

# Community Engagement: Frequently Asked Questions

## PUBLIC INFORMATION HANDOUT

The San Francisco Planning Department (SF Planning) is responsible for helping shape an inclusive City with more equitable, sustainable, and healthy communities. Part of this responsibility includes reviewing and approving development and land use projects. SF Planning encourages community engagement so people can participate in important changes in their neighborhoods and because development projects can affect different communities, especially communities of color and historically disenfranchised groups, in different ways. Successful community engagement can help build public awareness about important proposals, garner useful community feedback, shape projects in ways that make them more responsive to their neighborhoods, and lead to a more collaborative and streamlined review and approval process.

**This document includes information on community engagement for development projects, where and how it may happen, and resources to assist neighbors, community groups, and Project Applicants.**

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## What is Community Engagement?

Community engagement is the process of sharing information and gathering feedback from neighbors and community groups about proposed development projects. Effective and early community engagement increases people's understanding of projects and their potential neighborhood impacts, provides opportunities for them to share their comments, concerns, and priorities, and may lead to better projects overall. This can help create stronger neighbor relations, shape project development, and enhance the overall project approval processes. A proactive, inclusive, and accessible community engagement process can maximize benefits for all involved.



Photo by SF Planning

## Access to Information

### What development projects are happening near me?

- » You can learn about projects that are proposed in your area by checking the [Permits in My Neighborhood](#) website or the [Planning Information Map](#). You can also contact SF Planning with questions at [pic@sfgov.org](mailto:pic@sfgov.org).

### What do I do if I have questions, comments, or concerns about a development project?

- » To ask questions, learn more, or express concerns about a project, you can contact the Project Applicant or the staff planner by email or phone. Their contact information is on application materials, [online](#), and on the [Public Notice](#) materials. You may voice your comments and concerns to the Project Applicant and staff planner at any time – you do not have to wait for Public Notice or a Public Hearing. SF Planning encourages public feedback early in the process.

### How can someone get information in a language other than English?

- » In-language services are available upon request. If you have questions about a project or want help with a permit or review process, please contact [pic@sfgov.org](mailto:pic@sfgov.org) or 628-652-7300 and a staff planner will respond to your message in-language.
- » If you need translation services for a Public Hearing, please contact the Commission Secretary at [commissions.secretary@sfgov.org](mailto:commissions.secretary@sfgov.org) or 628-652-7589 at least 48 hours before the hearing.

### I have a disability, how can I get help attending a Public Hearing?

- » Disability accommodation services for Public Hearings are available upon request. Please contact the Commission Secretary at [commissions.secretary@sfgov.org](mailto:commissions.secretary@sfgov.org) or 628-652-7589 at least 72 hours before the hearing for assistance. Services like assistive listening devices, real time captioning, sign language interpreters, and large print agendas are available.



Photo by SF Planning

# Public Notices, Meetings, and Public Hearings

## What is a Public Notice?

- » SF Planning mails out [Public Notices](#) to neighbors and Registered Neighborhood Groups for certain types of development and land use projects and Public Hearings based on legal and Planning Code requirements. They are also [posted online](#). These notices are invitations to the public to provide comments, ask questions, or attend Public Hearings.
  - o Some smaller-scale projects, like expanding an existing building or house or changing a business, may require [Public Notice](#) before permits can be issued ([Planning Code Section 311](#)).
  - o Other larger-scale projects, like constructing a new building or starting a new business or office, may require a Public Hearing in addition to the [Public Notice](#) before permits can be issued ([Planning Code Section 333](#)).

## What should I do when I receive a Public Notice?

- » You do not have to do anything. If the Public Notice mentions a Public Hearing or Pre-Application Meeting, you do not have to attend. These notices are simply informing neighbors and Registered Neighborhood Groups about a project. If you want, you can provide comments or ask questions of the Project Applicant and staff planner, or you can attend the hearing or meeting.

