



County of San Diego

RESIDENTIAL SUBDIVISION DESIGN GUIDELINES

May 2012



TABLE OF CONTENTS

1.0 INTRODUCTION	1
2.0 PLANNING A COMPATIBLE DEVELOPMENT	2
3.0 DESIGNING A COMPATIBLE DEVELOPMENT	3
4.0 CRITICAL COMPONENTS OF LOT DESIGN	4
5.0 DESIGNING HOMES FOR THE COUNTRYSIDE	5
6.0 SAFE AND INTERCONNECTED ROADWAYS	6
7.0 MINIMIZING GRADING AND PRESERVING RIDGELINES	7
8.0 TRAIL AND PATHWAY CONNECTIVITY	8
9.0 DESIGNING MULTI-FAMILY HOMES FOR SINGLE-FAMILY NEIGHBORHOODS	9
10.0 REFERENCES	10

1.0 Introduction

Unincorporated San Diego County is rich in natural open space, agricultural lands, scenic vistas, and cultural and historical resources. The County is comprised of a variety of unique communities dominated mainly by small scale villages surrounded by semi-rural and rural areas with single-family residences agriculture, and open space. It is important that new development be compatible with these existing unique characteristics and resources as they contribute to a sense of pride in a community.

1.1 Purpose and Applicability

These residential subdivision design guidelines serve as a reference tool for applicants by demonstrating ways of designing a residential subdivision that is in harmony with existing community character, and that preserves and enhances characteristics that contribute to the charm and uniqueness of communities. These guidelines are intended to maximize the compatibility of new residential development with the form, scale, and visual character of neighboring properties in the vicinity.

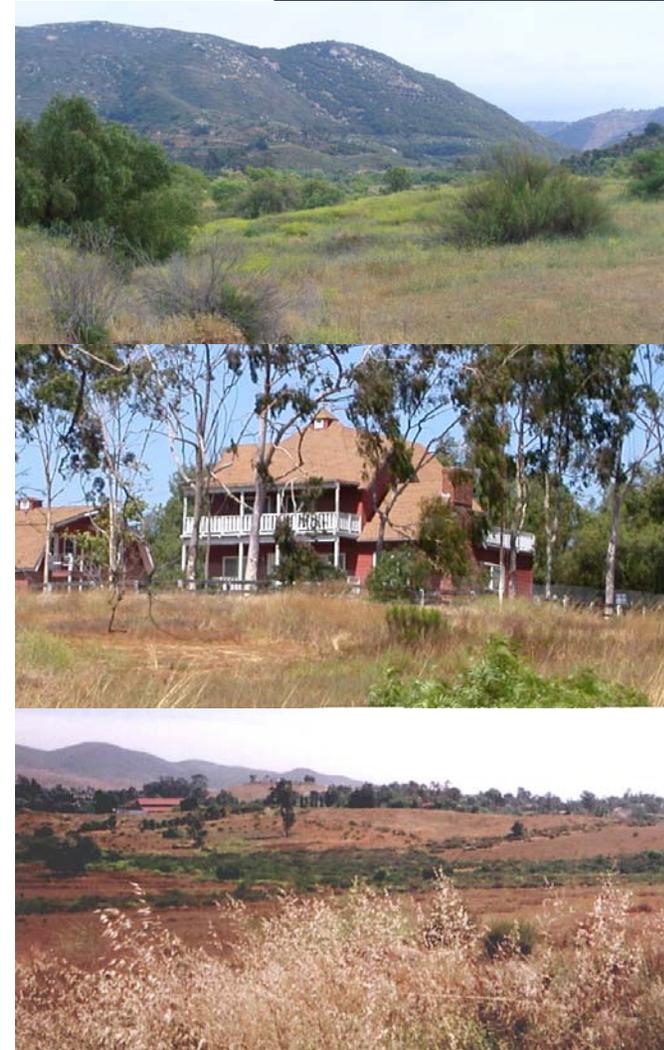
These design guidelines apply to any residential subdivision project requiring discretionary approval from the County.

