



PLANNING DIRECTOR BULLETIN NO. 7

Housing Crisis Act of 2019 Project Review and Zoning Actions

This Bulletin outlines how the Planning Department administers the provisions of the Housing Crisis Act of 2019 during the statewide housing emergency period through January 1, 2030. Please consult the references for additional information.

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References:
Government Code Sections 65905.5, 65913.10, 66300 (Housing Crisis Act)
Government Code Sec. 65589.5 (Housing Accountability Act)
Government Code Sec. 65940-50 (Permit Streamlining Act)

INTRODUCTION

Effective January 1, 2020, and further amended in 2021, “The Housing Crisis Act of 2019,” (HCA) establishes a statewide “housing emergency” until January 1, 2030. During the housing emergency, the Housing Crisis Act suspends certain restrictions on the development of new housing and expedites the permitting of housing. This bulletin provides guidance on the application of the HCA to the review and approval processes for residential development projects and zoning actions in San Francisco during the housing emergency.

OVERVIEW

During the housing emergency, cities and localities in urban areas, such as San Francisco, are generally prohibited from rezoning or imposing new development standards that would reduce the capacity for housing or adopting new design standards that are not objective. In these jurisdictions, the demolition of existing housing units is only permitted if the same number of units are created, and the demolition of existing below-market rate, rent-controlled units, units rented by low-income households or units withdrawn from the rental market within the last ten years is only permitted if replaced by units that meet certain conditions related to affordability and tenant protections.

Additionally, all localities must comply with additional project review requirements and timelines for housing developments applications. These include a prohibition on applying new zoning regulations and development standards or listing the project as a local historic landmark after a project’s application is submitted, except in certain circumstances. Housing developments that meet all applicable objective zoning standards may only be subject to five public hearings, including continuances and most appeal hearings.

The HCA does not establish any new ministerial approval programs, mandate any rezoning actions, prevent additional restrictions on short-term rentals or demolition of existing units, or supersede the requirements in the California Coastal Act or California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA).

HOUSING DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS

As used throughout this bulletin, a “housing development project” refers to 1) a development project consisting of one or more residential units, 2) a mixed-use development project where at least two-thirds of the square footage comprises residential uses, or 3) transitional or supportive housing development projects. The HCA applies to projects that involve both ministerial and discretionary approvals

ZONING ACTIONS AND DESIGN STANDARDS

Zoning Actions

The HCA prohibits jurisdictions from taking any legislative action, including by voter initiative, that would reduce the zoned capacity of housing development below what was allowable as of January 1, 2018, including but not limited to actions that would:

- Reduce the maximum allowable height, density, or floor area ratio (FAR)
- Impose new or increased open space, lot size, setback or maximum lot coverage requirements
- Adopt or enforce a moratorium or cap on housing approvals

However, a city may reduce housing capacity if the city concurrently increases the housing capacity of other parcels elsewhere in the jurisdiction such that there would be no net loss in residential capacity. In most instances, “concurrently” means that the Board of Supervisors must approve both zoning changes at the same meeting.

Design Standards

For housing development projects, the city may not apply new design standards that were adopted on or after January 1, 2020 unless these design standards meet the state law definition of “objective standards.” Specifically, an objective standard involves no personal or subjective judgement on the part of the city and is uniformly verifiable by reference to criteria that are available to the applicant at the time of application.

San Francisco will continue to apply all Design Guidelines that were adopted and in effect prior to January 1, 2020 to residential projects, including the Urban Design Guidelines, Residential Design Guidelines, and any special area or topic-based design guidelines. Non-residential projects may be subject to future non-objective design guidelines or standards.