## What are Pre-Application Meetings and when are they required?

- » [Pre-Application Meetings](#) are held early in the development process with adjacent neighbors and Registered Neighborhood Groups to get initial feedback about the project. They are required in some zoning districts for projects like expanding an existing building or house, constructing a new building, or starting a new office or chain business.
- » Pre-Application Meetings can be attended in-person or virtually. The meeting date, time, and location are on the Public Notices that are mailed out to residents and Registered Neighborhood Groups.

## What are Public Hearings and when are they required?

- » A Public Hearing is a gathering of City officials who review proposed projects, listen to public feedback, and make decisions on development, land use, and policy projects. They are not required for all projects. Public Hearings can be attended either in-person at City Hall or virtually. The hearing date, time, location, and website are on the Public Notices that are mailed out for projects.
- » SF Planning regularly has Public Hearings with the Planning Commission, Zoning Administrator, and Historic Preservation Commission. Typical projects and their required Public Hearings are:
  - o [Planning Commission](#): large new developments, demolishing a dwelling unit or residential building, entitlements, cannabis retailers, discretionary reviews, legislation
  - o [Zoning Administrator](#): projects that need a Variance (special exception from a Planning Code rule)
  - o [Historic Preservation Commission](#): projects that involve changes to historic properties, landmarks, and historic districts, the creation of new landmarks and legacy businesses, possible environmental impacts to historic resources

## When is there additional community engagement?

- » Project Applicants are sometimes asked to do [additional community engagement](#) beyond what is required because of the size, type, or location of projects. Staff planners, as well as Commissioners or elected officials, ask for this extra outreach so that projects can move forward in the most inclusive and efficient way possible. Potential concerns can be identified, and feasible solutions worked on to avoid neighborhood conflict and project delays.
- » Project Applicants may have outreach events, informal meetings, or discussions with neighbors and community groups as part of their additional community engagement. These are hosted by the Project Applicant and not facilitated by SF Planning; City staff does not attend these meetings. The Project Applicant is responsible for providing logistical information about these additional events.



# Community Input on Projects

## Do all projects require the same level of community engagement?

- » No, not all projects require the same level of engagement. Usually, smaller projects that need simple building permits or limited environmental review are not expected to have community engagement. Sometimes larger-scale projects or projects of high community interest can include extensive community engagement in conjunction with key milestones throughout the project review process.

## Why do some housing projects have different community engagement processes?

- » As part of local and state-wide efforts to address the housing crisis, new processes have been created to expedite permit approvals and increase housing production. In exchange for providing additional affordable housing, these programs allow exemptions from some Planning Code rules like meeting certain height, size, and density requirements. They also can limit how projects are reviewed and what changes can be made by SF Planning. The [Housing homepage for SF Planning](#) has more information about these programs, including [HOME-SF](#) and [State Density Bonus](#).
- » Because of these limits, concerns expressed by the community cannot always be accommodated. Nonetheless, Project Applicants for these types of projects are expected to work with neighbors, community groups, and interested parties as much as possible.

## I represent a community group; how can we get more involved with projects in my neighborhood?

- » Engagement between community groups and Project Applicants is encouraged. The best way to ensure that your group is contacted about projects in your area is to sign up for the [Registered Neighborhood Groups list](#) through this [application form](#). All the groups on this list receive Public Notices and are invited to attend Pre-Application Meetings for projects in their neighborhoods.

- » Individuals or groups may also request custom project notifications. They can set up a free [BuildingEye](#) notification to be alerted about projects within a set area. They can also pay for a [Block Book Notification \(BBN\)](#) to be alerted about projects on individual properties. BBNs can be set up so that project and permit review is put on hold while the individual or group is contacted by staff planners.

## How do I share my concerns about a project?

- » If you have concerns about a project, you can contact the Project Applicant or staff planner. Project Applicants, neighbors, and community groups should collaboratively work toward a project that is acceptable to all parties. While this can involve neighbors asking for changes, not all requested changes may ultimately be incorporated into a project.
- » If a project complies with applicable development rules like height, depth, and density or is “Code compliant”, it may be approved even if you do not like it. For example, sunlight, air, and views from private property are not protected so they could be blocked by new development.