1.2 Planning Goals and Objectives

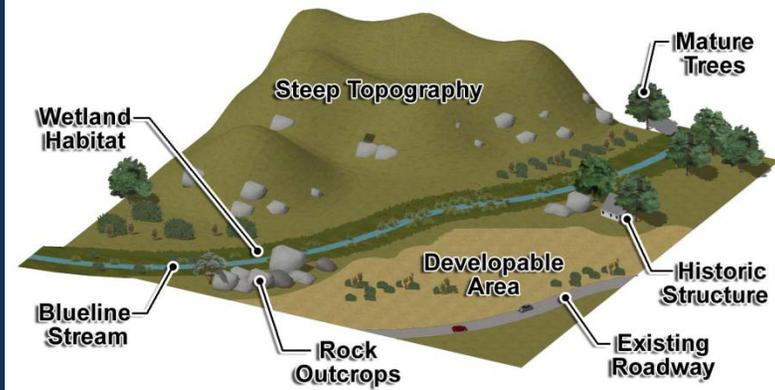
To ensure that future residential development is compatible with the existing community's character and consistent with the County of San Diego General Plan, these Residential Subdivision Design Guidelines focus on the following objectives:

- Context sensitive design that maximizes neighborhood compatibility and preservation of community character.
- Conservation-oriented project design that responds to rural surroundings and natural topography.
- Protection and enhancement of unique and natural resources.
- Preservation of rural and agricultural lands.
- Protection of scenic resources and viewsheds.
- Motorized and Non-motorized circulation network interconnectivity.
- Preservation of interconnected networks of open space areas.

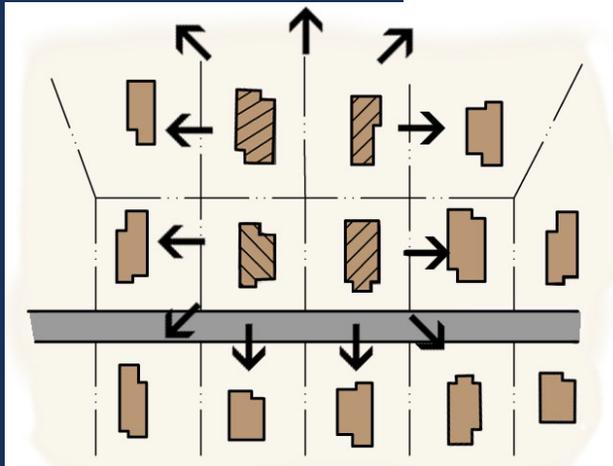
These Residential Subdivision Design Guidelines also complement required County ordinances, regulations, and requirements that establish development standards for residential subdivisions.



San Diego County's natural, scenic, agricultural, and historic resources contribute to a community's character.



Mapping existing physical features and sensitive resources helps identify the unique community resources that should be preserved.



Study the community to understand how the proposed development relates to the form, scale, and visual character of other developments in the general vicinity.

2.0 Planning a Compatible Development

It is strongly encouraged that the project proponent meet with the responsible community planning sponsor group (and design review board, if applicable) at the beginning of the conceptual design phase to gain a better understanding of any unique characteristics, challenges, or issues within an individual community.

2.1 Community Character Defined

Community character is the aggregate of features and traits that form the individual nature and uniqueness of a community. It includes the constructed and natural landmarks and surroundings that cause someone to identify with a particular place or community. This character is shaped by natural, cultural, societal, historic, and economic forces.

2.2 Identifying Unique Community Characteristics

A first step in designing a residential subdivision is examining surrounding development to identify the existing rural, semi-rural, or village design patterns and architectural styles that should be emulated in a proposed residential development.

Identify the existing physical features and sensitive resources that are unique to a community and should be avoided and preserved. Common resources that contribute to community character include:

- Sensitive biological resources;
- Prime agricultural land;
- Wetlands and water bodies;
- Floodplains and floodways;
- Steep slopes and ridgelines;
- Mature trees and vegetation; and
- Historic structures, districts, and other cultural resources.

2.3 Relationship to County Codes and Regulations

Thoroughly review all applicable County codes and regulations, as well as the County General Plan and the applicable Community Plan, to ensure that a proposed residential subdivision project is consistent and complies with all applicable County requirements.

