



**San Francisco  
Planning**

# Guidelines for Adding Garages and Curb Cuts

CRITERIA FOR ADDING GARAGES  
AND CURB CUTS TO EXISTING STRUCTURES  
( INCLUDING HISTORIC RESOURCES )

Formerly known as: Zoning Administrator Bulletin Nos. 2006.1a and 2006.1b





**ORGANIZATION:**

This document is divided into two sections, both describe the quantitative and qualitative measures used to review proposed projects.

**General Standards and Criteria for Existing Buildings**

**Additional Standards and Criteria for Known and Potential Historic Resources**

This bulletin explains Planning Department procedures for the review of building permit applications proposing to add off-street parking to existing residential structures. The review requirements of other City agencies, such as the Department of Building Inspection (DBI) or Public Works (SFPW), are not addressed in this document.

Approval of such building permit applications may be granted at the Planning counter at the Permit Center. In other instances, the application may be routed to a planner for further staff review, after which it may be approved, modified, or disapproved.

It is strongly recommended that all applications be reviewed first at the Planning counter prior to finalizing any plans. An initial determination can be made by PIC Staff as to whether the subject structure is a “historic resource” or a “potential historic resource.”

Rehabilitation and alteration standards for the preservation of designated City Landmark properties are contained in Article 10 of the Planning Code. However, there are structures within San Francisco that are considered “historic resources” in addition to Landmark properties.

For the purposes of this bulletin these structures or “historic resources” are buildings constructed in or before 1913 that appear to be of historic or architectural merit and those previously evaluated and included on specified registers and surveys. This also includes properties over fifty years of age that may be found to be historic resources based on available historic information.

Any proposal to add a new garage in a structure that is considered a known or potential historic resource is subject to the additional requirements outlined within this bulletin.

Inserting a new garage opening can have a major impact on a historic building and the surrounding neighborhood. Due to this potential impact, the Planning Department reviews proposals for new garages on a case-by-case basis. Department staff will review all proposals for compatibility with the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties. These Standards were developed by the National Park Service and are applied as set forth by the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) Guidelines Section 15331.

San Francisco's voter-approved Transit-First Policy states that decisions regarding the use of our public streets and sidewalks shall prioritize public rights of way for pedestrians, bicyclists, and public transit.

**Several Planning Department policies support this City wide policy and the Department will review the insertion of garages accordingly. It is important to note that the Planning Code does not require the provision of off-street parking for any property.**

For all other structures, Planning Staff at the Planning counter will determine compliance with the Planning Code, the General Plan, the Residential Design Guidelines<sup>1</sup> and the specific criteria contained below. Should the proposed curb cut and garage door meet these standards, the application may be approved at the Planning counter.

# General Standards and Criteria for Existing Buildings

## GARAGE DOOR APPEARANCE

Garage door design and materials should be compatible with the existing building and surrounding neighborhood character.

## PLACEMENT OF THE GARAGE AND CURB CUT

The location of the curb cut, garage, and garage door should ensure maximum compatibility with the building's context, existing on-street parking, existing dwelling units, and the existing streetscape.

- Is there a pattern of garages on the block?
- On-Street Parking. Could a greater number of on-street parking spaces be retained if the curb cut and garage were located elsewhere on the building's frontage?
- Impact to Existing Dwelling Units. Would the proposed placement of the new garage have a negative effect on any existing dwelling unit on the ground level?
- Loss of Existing Street Trees.<sup>2</sup> Could existing street trees adjacent to the subject property remain if the garage and/or curb cut were located elsewhere on the building's frontage?
- Loss of existing Significant Trees.<sup>3</sup> Could existing Significant Trees within the subject parcel remain if the garage and/or curb cut were located elsewhere on the building's frontage?<sup>4</sup>
- Would the driveway require an encroachment to warp the sidewalk? Warping the sidewalk is discouraged. Encroachment of stairs into the sidewalk required for building access is also discouraged.



