



# COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AGENCY

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Marin County Board of Supervisors  
3501 Civic Center Drive  
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**SUBJECT:** Multi-family Residential Design Guidelines

Dear Supervisors,

**RECOMMENDATION:**

Staff recommends that your Board review the administrative record, conduct a public hearing, and approve the attached resolution adopting the Multi-family Residential Design Guidelines.

**SUMMARY:**

The Multi-family Residential Design Guidelines (MFR Guidelines) define positive design attributes regarding the character of multi-unit and mixed-use buildings in unincorporated Marin County communities. They should also assist applicants, staff, design review boards, and County decision-makers by clarifying design objectives used to evaluate multi-family developments. The MFR Guidelines provide general design criteria that would apply in every type of community, including building proportion, scale, and relationship to the public realm, street frontages, building materials, outdoor space, lighting and landscaping. Additional place-based guidelines promote context-sensitive design through specific design criteria for residential neighborhoods, mixed-use centers, and rural towns. Criteria for parking placement, street improvements, and paths are also addressed. Suitable development patterns for each type of place are described. The design criteria in the MFR Guidelines will provide a basis for Design Review findings in project review and approval.

**FISCAL/STAFFING IMPACT:**

The MFR Guidelines will be implemented during the discretionary review of planning applications. No additional staff or other additional resources will be necessary for implementation.

**REVIEWED BY:**

<input type="checkbox"/> Department of Finance	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> N/A
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> County Counsel	<input type="checkbox"/> N/A
<input type="checkbox"/> Human Resources	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> N/A

Building and Safety  
Environmental Health Services  
Planning  
Environmental Review  
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**DISCUSSION:**

The MFR Guidelines will help implement Program DES-1.e (Expand Design Guidelines) of the Countywide Plan. Further, the MFR Guidelines are also a response to the County’s Analysis of Impediments to Fair Housing Choice. Specifically, item #9 of the Implementation Plan calls for addressing obstacles to infill development through preparation of multi-family design guidelines. The County’s Housing Element also contains Program 1.f to “develop multi-family design guidelines to establish clear and comprehensive design recommendations”. Aside from implementing existing policies, the MFR Guidelines can provide an effective tool to address community concerns about the compatibility of multi-family and mixed use proposals with adjacent neighborhoods.

The long term goal of the MFR Guidelines is to promote a greater diversity of housing opportunities to all Marin residents while respecting those qualities that make Marin livable and attractive. Achieving this goal will have a number of benefits, including increasing environmental sustainability, improving public health, adapting to the needs of an aging population, and retaining neighborhood identity.

The MFR Guidelines are separated into the following five sections:

1. Introduction
2. General Guidelines
3. Place-based Guidelines
4. Parking, Streets, and Paths
5. Development Patterns

The introduction explains what the MFR Guidelines are intended to accomplish. It also contains the statement “Competing objectives in the Guidelines will need to be balanced in a manner that is true to the fundamental design principles expressed below”, which is followed by a list of design principles. This statement is important from an implementation standpoint because it ties the review of individual projects to a list of design principles that reflect overarching goals found in the Countywide Plan and various community plans.

General Guidelines that are applicable to every type of community follow the Introduction. The General Guidelines in the second section begin by explicitly stating that individual projects must meet all County policies and regulations. This guideline establishes that the MFR Guidelines are part of a hierarchical regulatory framework where other policies and regulations preempt the Guidelines when there are any conflicts. The General Guidelines also set forth the different kinds of communities to which the Place-based Guidelines apply, and affirm the County’s discretion to determine what Place-based Guidelines apply to a given property. Further, flexibility is provided for projects which entail adaptive re-use of existing development that creates multi-family housing. Several basic design components are also covered in the second section, including proportion, scale and arrangement, building and street relationships, mass and building facades, and designing outdoor spaces.

Since the County is a large area with many different communities and neighborhoods, a one-size fits all approach is not appropriate for multi-family housing. Section three contains Place-based Guidelines specifically identifying three distinct types of areas: 1) residential neighborhoods, 2) mixed-use centers, and 3)

rural towns. Each set of guidelines for these types of areas begins with a list of development patterns that may be appropriate for a given site. Not all of the listed development patterns will be appropriate for any particular property, and whatever development pattern is chosen must be carefully designed to meet the other Guidelines as well. Design components that give different types of areas their distinctive look and feel are addressed in each subsection, such as mass and bulk, facades and exterior finishes, storm water management, and other issues related directly to the three specific types of places. The Guidelines for these elements have been informed by the visual preference survey and the Working Group discussions.

