

Single Family Design Guidelines Update/ Neighborhood Preservation Ordinance Update

ISSUE PAPER B

Definition: Neighborhood for Compatibility Determinations

The purpose of this issue paper is to:

- Clarify Santa Barbara’s current definition of “neighborhood”
- Reference how other jurisdictions define neighborhood
- Provide options for neighborhood definition

Background

When evaluating a project, the Architectural Board of Review (ABR) considers the project’s compatibility with the surrounding neighborhood. Two of the six required Neighborhood Preservation Ordinance (NPO) findings for project approval include references to neighborhood compatibility:

4. The development will be consistent with the scenic character of the City and will enhance the appearance of the **neighborhood**. (Bold format added.)
5. The development will be **compatible with the neighborhood**, and its size, bulk, and scale will be appropriate to the neighborhood. (Bold format added.)

In addition, both the Single Family Design Guidelines (SFDG) and Architectural Board of Review Design Guidelines (ABRDG) reference neighborhood compatibility (See pages H-13, I-2, N-1 and N-2 of the SFDG and pages 1 – 7 of the ABRDG Architectural Guidelines).

However, Santa Barbara, like most jurisdictions, does not currently define the term “neighborhood.” Instead, the ABR judges the extent of the neighborhood compatibility area for each case. Usually, the ABR or Historic Landmarks Commission does not formally define the extent of a project’s neighborhood; rather, the ABR or HLC must rely on a more qualitative assessment of the project, vicinity photographs provided by the applicant and the ABR or HLC members’ prior knowledge of the characteristics of the area where the project is proposed.

The Land Use Element of the General Plan currently maps 32 City neighborhoods. Although 32 neighborhoods seems like a large number of neighborhoods, this level of City division still constitutes neighborhoods with hundreds of parcels. Using this neighborhood map for calculated neighborhood compatibility determinations is currently impractical.

The website www.dictionary.com contains this very general definition of neighborhood:

“A place near; vicinity; adjoining district; a region the inhabitants of which may be counted as neighbors; as, he lives in my neighborhood.”

Issues

Difficulty in Defining Neighborhoods

It is often difficult for ABR or HLC to judge the extent of a neighborhood for compatibility determinations. Applicants and the public often advocate different neighborhood compatibility extents. For example, residents on a block with no two-story single-family homes where a two-story single-family home is proposed may advocate a very small compatibility area radius, so that the two-story home is judged in comparison to only single-story homes. However, the applicant may advocate a larger compatibility area radius, to include similar two-story home developments that the proposal could more easily be “compatible with.” Lacking base criteria to begin to define a neighborhood by — such as a given number of feet, blocks, zoning districts or lot size limitations — the neighborhood compatibility extent determination can become very difficult.

Potential for Inconsistent Application of Term “Neighborhood”

Since the ABR or HLC must judge the extent of a neighborhood for each case, and applicants and neighbors take an active role in trying to sway the ABR or HLC to make a certain neighborhood compatibility extent determination, there is the possibility for inconsistent application of the term “neighborhood.” Also, an indirect effect of this issue may be that some neighbors feel they must actively monitor ABR and HLC cases to ensure that the extent of the compatibility area is defined appropriately for cases in their area.

Compatibility Determinations Made More Difficult

How to determine compatibility is scheduled for Steering Committee discussion in August. The results of the discussion of this issue paper will create a “building block” for that discussion. Whichever compatibility criteria are used, it becomes difficult to determine compatibility when applicants, neighbors and Staff may all be presenting compatibility criteria for a different area that they define as a neighborhood. For example, interested neighbors sometimes present, at ABR and HLC meetings, their evaluations of the average square footage of homes within their “neighborhood.” There is usually confusion as to whether or not the data presented is consistent with the ABR’s, HLC’s or Staff’s interpretations of the “neighborhood” for the proposed project. Many members of the public have asked for floor to area ratio (FAR) criteria to be put in place. One method of designating maximum FAR criteria is to average FARs in the neighborhood to determine an appropriate range for a proposed project. If this method of establishing appropriate FARs is to be used, the neighborhood compatibility extent will need to be further defined.

Other Jurisdictions

Many jurisdictions require projects to be compatible with the surrounding neighborhood; however, as far as Staff is aware, most jurisdictions do not define “neighborhood.” Below are some of the few neighborhood definitions available from other jurisdictions which Staff found. See the attachments for some of the documents where these definitions were found.

City of Burbank

Neighborhood: All properties on both sides of the street the project is located on between the nearest two cross streets, and all properties in the same block as the project, including those on the closest side of the adjacent street to the rear of the proposed project. (Please see diagram in attachment.)

City of Monterey

Neighborhood: That area of the city that is visually impacted by the building project. This will normally include the street frontage between adjacent cross streets, properties along that frontage and properties located within the same block as that of the building project.

City of Rancho Palos Verdes

Immediate Neighborhood: Normally considered at least the twenty (20) closest residences within the same zoning district.

As far as Staff is aware, local jurisdictions such as the City of Goleta, County of Santa Barbara and the City of Ventura do not have a definition of neighborhood solely used for compatibility determinations.