Front yard setbacks that not only enliven the public realm but also represent the historic pattern of development should be maintained and protected. When a garage is necessary, it should be inserted into the building, avoiding impacts on the character-defining features of the building and the displacement of any ground floor residential units.

## WIDTH OF THE GARAGE DOOR AND CURB CUT

The total width of the garage door should be no larger than necessary to accommodate the off-street parking space typically no wider than 10'. The total width of the curb cut should not exceed Public Works standard curb cut maximum of 10 feet.<sup>5</sup>

In any instance where a proposed curb cut or garage door exceeds either of these dimensional requirements, the application will be routed upstairs for further review, where the burden will be upon the applicant to show that there are special circumstances that warrant larger dimensions, such as:

- Site Constraints. Is there a severe (1) lateral slope or (2) grade change in the front setback? Is the width of the lot or sidewalk atypical? The typical maximum slope for a driveway is about 20% with proper transitions at each end.
- Street Constraints. Is the width of the street prohibitively narrow such that maneuvering a standard automobile into the proposed garage is not possible?
- Limited Garage or Building Depth. When proposing a new multiple-space garage, could the garage be made deeper?
- On-street Parking Spaces. Does excessive curb cut or garage door width further decrease the number of available on-street parking spaces?
- Over-parking. Would the proposal result in the provision of more than one parking space per dwelling unit?

## REMOVAL OF STREET TREES

Removal of existing street trees to add a garage is discouraged. The addition of a new garage requires a new street tree.



The base of this historic projecting bay was adversely impacted for this garage. This treatment does not meet the criteria for inserting a garage within an existing structure.

## BUILDING EXPANSION

Would any exterior dimension of the structure be increased? If the building must be lifted to accommodate the garage, or if the proposal involves an exterior expansion, neighborhood notification may be required and the building permit application cannot be approved at the PIC. The application will be routed to a Planner for further review. If a garage is removed the curb cut must also be removed.

## INTERFERENCE WITH TRANSIT, BICYCLES, OR PEDESTRIANS

New or expanded garages or curb cuts that are located along Transit Preferential Streets or that would otherwise adversely transit stops, bicycle routes, or primary pedestrian streets cannot be approved over the counter. The application will be routed to a planner for further review.

ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLES

RIGHT: The property is not a good candidate for the insertion of a garage. The base of the building is short and constructing a garage would require the removal of character-defining features. Raising the building would significantly change its height and would adversely impact its overall design and its relationship to the street and its immediate neighbors.



ABOVE: In some cases adding a garage is discouraged because it would remove an existing mature street tree, require warping of the sidewalk and disrupt the character of a historic resource and the block pattern. In this case by eliminating of the base of bay and modification of the bay above would be a significant alteration to a character defining feature and pattern of the block.



ABOVE: This garage meets the criteria. The garage opening does not adversely impact the projecting bay above and has been designed to be the minimum width necessary in order to reduce the removal of historic material while maximizing landscaping within the front setback.

RIGHT: In this case a minor encroachment to warp the sidewalk was required.



# Additional Standards and Criteria for Historic Resources

The ongoing demand for off-street parking in San Francisco has created a serious challenge for its historic resources. This bulletin is written to ensure adequate and consistent review of the City's known and potential historic resources.

## CHARACTER-DEFINING FEATURES

Below is a list of the character-defining features that, if altered, may trigger additional Planning Department review. Please note that in some instances the insertion of a garage opening in a historic resource will not be approved.

### Architecture:

- Bays
- Decorative features
- Front entries

### Relationship to adjacent buildings and streetscape:

- Significant trees<sup>6</sup>
- Historic fences
- Historic pattern of development
- Historic Landscape

### Massing & Scale:

- Height
- Front Setbacks

## RAISING STRUCTURES

Generally, raising a historic resource to insert a garage opening is strongly discouraged when the act may render the building ineligible for the California or National Register. In some instances, raising a structure to insert a garage opening may be approved to avoid the removal of historic fabric as long as the integrity of the building and its original design, proportions, and relationship to adjacent buildings are not compromised.