One of the most important aspects of good design is the appearance of streets, parking, and sidewalks. Due to the higher densities inherent in multi-family developments, street and frontage improvements are likely to be a part of every substantial project. Therefore, a separate section is dedicated to circulation and its relation to the curb appeal of new developments. Privately maintained streets are separated from publically maintained streets because there is greater flexibility in design when the County's Department of Public Works is not responsible for maintenance. The subsection covering pedestrian improvements in County maintained rights-of-way are copied verbatim from the Board adopted Bicycle and Pedestrian Master Plan. Therefore, staff recommends against any modifications to this section. Street trees and sidewalks are addressed as a priority because of the strong positive attitudes that residents expressed towards them during the public engagement process.

The final section covers various development patterns that are referred to elsewhere in the MFR Guidelines. A number of typical types of housing, such as townhouses and apartment buildings, are addressed first. The descriptions of these different development patterns include guidance on how they should be designed. Second, several more unusual development patterns are described. These include clustered developments, pocket neighborhoods, live/work arrangements, senior/special needs housing, and living streets. While people may be familiar with clustered developments and live/work arrangements, pocket neighborhoods and living streets are beyond most people's experience. Pocket neighborhoods were first brought up as a design concept during the public meetings about the MFR Guidelines, and the descriptions are loosely based on the book "Pocket Neighborhoods" by Ross Chapin, while being tailored for multi-family housing in Marin. Pocket neighborhoods have relatively small cottages clustered around common greenspace with parking located in a separate lot adjacent to the cluster of cottages. Living streets are described to promote vibrant pedestrian streets and are linked to the open space requirements as an incentive for their development. Living streets have wide sidewalks with trees and street furniture in place to create a more inviting pedestrian environment.

Overall, the MFR Guidelines have been written in a manner intended to be clear and straightforward. While it is not possible to avoid all architectural jargon when writing these types of guidelines, the illustrations are provided to clarify some of the terms and concepts. Hopefully, whether they are designers or residents, people will be able to study the MFR Guidelines and visualize how future multi-family developments could look on a particular property.

**PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT:**

The MFR Guidelines have benefited from extensive community input starting early in the creation process, as summarized below. A website for this project contains all

public materials at [www.marincounty.org/multifamily](http://www.marincounty.org/multifamily). The website also offers a subscription service for the public to receive email notifications about the initiative.

### ***Public Meetings***

Two community workshops were held in late August 2012, in San Rafael and Bolinas, to elicit design preferences and collect feedback on what citizens think is appropriate and desirable. A summary of those workshops can be found in Attachment 5. Some common themes identified were:

- Design development to fit in with the natural environment and the context of the setting and neighborhood.
- Balance the need for privacy with opportunities for socializing and fostering community building.
- Design buildings and locate developments to promote walking and access to services.
- Promote diverse housing types that serve a variety of households and income levels to support economic diversity, including families, seniors, people with disabilities, and the local workforce.

### ***Visual Preference Survey***

While design aesthetics are subjective, shared collective preferences often exist. A visual preference survey with example photographs of specific characteristics within the built environment was distributed in August, 2012 to gather information on the public's preferences and dislikes. Staff collected over 300 completed surveys, successfully reaching a broad participant base. This provided anonymous feedback which was used as input to the MFR Guidelines. Survey results, individual comments, as well as the demographic characteristics of responders are found in Attachment 5.

Responses to the visual preference survey were helpful in a number of respects, including indicating people's preferences for articulating facades and certain exterior materials. Perhaps most interesting were the responses relating to the design of streets and parking areas. Of all the responses, the clearest preferences were for street design that incorporates on-street parking with a landscape strip planted with street trees. In mixed-use areas, sidewalk furniture such as outdoor tables is also strongly preferred. In contrast, streets with sidewalks directly adjacent to the travelled way and roads with shoulders and no sidewalks were strongly disliked within towns. The clarity of these responses led to an emphasis in the MFR Guidelines on frontage improvements including landscape strips and designing living streets.

### ***Working Group***

In order to acquire early input from potential users, a small Working Group met three times to help vet the MFR Guidelines as they were being drafted. The 13 members included architects, members of design review boards, market rate and affordable housing developers, and community representatives. Feedback from members was diverse and issues of local aesthetics, financial feasibility, public engagement on a project level, and the challenges of prescriptiveness versus creative flexibility were discussed at length.

**TECHNICAL REVIEW:**

During the drafting of the MFR Guidelines, a Technical Advisory Committee made up of specialists from different County agencies was convened to provide information and advice. Staff from the Current Planning section, Sustainability Team, County Fire Department, Department of Public Works (DPW) Land Development Division, DPW Traffic Division, and DPW Flood Control Division participated in the Technical Advisory Committee. They provided summaries of policies and regulations that could affect the MFR Guidelines, reviewed drafts of the MFR Guidelines, and met to discuss outstanding issues as the MFR Guidelines were drafted.

