



A Guide to Planning Project Reviews

- Purpose of planning project reviews
- An overview of the process
- Forms and submittal requirements

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1. Welcome to the City of El Cajon

Dear Prospective Developer or Business Owner:

On behalf of the City Council and City Staff, we would like to thank you for your interest in investing in the City of El Cajon, California. The process of permitting and development can be daunting, and we see our role as helping applicants through the City's process.

The City of El Cajon understands that time is money in the permitting and development of property. We also know that consistency, timeliness, professionalism, and helpfulness in the process are critical to your business planning and success. With this in mind, the City of El Cajon continually reviews its policies and procedures to ensure that our requirements are appropriate and our development staff is as skilled and helpful as possible. Our discretionary project reviews include performance timelines.

El Cajon is truly business-friendly and your project is special to us, regardless of its size. We are here to work with you and consider ourselves partners in your success.

Sincerely,

Anthony Shute, AICP
Director of Community Development

2. How is My Project Subject to Planning Review?

The City of El Cajon plans and regulates the use of land to protect the public health, safety and general welfare; promote economic development; provided limited protection for investments in private property; and plan for public infrastructure. The state requires the City to have a General Plan, which expresses the community's goals and policies for land use. In essence, the [General Plan](#) is an expression of the City's vision for how it will develop, shown visually in its [land use map](#). From the General Plan comes various regulations to implement it, including a [zoning map](#) and [zoning code](#), along with the [subdivision code](#). Existing area- or site-specific regulations may also apply to a property, including a Specific Plan, [Gillespie Field Airport Land Use Compatibility Plan](#), and similar regulatory plans. Because the use of land is regulated, the City must review all projects against this policy and regulatory framework. Additionally, the state requires all projects to undergo environmental review, pursuant to the [California Environmental Quality Act \(CEQA\)](#), unless a finding can be made to exempt the project. In recent years, as the City has fully urbanized, nearly 90 percent of projects have been found exempt from CEQA.

The planning review process applies to all projects requiring some level of action, including legislative decisions, discretionary and administrative permits. Discretionary refers to projects that involve a level of judgment and discretion by the decision-maker in taking action to approve, approve with conditions or deny a project, with findings. Depending on the level of review, a decision-maker may be the Director of Community Development, Director of Public Works, Planning Commission or City Council. About three-quarters of the discretionary projects in El Cajon require public review. Two-thirds of those projects require City Council action as part of the public review process.

3. Project Review Levels

REVIEW LEVEL	TYPE OF ACTION	DECISION-MAKER	MAXIMUM REVIEW CYCLES ¹	STAFF REVIEW TIMES ^{2, 3, 4}	APPLICANT RESPONSE TIMES ⁵	TOTAL PROCESS TIME ⁶
Level 1-EZ	Easy Ministerial Permits <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eligible over-the-counter permits 	Staff	1	Cycle 1: same day	None	Same day
Level 1-S	Simple Ministerial Actions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Building permits <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Tenant improvement ○ Residential addition • Signs • Business License • Tobacco License • Special Operation License • Freeway-oriented Sign – Director level approval • Landscape Documentation Package • Temporary Use Permit • Temporary Subdivision Sign 	Staff	1	Cycle 1: 2 weeks	None	1 – 2 weeks
Level 1-C	Complex Ministerial Actions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All permits within SP-182 area • Building permits <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ New construction ○ Storm water requirements triggered • Substantial Conformance Review 	Staff	2	Cycle 1: 3 weeks Cycle 2: 2 weeks	Cycle 1: 2 weeks	3 – 6 weeks
Level 2	Minor Subdivision Actions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tentative Parcel Map (timeline per Chapter 16.24; discretionary action) • Lot Line Adjustment (timeline per Chapter 16.34; ministerial action) • Final Parcel Map (ministerial action) • Certificate of Compliance (ministerial action) 	City Engineer or Community Development Director	2	Cycle 1: 3 weeks Cycle 2: 2 weeks	Cycle 1: 2 weeks	3 – 7 weeks

