

CITY OF SEBASTOPOL CITY COUNCIL
AGENDA ITEM REPORT FOR MEETING OF: April 15, 2025

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To: Honorable Mayor and City Councilmembers
From: Emi Thériault, Community Development Director
Subject: City Council Informational Item-Merger of Design Review Board and Planning Commission

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RECOMMENDATIONS:

City Council receive an informational overview for the potential merger of the Design Review Board and Planning Commission.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

As part of the prior (Planning) department review of potential efficiency improvements, a proposal to merge the Design Review Board and the Planning Commission into one body was suggested. This report considers various options for Council’s information. These matters have been reviewed by the Design Review Board and Planning Commission, whose recommendations are included below.

BACKGROUND AND DISCUSSION:

The Design Review Board / Tree Committee (DRB) is regularly scheduled to meet the second Tuesday of each month from 3:00 p.m. to 4:50 p.m. at the Sebastopol Youth Annex on 425 Morris Street, Sebastopol, CA. The Planning Commission (PC) meets on the same date and at the same location later in the day starting at 6 pm with no specific meeting end time identified; the meeting’s average adjournment depends on the scope of the agenda and typically runs for 2 hours on a regular basis and up to 4-5 hours for more complicated items and/or items of significant public interest. As with the recent review of the Barlow Hotel item, more complex planning projects have periodically been reviewed through joint meetings of the two bodies to better facilitate communication, transparency, and process efficiency.

Last year’s Budget included a proposal to merge the two bodies based on potential redirection of staff time to revenue generating activities.

Design Review Board.

This item was brought forward to request the Design Review Board’s recommendation at their January 13, 2025 meeting. A copy of the DRB report is provided as Attachment 1. The DRB was supportive of the merger subject to the committee composition resulting in a 5 member body, 4 members of which would be design professionals.

Planning Commission.

The PC reviewed the matter at their February 25, 2025 and March 11, 2025 meetings. See Attachment 2 for the related staff report for more information.

On March 11, 2025 the PC voted 3-1 (with one member absent to not recommend merger of the DRB. No revised composition recommendation was made at that time.

Additional Efficiency measure to consider - Order of Review.

Both appointed bodies were also informed that the current process, which requires design review by the DRB after a planning entitlement has been reviewed by decision making bodies such as the Planning Commission and Council, is not industry practice. No legal or local codes require the current process, which creates the potential for

significant delays in project review and potential fiscal impacts/reduced investment in the community. An alternative, suggesting one efficiency improvement to flip the order of review to require the DRB review applications first be implemented, was brought forward by staff to both bodies. Both bodies indicated receptiveness to a revised order of review and especially if a merger of bodies was not directed by Council.

STAFF ANALYSIS:

Improved process efficiencies would benefit applicants, members of the public wanting to comment on the project, and investment in the community. All of the options include a continued monthly meeting frequency at a minimum. However, Planning project workplan priorities more typically demand twice monthly meetings.

- Option 1: Join the two bodies, the composition of which would need to be reviewed at greater length for Council’s consideration. This would ultimately require at least a minor update to the Zoning Code (to identify the joint body as responsible for all projects identified in the Code for DRB or PC review as under the review authority of the joint body).
- Option 2: Table a merger proposal and, instead, continue to hold joint meetings of DRB and PC for more complex and items of significant interest to the public.
- Option 3: Revise current process for major planning entitlements, which require both Design Review Board and Planning Commission review, be considered by the DRB first so that the DRB considers the item before PC or for the item to be reviewed at a joint meeting as suggested in Option 2.

COMMUNITY OUTREACH:

This item has been noticed in accordance with the Ralph M. Brown Act and was available for public viewing and review at least 72 hours prior to the scheduled meeting date.

FISCAL IMPACT:

There is no fiscal impact associated with the recommended informational item presented tonight. A merger would save a modest amount of staff time to work on other Council priorities.

RESTATED RECOMMENDATION:

1. Accept Staff’s informational report on the DRB – PC merger proposal.

OPTIONS: None. This is an informational item only.

ATTACHMENTS:

- January 13, 2025 DRB Staff Report
- March 11, 2025 PC Staff Report

APPROVALS:

- Department Head Approval: Approval Date: 4.8.25
- CEQA Determination (Planning): Approval Date: 4.8.25

The proposed action is not a project under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA)

Administrative Services (Financial)

Approval Date: 4.1.25

Costs authorized in City Approved Budget: Yes No N/A

Account Code (f applicable) _____

City Attorney Approval:

Approval Date: N/A Informational item only.