## What if I am strongly opposed to a project?

- » If, after talking with the Project Applicant and working with the staff planner, you are still strongly opposed to a project, you can file a [Discretionary Review \(DR\)](#) or an Appeal. These are official requests for the [Planning Commission](#), [Board of Appeals](#), or the [Board of Supervisors](#) to consider changing a building permit, development or land use project, or an environmental document at a Public Hearing.
- » For both Discretionary Reviews and Appeals, the person who filed the objection is responsible for proving the basis and need for the requested changes.

## Guidance for Your Own Project

### Why do I have to tell the neighbors about my home renovation?

- » Most projects that involve expanding a building, including single-family homes and many other residential properties, are required to have a [Pre-Application Meeting](#) and [Public Notice](#). This includes projects like adding a rear addition or another story to your home. SF Planning encourages Project Applicants to talk with their neighbors early in the development process.

### Who in the community should I talk to about my project?

- » Different levels of community engagement are appropriate for different projects. If your project is required to have a [Pre-Application Meeting](#), [Public Notice](#), or a Public Hearing, at minimum you will have to follow the applicable notification, hearing, and engagement rules. It is always important to talk with close-by neighbors. For larger projects and projects that require Public Hearings, like constructing a new building or starting a new office or chain business, more robust engagement is helpful, including talking with community groups. You can use the [Registered Neighborhood Group List](#) to find and contact community groups in your area. You may also ask staff planners for guidance or refer to the Community Engagement Guidelines.

### Why did SF Planning ask me to do additional community engagement?

- » Project Applicants are sometimes asked to do additional community engagement because of the size, type, location, or public interest of projects. Planning staff, as well as Commissioners or elected officials, ask for this extra outreach so projects can move forward in the most inclusive and efficient way possible and hopefully avoid neighborhood conflict and costly delays.
- » In addition, neighbors and community groups sometimes contact staff planners to request information or participate in the community engagement process for projects in their neighborhood. The goal of this additional engagement is to inform community members of projects in their area, identify potential concerns, and work to create feasible solutions.

