

Allows users to search Environmental Impact Reports, Notices of Determination, Notices of Exemption, and other CEQA documents submitted by public agencies throughout California.

[State Clearinghouse Environmental Document Portal](#)

Serves as the State portal for public agencies to submit CEQA environmental documents and notices for State Clearinghouse review and publication to CEQAnet.

[Site Check & CEQA Housing Resources](#)

Provides tools and guidance related to CEQA streamlining provisions and housing-related exemptions, particularly for infill and transit-oriented development projects.

[Association of Environmental Professionals \(AEP\) CEQA Handbook](#)

Summarizes CEQA statutes, regulations, case law, and practical guidance commonly used by environmental review professionals.

Coastal Planning

The California Coastal Commission is the primary agency responsible for implementing the California Coastal Act and protecting coastal resources throughout the State's Coastal Zone. The Commission works with local cities and counties through certified Local Coastal Programs (LCPs), which establish local land use policies and development regulations for coastal areas.

For planners in coastal jurisdictions, project review may involve additional requirements beyond local zoning, including Coastal Development Permit (CDP) requirements, LCP consistency review, noticing procedures, appeal rights, and coordination with the Coastal Commission. Depending on the project location, type of development, and applicable LCP, projects in the Coastal Zone may be reviewed by the local jurisdiction, the Coastal Commission, or both.

Current Planning Considerations

Key considerations for planners in coastal jurisdictions include:

- Whether the project site is in the Coastal Zone and covered by a certified Local Coastal Program, and whether a Coastal Development Permit is required.
- Whether the local jurisdiction, Coastal Commission, or both have permitting or appeal authority, and whether the site is in an appealable area.
- Whether the proposed use, site design, or conditions of approval are consistent with applicable LCP policies and development standards.
- Whether coastal resource issues may affect project review, such as public access, coastal hazards, sea-level rise, visual resources, environmentally sensitive habitat areas, shoreline protection, or water quality.
- Whether noticing, findings, hearing procedures, appeal information, final local action notices, and other required materials are coordinated with or submitted to the Coastal Commission.

Helpful Resources

[California Coastal Commission LCP Home Page](#)

Explains how LCPs guide land use, development review, and coastal resource protection within California's Coastal Zone.

[California Coastal Commission Coastal Development Permit Resources](#)

Explains CDP requirements, review procedures, appeal processes, and Coastal Commission permitting roles

[California Coastal Zone Boundary Map](#)

Shows whether a property or project area is located within the Coastal Zone.

Typical Coordination and Referral Examples

Development review is often a collaborative process involving multiple municipal departments, utility providers, and outside agencies. While planners typically serve as the primary point of contact for applicants, many projects require technical review by subject-matter experts to assess issues such as public safety, infrastructure capacity, environmental constraints, building code compliance, and housing requirements. Early coordination can help identify potential issues, reduce processing delays, and ensure that projects comply with applicable regulations. **Table 2** provides examples of common referral topics, reviewing departments, and why coordination may be necessary during project review.

Table 2: Coordination and Referral Examples

Issue / Topic	Typical Department	Why Coordination Matters
Affordable Housing Requirements	Housing / Planning	Reviews affordability obligations, housing program requirements, and regulatory agreements.
Building Code and Construction Feasibility	Building	Reviews building code compliance, accessibility requirements, construction feasibility, fire separation, height limitations, and geotechnical considerations.
Coastal Review	Planning / Coastal Commission Staff	Determines consistency with the Coastal Act, Local Coastal Program (LCP), and Coastal Development Permit (CDP) requirements.
Drainage / Grading	Engineering / Public Works	Reviews stormwater management, drainage, grading, hydrology, and geotechnical issues.
Fire Access	Fire Department	Ensures emergency vehicles can safely access and service the project site.
Historic Resources	Planning / Historic Preservation Staff	Evaluates potential impacts to historic resources and applicable preservation requirements.
Public Easements, Dedications, Right-of-way (R-O-W) Improvements	Engineering / Public Works	Identifies access and infrastructure constraints, required street improvements, easements, dedications, and right-of-way requirements.

Issue / Topic	Typical Department	Why Coordination Matters
Traffic Circulation	Transportation / Engineering	Evaluates vehicle, bicycle, pedestrian, and emergency access circulation as well as traffic safety considerations.
Tribal Consultation	Planning Department	Coordinates compliance with AB 52, SB 18, and other cultural resource consultation requirements.
Trash Collection and Solid Waste Services	Public Works / Sanitation	Reviews service access, enclosure requirements, and operational feasibility for waste collection.
Utilities	Public Works / Utility Providers	Confirms the availability and capacity of water, sewer, power, and other utility services.