

**Planning & Zoning
Committee of the
MidCoast
Community Council**
PO Box 64, Moss Beach
CA 94038
Serving 12,000 residents

June 15, 2005

FAX/Email

San Mateo County Board of Supervisors
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**RE: Planning & Building Task Force Recommendations
for the Improvements of the Division and its Service to the
Public.** Hearing Date: June 21, 2005

Dear President Gordon, Vice-President Hill, Supervisors Church, Jacobs Gibson and Tissier:

The Planning and Zoning Committee of the MidCoast Community Council reviewed the Planning & Building Task Force Recommendations on June 15, 2005 as an Urgency Item during its regularly scheduled Planning and Zoning meeting.

We truly appreciate the work of Supervisor Richard Gordon and Supervisor Adrienne Tissier, Co-Chairs of this Task Force, and their initiative in trying to improve the service of the Planning and Building Division.

We also agree with the Recommendations that the staff of the Planning & Building Division is extremely dedicated and talented, and our comments are in no way to be construed as a criticism of any staff members. Our suggestions are aimed at the process and not the people involved.

In reviewing the Recommendations, we find most of the recommendations to be laudable goals, but overall these recommendations can only be followed if the Division has extremely well-trained staff who have the resources available to them to correctly inform the public of the rules governing building here on the coastside and to enforce those rules. If a person has all the correct information and rules in the beginning of the process, then they can follow the rules and get their project completed in a timely manner. To this end we have the following comments:

- Staff that accepts a project as "complete," should raise the bar as to what constitutes a "complete" project. We have often seen projects at Planning & Zoning that are missing key elements such as a landscape plan, drainage plans or lighting plans or that are in violation of key zoning or design review guidelines. If these projects had been caught at the beginning of the process and deemed "incomplete," then this would save a lot of frustration and time on the part of the applicants who feel abused when they have to keep returning to P&Z or CDRC or when the first time they hear about a building requirement is when they are at CDRC. This would also save a lot of county staff time by having the projects be truly "complete" before being accepted for further review.
- The County should take a more straightforward and consistent approach to following the zoning rules and the Design Review Guidelines. This would send a consistent

message to builders and also would simplify things for builders and community members because everyone would know what to expect when a house is being built.

- To help make the rules more straightforward, there should be a reorganization of all the zoning regulations and other applicable rules, so they can be more user-friendly. Applicable rules for each zoning area should be linked together.
- As the bulk of the new projects and permits are for items on the coast, we would like to revive the idea of a satellite Planning & Building office on the coast. This was being seriously considered a few years back, but dropped because of budgetary constraints. One experienced planner and a set of books could get a lot of extremely useful work with applicants done, even with limited hours.

We also have a few comments regarding the specific recommendations:

- On page 18 of the Recommendations, the Task Force recommends:

Standardize review period by outside agencies - Many outside agencies have the power to review planning applications and building permits. These agencies, such as Public Works, County Fire, Water and Sewer agencies, or County Advisory Councils, all perform these functions to ensure that projects are designed and built with the best safety and health practices in mind, to ensure harmony with existing communities, and preserve the value of land. These outside agencies do not have set times by which they are required to finish their review of pending applications. Without set times, outside agencies could potentially delay projects indefinitely. A 45 calendar-day review period from the time of submittal of the application to an outside review committee, is an acceptable amount of time for any group to meet and make comments. If the outside review agency has not communicated recommendations to Planning, the project should be deemed reviewed as submitted, and approved if applicable. (emphasis added.)

Focusing on the final underlined sentence, the requirements of Special Districts and the applicable laws need to be considered. For example, a house cannot be approved without sewer, water, and public access because it would violate the Subdivision Map Act. Furthermore while the County can impose timelines on its County Advisory Councils, the County may not be able to impose timelines on Special Districts which are separate legal entities. Rather than attempt to dictate timelines to Special Districts, the County should work with the Special Districts to create a mutually agreeable schedule for responding to planning & building applications.

- On page 18 of the Recommendations, the Task Force recommends:

Make all outside review of projects concurrent- As it stands, much of the review done by outside agencies and design review bodies is done one after another – each agency reviews the project, then passes it to the next.

This has resulted in substantial delays in permitting. Projects must be reviewed concurrently by all bodies, allowing for a more timecertain outcome for applicants.

Currently much of the review by outside agencies is initiated concurrently, but the design review bodies are the final decision-makers because they accept or reject the final design of the project. To have the design review bodies review the project concurrently is impractical because often the outside agencies have specific requirements such as driveway profiles or fire turn-arounds that significantly impact the design of the project and may require changes to the submitted design. Therefore by necessity, the design review agencies must be the final decision point and must review the project after the outside agencies have made their recommendations, because otherwise you will have design changes occurring after a project has been approved by design review and this will necessitate a return to design review or will undermine the whole purpose behind design review.

Finally, as acknowledged in the title of the Task Force Recommendations, the Planning and Building Division provides service to "the Public" and not just the builders and developers. The right to public notice and public review are an important part of the fabric of our society and the democratic process. These democratic rights should not be undermined or forgotten in the name of "efficiency."

Again, we appreciate the work done by this Task Force, and the Planning and Zoning Committee will do our part to improve efficiencies in the planning and building process so long as these efficiencies do not denigrate the existing rules nor the environment of the coastside.

Thank you so much for your attention to this matter.

For the MidCoast Community Council Planning & Zoning Committee,



Sara Bassler
Chair, MCC Planning & Zoning Committee