
Public Comment For Planning Commission Meeting 10/14

From Melissa Hanley [REDACTED]

Date Mon 10/13/2025 8:35 AM

To Victoria Henkel <vhenkel@cityofsebastopol.gov>; John Jay <jjay@cityofsebastopol.gov>

Hi John and Tori, could you please pass on my comment to the commissioners? I'll endeavor to call in as well.

Subject: Community Input on Refinement of the Formula Business Ordinance in Sebastopol

Dear Chair and Members of the Planning Commission,

As you prepare to discuss the definition of formula business and how to refine it for Sebastopol, I would like to offer input based on how other jurisdictions approach this issue. Examining the approaches of our neighbors and other like-minded communities can provide a useful framework for ensuring our own ordinance continues to serve Sebastopol's best interests.

The key distinction many jurisdictions make in their regulations centers on the **standardized features** of formula businesses, recognizing that these elements are what most fundamentally erode a community's unique aesthetic and character. I believe that it is not the number of locations that a business operates that the Sebastopol community is concerned about but rather the possibility of Sebastopol losing its unique character to the homogenization of cookie-cutter retail. Additionally, we celebrate locally-owned, small business and I know I certainly am concerned about unfair competition from corporate behemoths.

Consider the following examples:

- **San Francisco, CA**, for instance, defines formula retail as a business that maintains standardized features and has 11 or more locations worldwide.
- **Healdsburg, CA**, defines a formula business as one with standardized features that is not locally or regionally based. This is really important. If we have a local business that takes off and has businesses all over the world I think we would be thrilled to have its flagship store in Sebastopol. If the business is locally based, employing local people for their corporate back-office, then their success is a win for the town and the region. The Healdsburg ordinance is

structured to manage where such businesses can or cannot locate, a surgical approach that focuses on protecting specific areas like its Plaza.

- **Ojai, CA**, requires that a retail or restaurant establishment have 10 or more locations and maintain at least two or more standardized features to be considered a formula business. This shows that communities can target the aesthetic and operational homogeneity, not merely the number of locations.
- **Sonoma, CA**, adopts a similar approach by defining a formula business as one with standardized features that cause it to be "substantially identical to ten or more other businesses in the U.S.". This definition again highlights the undesirable nature of replication over location count alone. It also means that the business can't look like other businesses.

The common thread in these and many other ordinances is that the number of locations serves as a threshold, while the *standardized features* are the real target of regulation. As the Commission considers how to better define our ordinance, I urge you to focus on the following:

- **Standardized Features:** The definition should emphasize the elements that erode Sebastopol's unique charm, such as uniform interior and exterior décor, consistent signage, and recognizable building fronts. These are the features that make a local business feel like it could be anywhere, rather than distinctly in Sebastopol.
- **Aesthetics and Community Character:** As has been legally upheld under the "police power," regulating aesthetics and preserving community character is a legitimate governmental interest. Any refined ordinance should clearly state its purpose in preventing the "homogenizing" effect of chain stores and protecting our town's small-town character.
- **Retail Diversity and Local Economy:** Any updated ordinance should serve to encourage independent, locally-owned businesses, promoting retail diversity and supporting our local economy. A strong, unique business community is a direct contributor to the overall public welfare.

By sharpening our ordinance to focus specifically on the undesirable effects of standardization, Sebastopol can more effectively preserve its character and unique identity while maintaining legal defensibility.

Thank you for your time and for the work you do for our community.

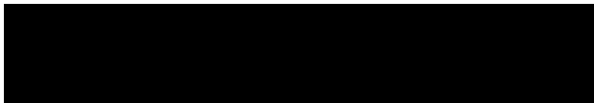
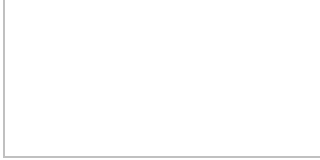
Respectfully,

Melissa Hanley, Architect and Co-Founder, Blitz

Vice-Chair Design Review Board, City Of Sebastopol

Melissa Hanley AIA , IIDA , ASID

Partner & Co-Founder



 [instagram](#)  [linkedin](#)  [www](#)

This email, including any attachments, is confidential and intended for the recipient specified in the message only. It is strictly forbidden to share any part of this message with any third party, without the written consent of the sender. If you received this message by mistake, please reply to this message to inform the sender, and follow with its deletion.