PROJECT REVIEW PROCESS

Permit Streamlining Act

The Permit Streamlining Act (Government Code Sec. 65920-64) applies to housing development projects. During the housing emergency, the required timeframe to approve or disapprove a housing development project for which an environmental impact report (EIR) is prepared is decreased by 30 days. The new timelines are as follows: 1) 90 days after certification of an EIR for a housing development project; or 2) 60 days after certification of an EIR for a housing development project in which at least 50 percent of the units are affordable to low-income households and that receive public financing. All other required review timeframes in the Permit Streamlining Act continue to apply unchanged during the housing emergency

Housing Accountability Act

The Housing Accountability Act (“HAA”) (Government Code Sec. 65589.5) applies to certain housing development projects (at least two units, at least 2/3 residential, or transitional or supportive housing). Generally, the HAA limits the City’s ability to deny or reduce the density of projects that comply with applicable objective zoning and development standards in effect at the time a development application is determined to be complete. During the housing emergency, however, these limitations apply to housing development projects that comply with the objective zoning and development standards in effect at the time a “preliminary application” is submitted, as described below.

Preliminary Applications

Requirements of State Law

The Housing Crisis Act establishes a new “preliminary application” under Government Code section 65941.1 separate and distinct from a development application. A preliminary application is required by state law to collect specific site and project information in order to determine the zoning, design, subdivision, and fee requirements that apply to a housing development project.

If an applicant submits a complete development application within 180 days of submitting a preliminary application, then the zoning, design, subdivision, and fee requirements in effect at the time the preliminary application was submitted remain in effect for the remainder of the entitlement and permitting process except under the following circumstances:

- The project does not commence construction within 30 months of the project’s site permit being issued.
- The project increases by more than 20 percent in the number of units or total square footage beyond the preliminary application, except as the project may be revised using the State Density Bonus.
- The requirement is necessary to avoid an adverse impact to public health or safety as defined in state law.
- The requirement is necessary to avoid or lessen an impact under CEQA.
- Development impact fees, application and permit processing fees, capacity or connection fees, or other charges may be annually adjusted based on a published cost index.

Implementation

For housing development projects that did not submit a complete Project Application before January 1, 2020, a preliminary housing development application may be submitted as an attachment to the Project Application (PRJ). For housing development projects that require a Preliminary Project Assessment (PPA) application prior to submittal of a Project Application, the preliminary housing development application may be submitted as an attachment to the PPA application. A preliminary housing development application may also be submitted independently, prior to either a Project Application or PPA application, provided that a Project Application is submitted within 180 days.

Housing development projects that submitted a complete Project Application prior to January 1, 2020 may submit a preliminary housing development application to the Planning Department at any time. The zoning, design, subdivision, and fee requirements in effect on the date such preliminary application is submitted shall apply except as listed above.

Historic Resource Determinations

Requirements of State Law

The HCA does not supersede, limit, or modify the requirements of CEQA. Accordingly, the Planning Department will continue to review the potential environmental impacts of proposed projects on historic and cultural resources, as required by CEQA, and may be required to prepare an Environmental Impact Report (EIR), as appropriate, to examine potential impacts to historic resources or impose mitigation measures necessary to avoid or lessen such impacts.

Other determinations that the site of a proposed housing development is a historic site must be made at the time the development application is deemed complete, and that determination remains valid for the duration of the project review process, except in limited circumstances where any archeological, paleontological, or tribal cultural resources are subsequently discovered at the project site. This determination does not modify the requirements of CEQA.

Implementation

Housing development projects that submitted a complete Project Application prior to January 1, 2020 may only be subject to requirements of Article 10 or Article 11 if the application to designate was approved prior to submittal of a complete Project Application. Housing development projects that submit a complete Project Application after January 1, 2020 may only be subject to the regulations in Planning Code Article 10 or 11 if the site is designated as a landmark or included in an historic district prior to submittal of a complete Project Application.

Limited Public Hearings

Under the HCA, housing development projects that comply with applicable zoning standards and that are not seeking any exceptions, rezoning, or other legislative actions, can be subject to a maximum of five public hearings to consider project approval by the city. These include informational hearings, hearings at which the project is continued to another date at the request of the government agency, sub-committee hearings, and appeal hearings. Public hearings required by CEQA, including those arising out of a timely appeal of a CEQA decision, do not count toward the five-hearing limit.