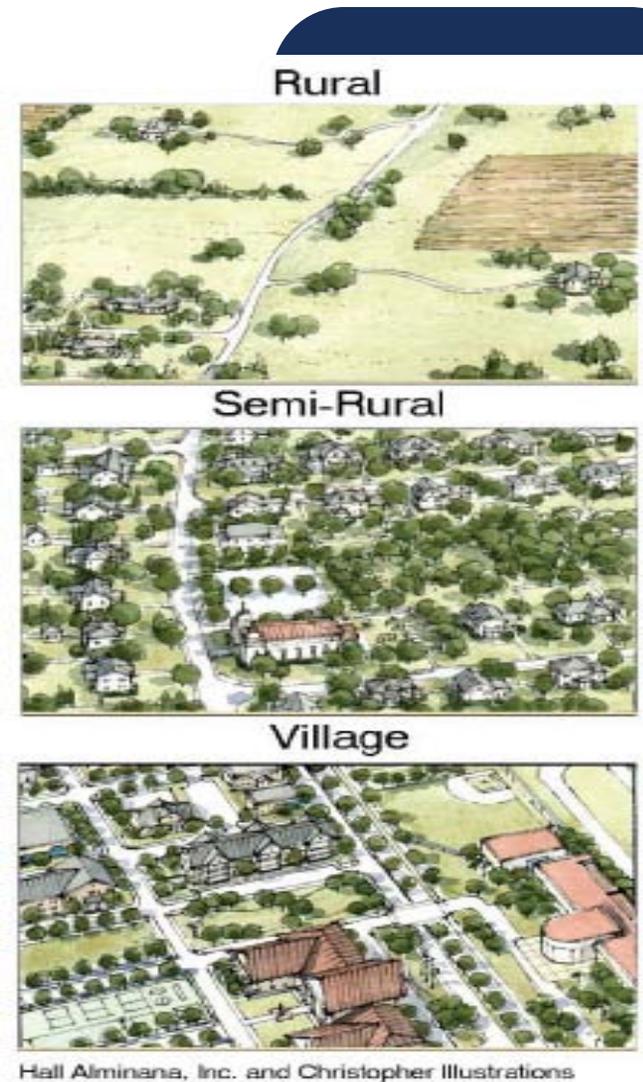
3.0 Designing a Compatible Development

HOW to design a residential project that integrates with the surrounding community and avoids sensitive and unique resources:

- Avoid and preserve steep slopes, ridgelines, floodplains, floodways, prime agricultural lands, sensitive biological resources, natural drainage courses, rock outcroppings, wetlands, and other sensitive resources that are valued and unique to a given community.
- Utilize sites that are better able to absorb development, such as sites with existing infrastructure, transportation connections, and community amenities.
- Avoid and preserve sites less capable of accommodating development, such as ridgelines, steep slopes, floodways/floodplains, and sensitive resource areas.
- Allow natural landforms to guide lot design by utilizing topography to create a variety of lot shapes, pad locations, and building setbacks that better blend with the environment and surrounding community.
- Buffer smaller lots with larger lots, greater setbacks, landscaping, agricultural areas, and/or natural topography.
- Design the site layout and building locations around a cohesive vegetation framework and in a manner consistent with the size, bulk, and scale of existing buildings in the vicinity.
- Provide the lowest amount of interface between proposed residential development and agricultural lands and open space to ensure that sensitive and unique resources are sufficiently buffered and preserved.

WHY?

- ☑ Preserving natural landforms and sensitive resources enhances community character by protecting scenic beauty.
- ☑ Identifying existing patterns of development and locations of unique community resources provides a framework for a compatible residential development.
- ☑ Emulating the home placement and site characteristics of other residential lots in the neighborhood assists with designing a project that is compatible with its surroundings.



Identify and emulate the existing rural, semi-rural, or village development patterns and architectural styles when designing a residential development.



Vary front setbacks to create visual interest, provide a diversity of housing styles, and site homes to ensure adequate private open space.



Strive to provide multiple access points, trail connectivity, buffers from the main road, and separations between residential development and agricultural operations.

