

Date: Dec 12, 2024

To: Supervisor Ray Mueller
District 3, San Mateo County

From: Mark Stegmaier, Chair
Coastside Design Review Committee

Re: Demonstration of Project Scale Policy and Story Poles

Background

San Mateo County's Demonstration of Project Scale Policy revised in July 2024 ([link](#)) describe two options for proposed projects to satisfy the policy: 1) the construction of story poles and 2) the use of visual methods such as digital imaging simulations, computer modeling, and other visual techniques. Since the policy has been in place since 2020, the overwhelming majority of projects have elected to use visual methods to demonstrate project scale. This option has not only resulted in numerous community complaints via written correspondences and in-person speakers, but has also yielded incomplete and potentially misleading representation of the projects.

The CDRC had previously made a recommendation to change County policy to require story poles in October 2020 ([link](#), pages 23-26), after much research including evaluations of similar story pole requirements in other counties and cities. Subsequently, a draft work plan and proposed schedule was completed by San Mateo County (SMC) project planner, Ruemel Panglao. Our understanding is the work plan is still under consideration, but has not been executed.

Since then, the CDRC has fielded many requests from the community to require story poles and has recently agendized discussion on the Demonstration of Scale policy in [October](#) and [November](#) 2024. In the [November 2024 meeting](#), the CDRC unanimously voted 5-0 in to recommend an ordinance that would require story poles to demonstrate project scale.

The CDRC understands that the construction of story poles could add more upfront costs to a project, but do not feel this is an undue burden given the relative cost to construct story poles as compared to overall project costs. Additionally this could lead to a more streamline design review effort, more positive community engagement, less project continuances, and faster project approvals. Finally, the CDRC strongly feel that an effective story pole requirement should incorporate thresholds that exclude projects that would not be of significant project scale (examples: new construction or additions less than 500 square feet, maximum building height under 16', floor area ratio threshold), but not lead to complex or subjective interpretations or many exceptions.

Recommendation

The CDRC recommends that San Mateo County adopt an Ordinance to require the construction of story poles for all projects subject for consideration by the CDRC in all areas zoned "Design Review" (DR) within the urban Midcoast communities of El Granada, Miramar, Moss Beach and Montara meeting clear and concise project thresholds. By providing a single requirement, rather than multiple options, for projects to demonstrate project scale, the CDRC feel this approach leads to greater clarity for project applicants and the community, more positive community interaction, and a more streamlined design review process.

Furthermore, the CDRC also recommends the county evaluate the overall project review process to see if there are additional efficiencies that could offset the potential costs for constructing story poles.

CC: Luis Topete, Design Review Officer, San Mateo County
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Steve Monowitz, Director of Planning and Building, San Mateo County