Implementation

Eligible projects that submitted a complete Project Application prior to January 1, 2020 will be subject to no more than five public hearings after January 1, 2020, regardless of any previous public hearings. Projects that submit a complete development application after January 1, 2020 shall be subject to a maximum of five public hearings. Independent requests from Project Sponsors for a continuance do not count toward the five-hearing limit.

REPLACEMENT HOUSING UNITS

Requirements of State Law

The Housing Crisis Act requires housing projects that will demolish existing residential units to create at least as many units as demolished. If the project demolishes “protected” units, as specified below, special provisions apply. The following requirements shall only be applied to housing development projects that submit a complete development application after January 1, 2020.

Replacement of Existing Housing Units

The City may not approve a housing development project that requires the demolition of existing residential units unless the replacement project includes at least as many residential units as demolished. Where the building on site was demolished within the past five years prior to submittal of a development application, the replacement project shall provide at least the maximum number of units that were present during the five-year period.

Non-residential development projects are not subject to the HCA and may be approved, disapproved, or subject to conditions of approval in accordance with local requirements regarding the removal of existing residential units.

Replacement of “Protected” Units

Additionally, certain requirements apply to housing development projects that would demolish any existing “protected” units, including units that are or were in the five years prior to the development application: 1) affordable units deed-restricted to households earning below 80 percent of Area Median Income (AMI); 2) subject to a local rent control program; 3) rented by low-income households earning below 80 percent of AMI; or 4) withdrawn from the rental market under the Ellis Act within 10 years prior to development application. Single-family homes may be considered protected units. Units constructed without permit, or Unauthorized Units, may be considered protected units if they meet any of the criteria above.

Except in limited circumstances, any housing development project that would demolish any protected units shall as a condition of approval provide replacement units of the same number of bedrooms, and at an affordable rent or sales price to households of the same or lower income category as that of the last household in occupancy in the past five years. Such rental units shall remain under the affordability restriction for a period of at least 55 years. The low-income categories defined in state law are:

1) “extremely low income” households earning up to 30% of AMI, 2) “very-low income” households earning up to 50% of AMI, and 3) “lower income” households earning up to 80% of AMI.

Where the household income of current or previous occupants is not known, the replacement units shall be provided as affordable to very-low (earning up to 50% AMI) and low-income households (earning between 50% and 80% of AMI) in an amount proportional to the number of very low and low-income households present in the jurisdiction according to the most current data from the Comprehensive Housing Affordability Strategy (CHAS) database provided by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD).

Where the existing units to be demolished are subject to a local rent control program and the last household in occupancy earned moderate or above moderate income (above 80 percent of AMI), the project shall provide either: 1) replacement units affordable to low-income households (i.e. earning up to 80 percent of AMI) for a period of at least 55 years; or 2) replacement units that are subject to the local rent control program. Effective January 1, 2022, Senate Bill 8 clarifies that replacement units can be constructed even if they exceed local density controls

Relocation Assistance and Right of Return

Projects proposing the demolition of any protected units shall as a condition of approval provide all of the following to occupants of such protected units:

- For lower income households, a right of first refusal to a comparable unit in the replacement project that shall be provided at a rent or sale price affordable to households of the same or lower income category, except when the replacement project is a single residential unit, a single family home, or a 100% affordable project.
- For lower income households, relocation benefits pursuant to state or local law, whichever requires greater assistance
- For all households, right to remain in the unit until six months before the start of construction
- For all households, right to return if demolition does not proceed and units are returned to rental market

The HCA was amended by Senate Bill 8 (2021) to apply to single-family homes. If a single-family home has been rented by a lower income household within five years preceding the date of the application, then the single-family home is considered a protected unit.

If a housing development project proposes to demolish a single-family home and construct a single-family home, then the project sponsor must provide relocation benefits to the current renters of the home but are not required to offer the existing renters a right of first refusal for the new single-family home. The new single-family home may be provided at any size and at any income level. If the housing development project proposes to demolish a single-family home and construct a building with two-units or more, then the project sponsor must comply with the replacement, relocation, and right of first refusal requirements as set forth above. If the protected single-family home included three bedrooms or fewer, the replacement unit must include at least the same number of bedrooms as the existing single-family home. If the protected single-family home contained four or more bedrooms, then the replacement unit must include at least three bedrooms. The replacement unit is not required to have the same or similar square footage or the same number of total rooms.