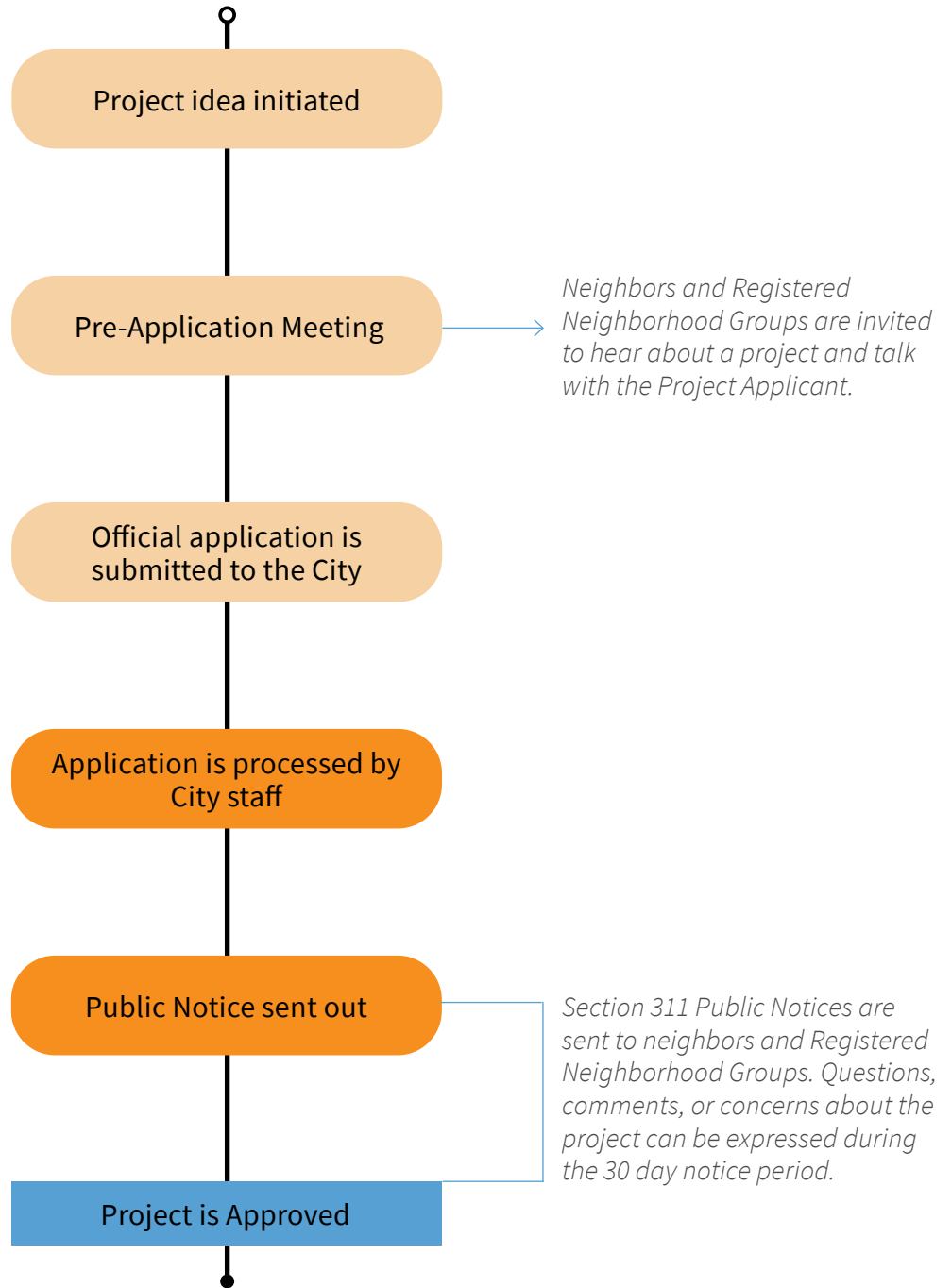


Photo by SF Planning

# Project Process: Typical Small Development

**Typical “small projects” may include expanding an existing building, constructing a new house, or changing or starting a new business.**

Members of the public can contact the Project Applicant and staff planners with questions or comments at any time throughout the process.