## ADDITIONAL CRITERIA

In cases where a garage opening may be appropriate, great care should be taken in the design and execution of the work. In addition to the criteria set forth in this document, the following criteria apply to the review of new garages in historic resources.

- A garage opening should be inserted on the side or rear whenever possible. These "secondary elevations" have fewer character-defining features.
- A new opening and curb cut should be no larger than absolutely necessary while still meeting the requirements of the Building Code.
- All detailing, including garage doors, surrounds, and decorative features, should be compatible with the building's architectural features without creating a false sense of history.
- To avoid impacts to character-defining features, the project sponsor may explore obtaining a Minor Encroachment Permit (Section 723.2 of the Public Works Code) from Public Works (SFPW). This permit allows for the extension of the driveway into the public right-of-way and can lower the height of the garage door to avoid the removal of character-defining features. SFPW can be reached at (415) 554-5810.
- Garages should be designed to be inconspicuous so they do not project out from the front façade of the building; however, new garage structures in the front yard setback of steeply sloping lots or in retaining walls may be appropriate.
- Landscape improvements should be incorporated into the proposal to minimize the impact a new garage opening has on the building and the surrounding streetscape.

ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLES



ABOVE LEFT: To maximize landscaping within narrow front setbacks, consider a "Hollywood" driveway, as depicted above, or an open cell paver to allow for grass to grow through and to minimize stormwater runoff.

ABOVE RIGHT: The insertion of two separate garage openings that run the entire width of the building is not recommended because it erodes the public realm. Additionally, the width of the curb cut removes more street parking than necessary.

RIGHT: Historic fences, should be taken into consideration when proposing a new garage opening and should be salvaged and reinstalled as appropriate to preserve these rare historic features.



## NOTES

- 1 The Residential Design Guidelines, (December 2003) contain recommended standards for new garage openings and curb cuts on pages 34-36.
- 2 Should any street tree removal be proposed, the application would be routed upstairs for further review while a Street Tree Removal Permit is sought from the Bureau of Urban Forestry Division of the San Francisco Public Works (SFPW).
- 3 For purposes of this Bulletin, a Significant Tree is defined in Public Works Code Section 810A as a tree within 10 feet of the front property line which meets at least one of the following criteria: (a) a diameter at breast height (DBH) in excess of 12 inches, (b) a height in excess of 20 feet, or (c) a canopy in excess of 15 feet. Any removal of or impact to Significant Trees would result in the application being routed upstairs for further review while the applicant pursues required permits from SFPW.
- 4 This is a restatement of policies set forth in Zoning Administrator Bulletin 2. While ZA Bulletin 2 presents background information and establishes a policy foundation for the regulation of curb cuts, these guidelines expand on and supersede the policies contained in ZA Bulletin 2.
- 5 The Department's standard curb cut (7 feet across at the street level and 18 inch transition slopes [where the curb tapers down to the street] on either side) was established in Zoning Administrator Bulletin 2 and is reiterated on page 37 of the Residential Design Guidelines. This is a restatement of policies set forth in Zoning Administrator Bulletin 2. While ZA Bulletin 2 presents background information and establishes a policy foundation for the regulation of curb cuts, this bulletin expands on and supersedes the policies contained in ZA Bulletin 2.
- 6 See footnote 3.

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### FOR MORE INFORMATION: Contact the San Francisco Planning Department

**Central Reception**  
49 South Van Ness Avenue, Suite 1400  
San Francisco, CA 94103

TEL: **628.652.7600**  
WEB: **www.sfplanning.org**

**Planning counter at the Permit Center**  
49 South Van Ness Avenue, 2nd Floor  
San Francisco, CA 94103

EMAIL: **pic@sfgov.org**  
TEL: **628.652.7300**