4.0 Critical Components of Lot Design

HOW to design residential lots that are compatible with existing residential development in the surrounding community:

- In new subdivisions, setbacks should vary to create visual interest. However, if there is an established setback pattern in the area, new development should be setback similar to the average of existing setbacks on adjacent properties.
- Lot lines should maintain a linear configuration without unnecessary jogs and turns to the maximum extent possible.
- Enhance compatibility of residential development with existing and future agricultural operations using buffers and setbacks.
- Encourage the incorporation of agriculture into new residential development, where appropriate, and buffer residences from agricultural uses with setbacks, open spaces, and landscaping.
- Consider neighbors' views and seek to accommodate neighbor concerns in the placement of structures.
- Respect privacy in the placement of the main residence, accessory buildings, and exterior lighting.
- Avoid double-loading roads to provide breaks between homes to reveal scenic views and vistas.
- Provide for adequate on-site parking that minimizes the visual impacts of parked vehicles and allows for quick exit in the event of a wildfires or other natural disaster.
- Design lot lines to assure that adequate areas for usable private open space for each home can be used and easily accessed.

WHY?

- ☑ Designing new residential lots to be compatible with existing development patterns enhances and maintains a cohesive community appearance and character.
- ☑ Preserving open space areas may promote active and passive recreational activities which enhance public health.

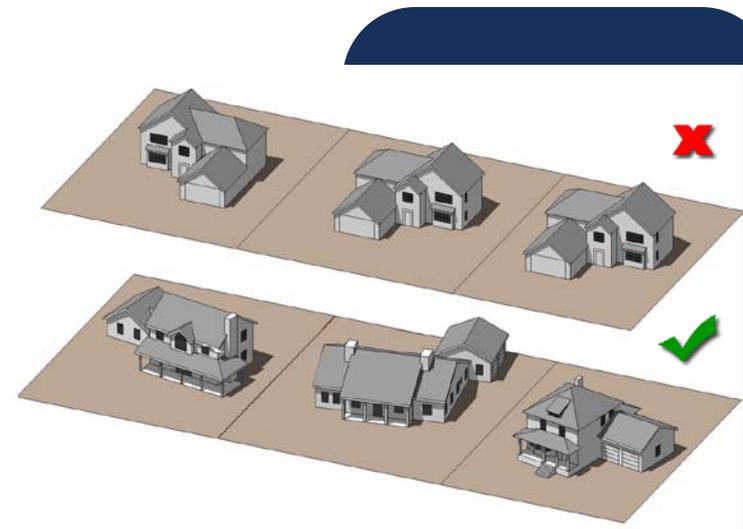
5.0 Designing Homes for the Countryside

HOW to design a residential project that emulates the visual character, form, and scale of rural and semi-rural communities:

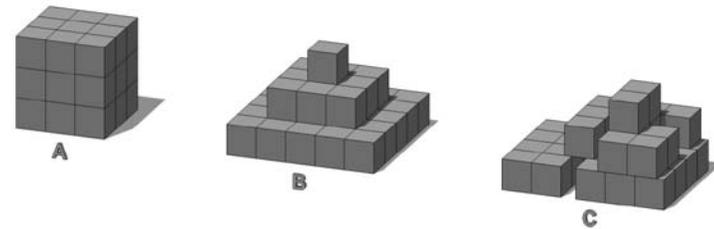
- Architectural styles vary by community, and therefore, should be governed by community design guidelines, the history, and culture of communities, personal preference, and cues from an architectural theme apparent in surrounding homes.
- Rural and semi-rural communities generally value diversity of architecture, lot sizes and shapes, orientations, and setbacks.
- A home should not dominate the site; it should complement the existing neighborhood character, providing for adequate space, light, and a sense of openness.
- All materials and colors should blend with the natural surroundings and complement existing structures.
- New and reconstructed dwellings should be designed to appear proportional and complementary to nearby dwellings.
- Minimize size, bulk, and scale through appropriate roof style and pitch, form and materials, varied setbacks, window treatment and location, and door size and type.
- Vary the angle of homes in relation to the street. Not all homes should parallel the road and lots should face the street with the least amount of traffic, wherever possible.

WHY?

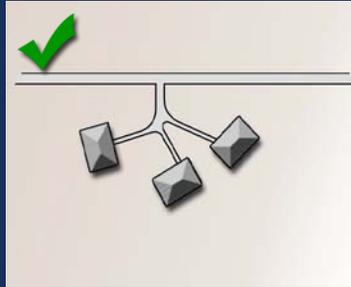
- ☑ Thoughtful site and building design can result in a development that is compatible with the surrounding community, respectful of neighbors, and aesthetically pleasing.
- ☑ Emulating the home placement and site characteristics results in a residential project that will be compatible with its surroundings.