Many technical issues were easily resolved by the Technical Advisory Committee. Frontage improvements were the most difficult problem to address. Public opinion, as expressed in the visual preference survey and other forums, strongly favors streets with on-street parking, a landscape strip planted with trees, and a sidewalk in front of most medium to high density development. It would be the responsibility of a developer to install frontage improvements. However, these types of improvements on County maintained streets can prove costly enough over the long term that it affects the County's road maintenance budget. To address this issue, the MFR Guidelines separate the frontage improvements for County maintained and privately maintained streets. For County maintained streets, the existing County policies in the Bicycle and Pedestrian Plan have been copied into the MFR Guidelines. However, the MFR Guidelines are more creative about frontage improvements for privately maintained streets. According to Marin County Code section 24.04.440, sidewalks are required on both sides of any street where residential densities will ultimately exceed four units per acre. Given this density threshold, it is reasonable to expect that virtually all multi-family projects will entail the development of sidewalks along their frontage.

**PLANNING COMMISSION:**

The Planning Commission held three public hearings in 2013, on February 25th, April 22nd, and May 28th. During the first two meetings, the Commission directed staff to make numerous changes to the MFR Guidelines. The majority of these changes were to restructure and simplify the draft MFR Guidelines and make them more clear and concise. An emphasis was also placed on addressing the inherent tension in any set of design guidelines between providing designers with the flexibility to be creative while defining parameters closely enough to provide clear expectations to the applicant and to local communities. This same issue was earlier focused on by the Working Group, which included members of community groups, architects, and developers. As a result of this thorough review, the MFR Guidelines set high expectations that are realistically achievable, and allow greater degrees of flexibility for unusual circumstances and for rehabilitating or converting existing developments.

Since the Planning Commission made its recommendation for the Board to approve the MFR Guidelines in May, there has been additional focus on the effects of sea level rise on future development. The MFR Guidelines do not restate code requirements, especially when they are evolving the way flood protection standards tend to evolve. However, as an alternative to the Planning Commission's recommendation, your Board may wish to modify DG-42 (Green Building) to include adaptation to the effects of climate change, such as sea level rise, as a consideration

in the sustainability of the development. A new subsection "I" could be added to DG-42 with the following text:

"Multi-family projects should integrate means of adapting to the effects of climate change, such as sea level rise, into the initial design phase of the project where appropriate."

While this text would not proscribe a particular manner of adaptation, it would signal to a designer that the potential effects of climate change should be considered early on in the process and should not be treated as an afterthought.

**IMPLEMENTATION:**

The MFR Guidelines will be implemented in a manner similar to the Single-family Residential Design Guidelines. Multi-family development proposals will continue to be reviewed for conformance with the Countywide Plan and applicable community plans. Design Review will be the primary tool to review projects, although Master Plans, Precise Development Plans, and subdivisions will also be informed by the Guidelines in some cases. The MFR Guidelines will not be a standard for review of Coastal Permit applications.

The specific types of planning permits that a project needs depend on the zoning of the property and the nature of the project. In a planned zoning district, large multi-phased housing projects would need Master Plan and Precise Development Plan or Design Review approval while projects in conventional zoning districts may only need Design Review approval. The process for each kind of planning permit is specified in the Marin County Code. In order to be successful, developers of larger multi-family projects are well advised to conduct public outreach before designing the project, so that local interests can be taken into account before an application is submitted to the County. In some cases, multi-family housing projects are more likely to need environmental review to address site-specific issues that were not adequately analyzed under a previously certified Environmental Impact Report.

The only change to the regulatory framework necessary to implement the MFR Guidelines is to refer to them in the mandatory findings for Design Review approval. This amendment was already approved separately as part of the Development Code amendments adopted with the Housing Element update. By providing clear expectations related to design, the MFR Guidelines are intended to make the planning process more transparent, efficient, and predictable.

**SIGNATURE:**

Jeremy Tejirian  
Planning Manager

Brian C. Crawford  
CDA Director

Attachments:

- 1. Recommended Resolution

*In order to save resources, paper copies of the following documents are only provided to the Planning Commission. All the documents are available for review in the Planning Division offices and the draft Multi-family Residential Design Guidelines are also available online at [www.marincounty.org/multifamily](http://www.marincounty.org/multifamily).*

2. Draft Multi-family Residential Design Guidelines
3. Planning Commission hearing packet from May 28, 2013
4. Planning Commission hearing packet from April 22, 2013
5. Planning Commission packet from February 25, 2013