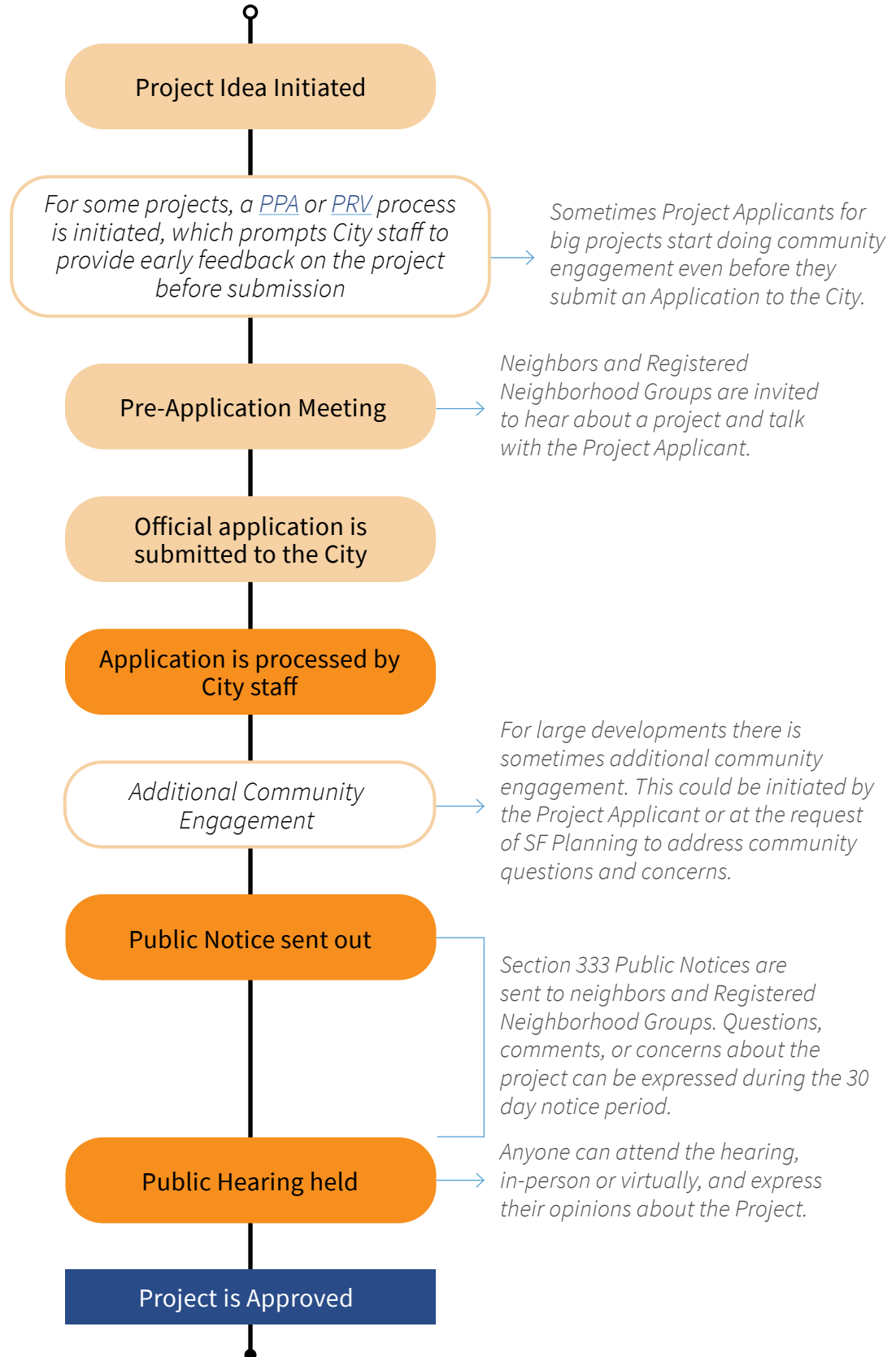


- Project Applicant Task
- SF Planning Task

# Project Process: Typical Large Development

**Typical “large projects” may include constructing a new building or multi-family housing, opening an office or chain business, or proposed legislation.**

Members of the public can contact the Project Applicant and staff planners with questions or comments at any time throughout the process.



- Project Applicant Task
- SF Planning Task



# Resources

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## Public Procedure Information:

- o [Pre-Application Meeting](#)
- o [311 Neighborhood Notification/Public Notice](#)
- o [333 Public Hearing Notice](#)
- o [Planning Commission & Hearing Procedures](#)
- o [Zoning Administrator & Hearing Procedures](#)
- o [Historic Preservation Commission & Hearing Procedures](#)
- o [Environmental Review Officer & Hearing Procedures](#)

## Community Engagement & Informational Resources:

- o [Community Engagement Recommendations for Development Project Applicants](#)
- o [Registered Neighborhood Group List](#)
- o [Planning Information Map](#)
- o [Permits in My Neighborhood](#)
- o [Public Notices for Project Applications](#)
- o [Public Information Counter](#)
- o [Community Equity Division](#)
- o [Racial & Social Equity Action Plan](#)
- o [Community Development & Engagement](#)

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**San Francisco**  
**Planning**

### FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Call or visit the San Francisco Planning Department

#### Central Reception

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

TEL: **628.652.7600**

WEB: **<https://www.sfplanning.org>**

#### Planning counter at the Permit Center

49 South Van Ness Avenue, 2<sup>nd</sup> Floor  
San Francisco CA 94103

TEL: **628.652.7300**

*Planning staff are available by phone and at the Planning counter. No appointment is necessary.*