Implementation

The above requirements shall apply to any housing development project that submits a complete Project Application after January 1, 2020. Projects proposing to demolish, merge, or remove any existing unit are also subject to the provisions of Planning Code Sec. 317, and such projects shall be required to provide all necessary information regarding the occupancy, eviction, and household income history as part of a complete Project Application, and as may be verified during the project review process.

Manner of Replacement of Existing Units

Where multiple options are provided under state law as to the manner of replacement of any existing protected units, the Planning Department shall follow the guidance set forth below to determine the required restrictions on replacement unit(s). For purposes of implementing the HCA, there shall be a rebuttable presumption that any multifamily building constructed prior to 1979 is subject to the San Francisco Residential Rent Stabilization and Arbitration Ordinance (hereinafter "rent control").

If the protected unit that is being demolished is subject to **rent control**, then the following replacement provisions would apply:

- If the protected unit was not previously rented by a low-income tenant in the five years preceding the application, and the project will construct rental units, then the replacement unit(s) shall be subject to rent control. If the project will construct ownership units, then the replacement unit(s) shall be deed-restricted at 80 percent of AMI.

- If the protected unit was previously rented by a low-income tenant in the five years preceding the application, then the replacement unit will be deed-restricted at the income category that most closely corresponds to the previous tenant's income.
- If the household income of current or previous occupants is not known, then 51 percent of the units must be replaced with deed restricted units. Of the units being replaced, 74 percent of such units shall be replaced by units affordable to very low-income households earning up to 50% of AMI and 26 percent of such units shall be replaced by units affordable to low-income households earning up to 80% of AMI for a period of at least 55 years.¹The remaining 49 percent of replacement units shall be subject to rent-control.

If the protected unit that is being demolished is a **deed-restricted affordable unit**, then the replacement unit must also be deed-restricted at the income category that most closely corresponds to the protected unit.

If the protected unit that is being demolished is not subject to rent control and is not deed-restricted but has been **rented by a low-income tenant** in the five years preceding the application, then the replacement unit shall be deed-restricted at the income category that most closely corresponds to the protected unit being demolished. Where the household income of current or previous occupants of protected units is unknown, 51 percent of the units must be replaced with deed restricted units. Of the units being replaced, 74 percent of such units shall be replaced by units affordable to very low-income households earning up to 50% of AMI and 26 percent of such units shall be replaced by units affordable to low-income households earning up to 80% of AMI for a period of at least 55 years.² All replacement calculations resulting in fractional units shall be rounded up to the next whole number.

Inclusionary Housing Program

The HCA allows for jurisdictions to apply locally adopted objective provisions that further restrict or condition the demolition of existing units, including if the local provision requires a greater number of low-income households to be provided. Pursuant to Planning Code Sec. 415(a)(9), existing rent-control or affordable units must be replaced in addition to on-site units provided to comply with the requirements of the Inclusionary Housing Program.

This provision shall also apply to replacement protected units required by state law. The sponsor of any housing development subject to both the replacement requirements in the HCA and the Inclusionary Housing Ordinance in Planning Code section 415 may appeal to the Planning Commission for authorization to impose rent control on any replacement units based on the absence of any reasonable relationship or nexus between the impact of the development and the total number of required on-site affordable housing units.

Relocation Payments

Where relocation benefits are required by state or local law, the amount of relocation payments to be provided shall be the applicable amount as published by the San Francisco Residential Rent Stabilization and Arbitration Board. Current relocation payment requirements and amounts can be found on the Rent Board website:

sfrb.org/forms-center.

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¹ Pursuant to state law, this proportion reflects the most current data published by HUD on August 5, 2019 for the period 2012-2016. (huduser.gov/portal/datasets/cp.html).

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