REVIEW LEVEL	TYPE OF ACTION	DECISION-MAKER	MAXIMUM REVIEW CYCLES ¹	STAFF REVIEW TIMES ^{2, 3, 4}	APPLICANT RESPONSE TIMES ⁵	TOTAL PROCESS TIME ⁶
Level 3	Administrative Permits (Discretionary & Ministerial) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • AZP • SDP • Minor Amendment • Minor Use Permit 	Community Development Director	3	Cycle 1: 4 weeks Cycle 2: 2 weeks Cycle 3: 1 week	Cycle 1: 2 weeks Cycle 2: 1 week	4 – 10 weeks
Level 4	Discretionary Permits <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CUP • Minor CUP • Variance • Vesting Tentative Parcel Map (Minor Subdivision) • Expansion of nonconforming use or structure • Certificate of Modification • Adult entertainment permit 	Planning Commission	3	Cycle 1: 4 weeks Cycle 2: 3 weeks Cycle 3: 2 weeks	Cycle 1: 3 weeks Cycle 2: 2 weeks	4 – 14 weeks
Level 5	Legislative, Policy Planning, Regulatory and Discretionary Permits <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General Plan amendment • Zoning Reclassification • Zoning code amendment • Specific Plan • PRD • PUD • Tentative Map (Major Subdivision) • Vesting Tentative Map (Major Subdivision) • Final Map (Major Subdivision) • Reversion to Acreage • Certificate of Correction or Amending Map • Discretionary permits for sites with inconsistent General Plan and zoning • Historic Resource Designation 	City Council	3	Cycle 1: 4 weeks Cycle 2: 3 weeks Cycle 3: 2 weeks	Cycle 1: 3 weeks Cycle 2: 2 weeks	10 – 14 weeks

REVIEW LEVEL	TYPE OF ACTION	DECISION-MAKER	MAXIMUM REVIEW CYCLES ¹	STAFF REVIEW TIMES ^{2, 3, 4}	APPLICANT RESPONSE TIMES ⁵	TOTAL PROCESS TIME ⁶
Level CIP	CEQA for City Projects Separate of Entitlements <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Negative Declaration • Mitigated Negative Declaration • Environmental Impact Report, etc. 	City Council	3	Project Driven	Project Driven	Project Driven

1. Additional cycle reviews required for a project deemed incomplete. New issues should not be identified in subsequent cycle reviews unless it is the direct result of a change made by the applicant in response to a prior comment or due to applicant-initiated changes to the project description.
2. Schedule is based on a finding that the project is exempt from CEQA. If additional CEQA review is required, the schedule will be estimated with the first cycle review letter. Schedules for annexations and other special legislative actions will be project driven. Gillespie Field Airport Land Use Compatibility Plan consistency determination may increase review time.
3. Assumes no lengthy community, agency or legal issues requiring extraordinary time or resources to resolve.
4. Only the minimum number of cycles necessary to act on the project will be required. Fewer cycle reviews will reduce overall processing time.
5. If a complete response to a cycle review is not provided within 90 days, the project will be deemed dormant. A project stale for one year will be deemed to not be diligently processed and will be closed out following a 30-day notice.
6. Appeals will require additional processing time and are pursuant to ECMC Chapter 17.30.
7. Certain actions of the Planning Commission require transmittal of its report to the City Council within a timeframe specified in Title 16 and Title 17 of the ECMC.

4. The Process

Introduction

A process has been established for guiding your project through planning review. The process includes five basic steps:

- Step 1: Pre-submittal application
- Step 2: Formal Application Submittal
- Step 3: Staff and Agency Review
- Step 4: Public Hearing or Administrative Decision
- Step 5: Follow-up

This is not intended to be a one-size-fits-all approach. Simple projects, such as a Minor Conditional Use Permit involving no physical development, could undergo fewer reviews and be processed more quickly.

Applications are now primarily processed online through the City's Project Assistance Center Online (PACO). You may register and log-in to a PACO account on the City's website here: [PACO](#). In addition to processing your application, PACO also allows for invoice payments, record searches, and inspection requests.

After submitting an application, a project manager is assigned to manage your project through the process and will be your single point of contact. The project manager facilitates the review, corresponds with the project applicant or designated representative.

Step 1: Pre-submittal application

The purpose of a pre-submittal application is to provide you an opportunity to review your project with City staff in a preliminary form to finalize submittal requirements and receive a cursory identification of potential issues. A pre-submittal application is required unless waived by staff.

The pre-submittal application will generally be processed in 7-14 days by applicable City departments and divisions. There is no fee for this review. Benefits include increasing the likelihood that your application will be deemed complete following submittal and assuring that your consultants prepare only the necessary application materials. These benefits reduce overall processing time and costs.