City Manager Approval:

Approval Date: 4.8.25



City of Sebastopol
Planning Department

Date: January 13, 2025
To: Don Schwartz, City Manager; Mary Gourley, Assistant City Manager
CC: John Jay, Associate Planner
From: Emi Thériault, Community Development Director
Subject: DRB-PC Merger Schedule Memorandum

Currently the Design Review Board reviews applications after they are processed through the full planning entitlement process. This is an unusual approach that is not in line with best management practices. It places design review almost as an afterthought and significant changes by the DRB could require reprocessing of the application through the entire discretionary review process after Planning Commission and Council review. This has the potential for adding significant costs related to doubling process times and related costs for both the City and other parties.

The merger of the Planning Commission and Design Review Board will benefit the community with direct savings for Audio Visual vendor support of roughly \$4,000 per year with an additional reallocation equivalent value of staff time based on the current Fee Schedule (FY 24-25) hourly rates. The attached table provides an estimated savings of \$20,076 stemming from reduced staff time needed to support two separate reviewing bodies.

Table 1: Current Staff and Support Costs Related to Design Review Board

Staffing Support Costs per Fee Schedule		Meeting Support Activity ¹	Calculated Staff Cost per meeting	Number of Meetings	Calculated Annual Staff Cost
Staffing DRB					
Hrs/Meeting	1Cost/Hr ¹				
2.75	\$120	PCA: Technical support, live streaming, zoom recording; w/pro-rated set up and break down.	\$330	12	\$3,960
2	\$155	Associate Planner - attendance	\$310	12	\$3,720
2	\$138	Planning Technician - attendance	\$276	12	\$3,312
1	\$259	Community Development Director – packet materials editing ³	\$259	12	\$3,108
0.5	\$259	Community Development Director – attendance ³	\$130	12	\$1,554
		MEETING STAFFING TOTALS	\$1,305	12	\$15,654
DRB General Admin & Support					
0.5	\$155	Elimination of separate DRB review of complex applications that normally require sep. meetings of both bodies; staff report prep and process to be reduced by equivalent of 25% of meetings; Associate Planner)	\$78	12	\$930
0.75	\$138 plus \$7/month copy costs	Finalize and publish agendas; create public and staff binders; required copies for public (reduced by 25%); Planning Tech.	\$111	12	\$1,326
2.5	\$259	Annual Brown Act training, staff report/presentation and discussions	\$259	1	\$648
11	\$138	Membership admin (Planning Tech) to prepare CC staff reports for interviews & appointments; attend meetings	\$138	1	\$1,518
2	\$155	Membership admin (Associate Planner) prepare CC staff reports for interviews & appointments; attend meetings	\$310	1	\$310
0.5	\$155	Information & data requests by members, research (Associate Planner); amount reduced by roughly 50%.	\$78	12	\$930
		ADMIN & SUPPORT TOTALS			\$4,422
Total DRB Support Costs Reduction Estimate					\$20,076

¹ PCA-AV support direct costs; Staffing cost equivalent at adopted hourly rates for FY 24/25: Planning Director \$259; Associate Planner \$155; Technician \$138

² Community Development Director hourly for FY 24-25 shows reduced cost at Planning Director rate pending FY 25-26 Fee Schedule update by Council



City of Sebastopol Planning Department

Date: March 11, 2025
 Agenda item: 7C
 To: Planning Commission
 From: John Jay, Associate Planner
 Subject: Design Review Board and Planning Commission combination
 Recommendation: Receive report, deliberated, and provide direction to staff.

At the request of the Commission from their February 25th, 2025 meeting the Community Development Department has agendized a discussion about the group composition and make up for a combined Planning Commission and Design Review Board. A previous memo was presented to the Commission at their October 22nd, 2024 meeting where the board discussed the recommendations that staff will provide to the City Manager for their report out to City Council during the goals and priorities meeting on April 1, 2025. During that commission meeting of October 22nd, the Commission had a lengthy discussion on how they felt this newly formed body would be comprised of as it relates to categories and number of members. Staff's original recommendation of 7 members which would include one architect, one landscape architect, and one allied construction industry member was taken with a motion and voted on but did not pass as it failed to receive a majority vote.

Staff is requesting the Commission to review the proposed recommendations, deliberated, and provide direction to the Community Development Department for the City Councils goals and priorities meeting of April 1, 2025. Below are the recommendations:

- Combine roles and responsibilities of the Design Review Board and the Planning Commission;
- Membership of the combined bodies would be seven (7) members, with at least two of the members having relevant community development design expertise, e.g., architectural, landscape architectural, etc.)
- City Attorney to review State Brown Act requirements with Board member's and Planning Commission member's as they pertain to the merged roles and responsibilities
- Meetings will be held in-person with Zoom and live-streaming; and,
- Meetings will be scheduled monthly.