

## 2H

In Housing Element policy (H-P28/H-P29)

**Humboldt County's approach to *Objective Development/Design Standards (ODS)*** based on publicly available planning policies, state law context, and what Humboldt County has signaled in its planning documents:

### 1. What “Objective Standards” Mean

- **Objective standards** are defined (consistent with California state law) as *standards that involve no personal or subjective judgment and are uniformly verifiable by reference to an external and uniform benchmark or criterion*. This is the definition the county uses in its Housing Element policies.

### 2. General Plan Policy Direction

- In the **Humboldt County General Plan**, there's a clear policy directive to adopt objective standards when updating zoning and development regulations. For example:
  - The County commits to adopting objective standards in zoning and design review to *improve clarity and predictability* for both developers and the community.
  - The general plan includes implementation measures to review and update design review standards, potentially replacing subjective processes with more objective criteria.

### 3. Purpose of Objective Standards

Objective design and development standards in Humboldt County are meant to:

- **Make review of housing and development proposals more predictable and transparent** by using clear, measurable criteria rather than subjective design judgments.
- **Comply with California state housing laws**, which increasingly require objective standards for certain types of housing approvals to enable streamlined permitting (e.g., under SB 35, SB 330, SB 9). State law generally limits local governments' use of subjective standards for many residential and mixed-use projects.

### 4. Design Review vs Objective Standards

- Humboldt County's existing county code contains traditional *design review provisions* (for areas with a “D” combining zone) that are **discretionary and subjective**, focusing on compatibility with community character and views.
- The move to *objective* standards is part of a broader planning update process. These objective standards would be standards that staff and applicants can measure (e.g., numeric setbacks, heights, facade treatment rules) rather than relying on subjective judgments by reviewers.

## 5. Community and Planning Process

- Humboldt County has engaged the public in discussions about objective design standards, noting that community input, state law, and county values will help shape the standards. Once adopted, these standards should apply to eligible projects in unincorporated areas and be used to evaluate compliance in a more predictable, verifiable way.

## 6. What Is Included

While specific local “ODS” texts for Humboldt County aren’t publicly indexed in one single ordinance and include objective design and development standards that cover:

- **Site planning elements** (setbacks, parking location, circulation),
- **Building form elements** (height, massing, articulation),
- **Landscaping standards** and buffers,
- **Facade and architectural components** (transparency, modulation),
- and other criteria that can be *quantified or explicitly defined*. These are similar to what other California jurisdictions adopt to ensure compliance with state streamlined review requirements.

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### In essence

**Humboldt County’s ODS policy** (as reflected in its planning documents) is about shifting from subjective design review toward *clear, measurable, and objective criteria* that implement the General Plan and comply with state housing law requirements. The objective standards are intended to make development review more predictable and timely, reduce discretionary judgment where possible, and align local standards with state mandates for housing development.

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## The County Has *Policy Direction* on Objective Standards

Humboldt County’s **2019 Housing Element** (part of the General Plan) explicitly directs that:

- When the County **amends zoning regulations** for residential zoning, uses, or standards, it should **adopt objective standards** to improve clarity and predictability for both the community and developers.
- “Objective standard” is defined to mean zoning, subdivision, or design review standards that **involve no personal or subjective judgment** by a public official and are **uniformly**

**verifiable by reference to an external, uniform benchmark or criterion** known in advance to both the applicant and the official.

This policy comes from *H-P28/H-P29: Streamline Housing Review and Approval* in the Housing Element.

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## What This Policy *Means*

The purpose of this policy is to align Humboldt County’s development standards with California housing laws that require clear, objective criteria (e.g., for streamlined housing approvals under laws like SB 35 and others). Objective standards help make permitting **more predictable** and **less discretionary** than traditional design review.

- *Objective design standards* should be checklists, numeric thresholds, or quantifiable criteria (e.g., setbacks, building spacing, facade transparency, landscaping minimums) that staff can verify without subjective judgment.
  - These differ from *subjective design guidelines*, which require interpretation of style or compatibility. (This is the general legal distinction under state housing law.)
  - The county has **zoning and planning code sections** (e.g., design review provisions) that remain in the code, but those are **not the modern objective standards** described by the housing element policy.
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- **General plan policy language** requiring objective standards in future zoning amendments.
- **County design review zones** (the “D” combining zone) which remain discretionary and subjective in the code (not the same as ODS).