Step 2: Formal Application Submittal

After completing a pre-submittal, City staff will create your formal application in PACO, identify required application materials, and create an invoice for payment of fees. A formal application submittal will not be processed until applicable fees are paid. The application materials are initially reviewed to determine if the quality and completeness is sufficient to begin the next step. Therefore, if all the required application materials are not provided when submitted or the quality is inadequate, the application may be deemed incomplete by staff.

Step 3: Staff and Agency Review

After your formal application submittal is accepted, a project manager is assigned. The application is then prepared to be referred out to other City departments and outside agencies for review. Sometimes a project may be referred to community organizations. 30 days is the typical requested response deadline to referral comments.

During the referral period, the project manager conducts a review of the project against City policies and regulations. Referral comments are consolidated and conflicting comments needing to be reconciled are flagged for resolution in a cycle review letter. Within the first 30-days from application intake, the project manager makes a determination for completeness, pursuant to the Permit Streamlining Act (General Plan and zoning amendments are legislative actions not subject to the PSA, but the City uses the same process for these types of projects). For all development projects a Notice of Application is sent to all property owners and tenants within three hundred feet of the subject property informing them of the project and providing an opportunity to comment after a project is deemed complete.

After the 30-day completeness check, staff may prepare a cycle review letter for some projects. The goal is that this letter identifies all the issues to address with the project. The applicant may contact the project manager to review the comments prior to making a resubmittal. A response letter to the comments from the applicant is recommended to be provided with the resubmittal. Occasionally, the cycle review letter may note that a subsequent submittal is not necessary for projects with minor issues. In order to ensure a streamlined process the project manager will communicate project application deficiencies and cycle review issues with the applicant, the applicant's representative, and property owner.

A CEQA determination is also made concurrently with the completeness check. If the City finds that the project is not exempt from CEQA, a determination on the type of environmental document required will be made after the 30-day completeness check during a subsequent 30-day period. A cycle review letter will be provided about the CEQA determination, specific submittal requirements and a tentative schedule.

Step 4: Public Hearing or Administrative Decision

Following the staff and agency review process, the project is scheduled for a public hearing or administrative decision, as applicable. A public hearing notice is prepared by staff for Level 4 and 5 projects. A public hearing notice is not provided or required for administrative discretionary permits (Levels 2 and 3). A staff report and resolution and/or ordinance, as applicable, are prepared. The applicant has no role or input in the preparation of these documents. However, the applicant may be asked to provide images for a PowerPoint presentation for a public hearing. It is strongly recommended that the applicant and/or representative appear at the Planning Commission and City Council hearings, as applicable. Since there is no hearing on administrative decisions, the applicant does not participate. Depending on the project and review level, certain appeal periods apply. The Planning Commission or City Council may continue the project to a later meeting date, if a representative is not available to answer questions.

For Level 4 reviews, the Planning Commission will hear the request along with the staff recommendation and any public testimony. It will then make a decision to approve, approve with conditions or deny the request. Within ten days after the Planning Commission has adopted a resolution stating its decision and filed a copy of the resolution with the City Clerk, the applicant or any interested person disagreeing with the decision of the Planning Commission may appeal that decision to the City Council. The appeal filing fee must be paid upon submission of the appeal forms to the City Clerk. If the Planning Commission's decision is appealed, the City Clerk will schedule the appeal for a public hearing by the City Council. The City Council will either concur with or modify the Planning Commission's decision and the decision of the City Council is final. If the requested permit or action requires approval of the City Council—processed as a Level 5 review—the Planning Commission will make a recommendation to the City Council regarding the request. The item will then be forwarded to the City Council for final action.

Step 5: Follow-up

Once the discretionary review process has concluded with an approval or conditional approval, the project has gained entitlements to proceed, but additional follow-up activities are needed. This includes staff filing a Notice of Exemption or Notice of Determination, pursuant to CEQA. The applicant must submit revised plans for staff review that address the conditions of approval. Staff will clean out the file and retain documents according to state law and the City's Records Retention Policy—once following entitlements and again after final inspections, if the project is implemented. Please note that most entitlements have an expiration date if not legally exercised within a certain time period.

Instructions, Forms and Checklists

- [Planning Permit Application](#)
- [Supplemental Forms](#)
- [Fee Schedule](#)
- [Economic Development Information](#)

All documents linked in this guidebook are available on the City's website and at the Project Assistance Center during normal business hours.