City of Ventura

It should be noted that the City of Ventura features a “transect” based general plan, in which neighborhoods are defined in general (but not for compatibility determination purposes) as:

For many people, the block they live on represents their neighborhood. For others it is the friends that live nearby. The features that characterize a Neighborhood are:

- 5-10 minute walk from edge to center;
- Community spaces such as schools, parks, libraries and recreation centers; and
- Informal meeting spaces such as cafes, coffee shops, and bookstores.

Survey Results

Residents were asked, at the Neighborhood Visual Survey workshops, to answer the following question:

“What definition of ‘neighborhood’ is best for project compatibility determinations?”

The most popular response (with 50 percent, or 48 out of 96, respondents) was, “Properties on nearby blocks.”

What definition of “neighborhood” is best for project compatibility determinations?	# of Respondents (out of 96)	%
Homes adjacent to a project	4	4%
Lots within the same block	15	16%
Properties within 100’ or 450’	18	19%
Properties on nearby blocks	48	50%
Properties surrounded by the same arterial streets	11	11%

Options

It would be useful for applicants, and ABR and HLC members, to share a common base definition of neighborhood. The above definitions from other jurisdictions and the survey questionnaire present options for defining a project’s neighborhood.

Option #1: Homes **adjacent** to a project.

In such a definition, “adjacent” properties could be defined as properties sharing a common lot line. Although compatibility with immediately adjacent homes is important, this definition appears to be too narrow to be viable.

Option #2: Properties **visible** from a proposed project’s **property line**.

Ideally, at least properties visible from the street in front of a proposed property should be compatible with the proposed project. Applicants could be required to photograph homes visible from their project’s front property line. However, this option involves substantial perspective complications. Homes that are very far down a straight street may be visible at a very small scale, but should they all be included in compatibility determinations? Homes on curved streets or sloped lots would also have disproportionate numbers of homes visible from a front property line.

Option #3: Properties within a **certain distance** from a project

- 3a.** Establish a compatibility circle around the project with a radius of 100 feet.
- 3b.** Establish a compatibility circle around the project with a radius of 450 feet.

These two radius distances are consistent with noticing requirements. However, it is conceivable that in some instances noticing has a smaller radius than the proper neighborhood compatibility extent. Noticing should reach immediate neighbors that would most be affected by a project, but a project should ideally be compatible with the larger neighborhood.

As with noticing, the appropriate extent for a project’s neighborhood compatibility would likely be different for an area with small lot sizes versus an area with very large lot sizes. If a given number of square feet for compatibility is effective in small lot size areas, this same area may not encompass enough homes in large lot areas. Options to address this issue might include requiring a minimum number of homes to determine neighborhood compatibility or having a different compatibility radius for hillside design districts, or using a block method combined with a square foot radius method.

Option #4: Properties on **nearby blocks**.

This option was by far the most popular with Neighborhood Visual Survey workshop attendees. However, the challenge is to define “nearby blocks.” Below are two options for including a reasonable number of nearby street blocks in a neighborhood definition. For purposes of this issue paper, street block and municipal block are defined as follows:

Street Block: All properties one lot deep fronting one side of a street between the two nearest cross streets.



Municipal Block: All properties surrounded by the same closest streets and not transversed by any roadway meant for through traffic.



4a.: Draw from the Rancho Palos Verdes **quantity of closest homes** definition of neighborhood and define “neighborhood” as:

The twenty (20) closest residences.

Rancho Palos Verdes requires at least the twenty (20) closest residences within the same zoning district, but does not limit the number of residences to be considered. To avoid excess analysis which may not produce gains in project compatibility, Staff recommends analyzing simply the 20 closest homes if a numerical number of homes is to be considered in a neighborhood definition.

For projects with many small lots on a street block, the 20 closest residences may not always encompass every house on the same street block. However, this definition will usually encompass homes from nearby street blocks, unless the block is unusually large and lots are unusually small. An example illustration of this concept for a property on Madrona Drive is shown below.



4b. Properties within the **same street block and municipal block**. This definition would be identical to the City of Burbank’s and City of Monterey’s neighborhood definitions for compatibility determinations, as illustrated below. This definition will always encompass homes from nearby street blocks. An example illustration of this concept for a property on Madrona is shown below.



Option #5: Properties surrounded by the same **arterial streets** or **nearby municipal blocks**.

This option may be appealing to some, as it could potentially encompass a large area. However, the feasibility of implementing this definition is questionable. If a very large area is required for a compatibility determination, the research required to establish compatibility may become excessively time consuming and expensive. For example, if FARs, lot sizes and photographs are needed for areas within the same arterials, this could create an inordinate amount of work. It also appears that there may not be any improvement in “compatibility” from all of this extra data gathering. A smaller, but reasonably-sized neighborhood compatibility analysis area may be just as effective in producing compatible development results without extra time and expense.

Option #6: Adopt a definition of “neighborhood” **crafted by Single Family Design Guidelines Update Steering Committee members**.

Recommendation

Staff recommends Option #4a: Nearby Blocks, 20 closest residences.

The twenty (20) closest residences.

Attachments

City of Burbank Planning Division, Development Review for Multifamily Residential Zones, Neighborhood Compatibility Application Guidelines

City of Monterey, Architectural Review Committee Neighborhood Compatibility Design Guidelines, Neighborhood Compatibility Guideline 3.1.1

City of Rancho Palos Verdes, Neighborhood Compatibility and Roof Deck Code Amendment, Amendments to the Height Variations Guidelines