



CITY OF SALINAS PLANNING COMMISSION REPORT

DATE: OCTOBER 15, 2025

TO: PLANNING COMMISSION

FROM: COURTNEY GROSSMAN, PLANNING MANAGER

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TITLE: STUDY SESSION: PLANNING 101 (NAVIGATING THE DEVELOPMENT REVIEW PROCESS)

RECOMMENDED MOTION:

No action required. Receive a presentation on Planning 101 (Navigating the Development Review Process).

DISCUSSION:

On October 1, 2025, Senior Planner, Jonathan Moore presented an Overview and Hierarchy of Planning Documents and Zoning Code Update Engagement Plan. Today's study session will focus on Planning 101: *Navigating the Development Review Process*. The next study session is scheduled for November 5, 2025, when City Attorney Chris Callahan will provide an overview of the role of a Planning Commissioner.

Overview of Planning 101

Current Planning, a division of the Community Development Department focuses on the day-to-day regulatory and development review activities that guide how land is used and developed in the short term. Duties include processing and reviewing of development applications to ensure compliance with the City's General Plan, Zoning Ordinance and other applicable plans, regulations and standards. Current Planning ensure all development projects go through the environmental analysis process pursuant to The California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), the state law, that requires public agencies to evaluate and disclose the environmental impacts of proposed projects before approval. This study session will focus on the role of Current Planning Division in processing various development applications and reviewing common planning terminology.

Types of Applications

- General Plan Amendment
- Zoning Code Amendments
- Zone Variances
- Planned Unit Development Permits
- Tentative Maps
- Parcel Maps
- Conditional Use Permits
- Site Plan Reviews
- Temporary Use of Land Permits
- Home Occupation Permits
- Master Sign Plans and Sign Permits

Terminology, Permits & Entitlements

Permits: These are official approvals issued by local governmental authorities that allow individuals or businesses to engage in specific activities, such as construction, modification, or demolition. Permits ensure compliance with health, safety, and building code standards. Common types of permits include building permits and occupancy permits. Permits are typically ministerial decisions, granted if the application meets all established criteria. Ministerial decisions are based on whether they meet all established standards and regulations. These decisions do not involve personal judgment or interpretation.

Land Use Entitlements: This term refers to the legal rights granted by local government authorities to property owners or developers to use land for specific purposes, such as residential, commercial, or industrial development. The entitlement may often involve public hearings and community engagement, allowing stakeholders to voice their opinions on proposed developments. In some cases, environmental analysis under California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) would be required. In general land use entitlements are typically discretionary decisions, not ministerial ones. Discretionary decisions require interpretation, personal judgment or policy evaluation by planning staff, commissions, or elected officials.

Many of the projects within the City's jurisdiction will require a Site Plan Review, Conditional Use Permit, and/or a Planned Unit Development Permit.

Site Plan Review

Purpose:

- a) Provide a streamlined administrative review process for verifying a project's compliance

- with this Zoning Code's development, design, and use standards; and
- b) Assure landowners, business owners, and developers that proposed uses, structures, and site improvements comply with the provisions of this Zoning Code before preparation of plans for building permits.

Conditional Use Permit

Purpose:

- a) Provide flexibility in the application of land use and development regulations necessary to achieve the purposes of the Zoning Code by establishing procedures for the approval, conditional approval, or disapproval of minor, administrative, and non-administrative conditional use permit applications; and
- b) To ensure that use classifications that typically have unusual site development features or operating characteristics receive special consideration so that they will be designed, located, and operated in a manner, which is compatible with uses on adjoining properties and in the surrounding area.

Planned Unit Development Permits

Purpose:

- a) Provide a process for the development of land in order to reduce design rigidity that otherwise would result from strict application of zoning standards and procedures designed primarily for small parcels;
- b) Ensure orderly and thorough planning and review procedures that will result in quality urban design;
- c) Encourage variety and avoid monotony in developments by allowing greater freedom in selecting the means to provide access, light, open space, and amenities;
- d) Encourage the assembly of properties that might otherwise be developed in unrelated increments to the detriment of surrounding neighborhoods and commercial and industrial areas; and
- e) Allow freedom of design in order to obtain developments which will be a community asset or environmentally superior by equaling or surpassing the quality required by strict application of the zoning regulations.

Application Processing Steps

1. *Where to start?* Applicants start by completing the Development Review Application, Checklist and Operational/Environmental Statement. The application should be accompanied by plans (site plan, floor plans, and elevations). Prior to submittal, applicants may request to speak to a planner prior to submittal. This can be done by an appointment with the planner of the day, or the applicant may also pay a fee to request a meeting with the DRC (Departmental Review Committee). The DRC is comprised of staff from Fire,

Engineering, Building, Housing and Planning and can provide additional feedback prior to application submittal.

2. *Who do they submit it to?* Applications are submitted to: Currplanwebmail@ci.salinas.ca.us
3. *Who will process the application?* Once submitted, a planner will review the application for compliance with the Zoning Code and other applicable regulations. The planner will look at the use classification table and development standards table for the applicable zoning district. Depending on the type of application, the planner would review the application (development projects) for “completeness” subject to the Permit Streamlining Act. The Permit Streamlining Act ensure that the government jurisdiction has 30 days after an application is submitted in which to inform the applicant of whether the application is complete.
4. *What is a ministerial vs. a discretionary action?* A ministerial action would not require environmental review under California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) nor would it be subject to the Permit Streamlining Act. Ministerial projects require approval if it meets the applicable code. However, if it’s a discretionary permit, then it would require CEQA review, and would be subject to the Permit Streamlining Act.
5. *When does a project require a public notice and a public hearing?* A project would go to hearing depending on the requirements outlined in the zoning code for that specific type of entitlement. For example, the Zoning Code specifies that the City Planner has the authority to approve a Conditional Use Permit for certain types of alcohol related uses.
6. *What is categorical exemption?* Most projects do not require a public hearing because they are considered “exempt” under CEQA. CEQA guidelines include categorical exemptions, such as the infill development exemption, also known as Class 32 Categorical Exemption(CEQA Exemption 15332). For example:

Class 32 consists of projects characterized as in-fill development meeting the conditions described in this section.

- (a) The project is consistent with the applicable general plan designation and all applicable general plan policies as well as with applicable zoning designation and regulations.
- (b) The proposed development occurs within city limits on a project site of no more than five acres substantially surrounded by urban uses.
- (c) The project site has no value, as habitat for endangered, rare or threaten species.
- (d) Approval of the project would not result in any significant effects relating to traffic, noise, air quality, or water quality.
- (e) The site can be adequately served by all required utilities and public services.

State Driven Regulations/Housing Crisis in CA

Due to the high demand for housing in California, especially affordable housing, the State's Legislative branch has initiated new senate and assembly bills that aim to streamline housing development and reducing barriers to eliminate a lengthy entitlement process. These bills include Senate Bill (SB)330 also known as the Housing Crisis Act of 2019. The City is currently applying SB330 to several subdivisions in the future growth areas.

Other new bills include SB 9, SB 35, SB 131, and Assembly Bill (AB)130. The intent of these bills is to eliminate red tape and streamline the approval process for the public and developers to obtain the proper permits or entitlements. City staff must strike a careful balance between ensuring full compliance with CEQA and other land use regulations, while also identifying opportunities to streamline the permitting and entitlement process.