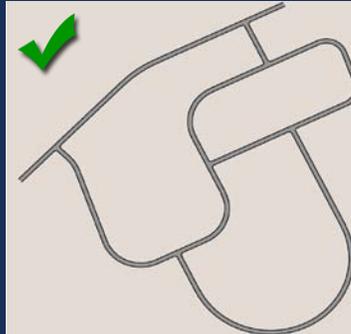
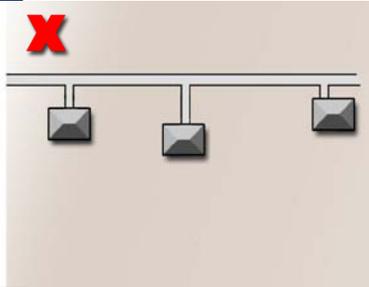
Monotonous “cookie cutter” housing development lacks character. A string of homes with same-model elevations should be avoided. Diversity and distinction between homes is strongly encouraged.



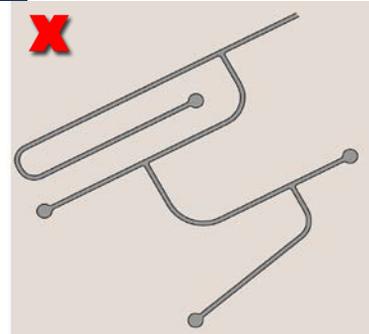
Variations in height, setbacks, and setbacks help to reduce bulk. A appears bulkier than B even though B is wider. A and B appear bulkier than C even though C is wider.



Limit the number of access points to public streets to reduce traffic impacts.



Circulation systems should have multiple connections and routes of travel.



Utilize road standards that currently exist in the surrounding area.



6.0 Safe and Interconnected Roadways

HOW to design a safe and interconnected circulation system that compliments and improves upon existing roadways in the area:

- Align and construct roadways to be consistent with the existing rural, semi-rural, or village character of the community. Generally, rural areas have curvilinear roadways and village areas have grid-like street patterns.
- Align streets to conform to existing land contours and minimize grading to avoid disturbing significant natural features.
- Design a continuous network that facilitates multiple routes of travel and enables vehicles to avoid areas when roads are congested or closed due to emergencies, such as wildfires.
- Streets should be linked to abutting networks and, in situations where future development is likely to occur on a neighboring site, provisions should be made to enable future connectivity.
- Access points to public streets should be limited to minimize interference from local traffic as it accesses Mobility Element and other heavily travelled roads.
- Design interconnected roads in residential areas to promote cycling and walking.

WHY?

- ☑ Roadways that are compatible with existing streets can help retain and enhance the distinct rural, semi-rural, or village character of a community.
- ☑ Multiple routes of travel and secondary access helps alleviate traffic congestion and ensures multiple evacuation routes during emergencies, such as wildfires.
- ☑ A system of interconnected roadways with reduced access points to public streets promotes road safety and, encourages cycling and walking, which enhance public health.

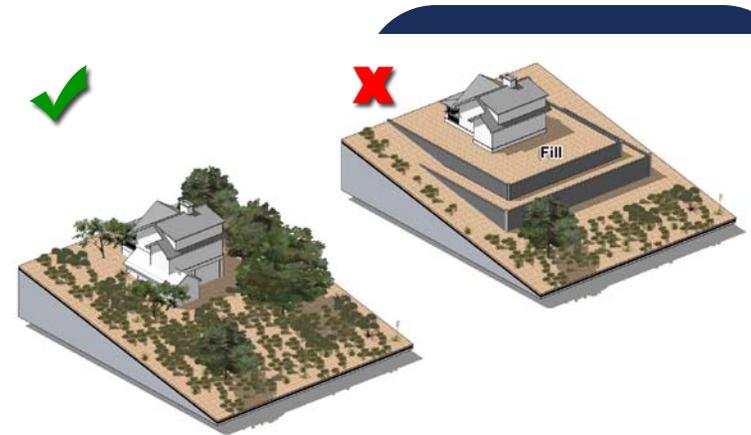
7.0 Minimizing Grading and Preserving Ridgelines

HOW to minimize grading and preserve natural landforms and ridgelines in order to enhance and retain a community's character:

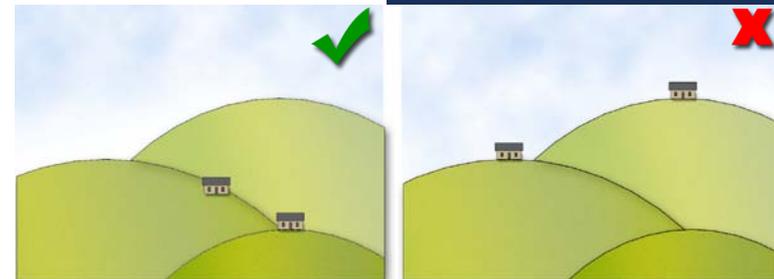
- Design the layout and location of roads and building platforms to mimic the natural topography and contours of the site.
- Minimize alterations to natural landforms and prominent topographic features, such as knolls, steep slopes, ridgelines, rock outcroppings, etc...
- Maintain the existing grade for new dwellings or additions, or limit grading to the building footprint and adjacent usable exterior space, to the extent feasible.
- New homes, accessory structures, and major additions should be designed so they mimic the existing contours of the land.
- On hillsides, grade new building sites so they appear to emerge from the slope rather than superimposing flat areas onto hillsides and ridgelines.
- Terracing or contour grading should be designed with small incremental steps and should avoid wide, large flat areas.
- Retaining walls should be constructed of materials and colors that blend with the natural surroundings. They should “echo” the surrounding natural terrain and blend with existing landforms.

WHY?

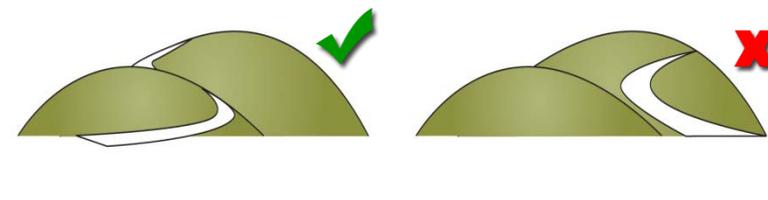
- ☑ Preserving natural features and landforms protects elements that contribute to a community's unique identity and character.
- ☑ Utilizing the existing landform to guide development reduces disturbance of the natural landscape and negative visual impacts, and preserves scenic resources in a community.
- ☑ A building's appearance and bulk can be reduced by shaping the building's forms so that they harmonize rather than contrast with existing topography.



Design structures to follow the existing contours of the land.



Avoid locating structures in prominent locations. Locate buildings on naturally occurring building platforms, where possible.



Design roadways to follow natural contours to avoid unnecessary grading.

8.0 Trail and Pathway Connectivity

HOW to accommodate pedestrians, equestrians, bicyclists, and other non-motorized modes of travel to enhance a community's character:

- Provide a continuous network of multi-use trails and pathways and off-site links to ensure connectivity between new and existing residential development.
- Align trails and pathways in a manner consistent with existing development patterns and choose surface materials that reflect the existing community character of the area.
- Connect publicly accessible open spaces with bike paths and multi-use trails and pathways.
- Ensure that trails, pathways, and bike paths are visible to and protected by passive surveillance from the surrounding community.
- Consider incorporating equestrian trails in addition to pedestrian trails in areas where horseback riding is common.



Provide for trail and pathway connectivity.



Trails and pathways separated from the roadway are strongly encouraged.

WHY?

- ☑ Trail and pathway networks enhance the overall quality of life, provides health benefits, improve safety, reduce traffic congestion, and decrease parking demand in a community.
- ☑ Designing trails and pathways in a manner compatible with neighboring land uses protects privacy, reduces public safety concerns, provides buffers between open space and developed areas, and enhances the visual character of the community.
- ☑ Establishing and maintaining a trail system helps in retaining the rural nature and character of a community.

9.0 Designing Multi-Family Homes for Single-Family Neighborhoods

HOW to design a multi-family residential project that relates to the visual character and scale of surrounding single-family homes:

- Attached multi-family units may not be appropriate for built-out communities with detached single-family residences.
- Outside of Village areas, attached multi-unit homes should respect the predominant single-family character of a community, and should be designed to appear as detached single-family homes.
- Minimize size, bulk, and scale through appropriate roof style and pitch, form and materials, varied setbacks, window treatment and location, and door size and type.
- New and reconstructed multi-family units should be designed to appear proportional and complementary to nearby single-family dwellings.
- A multi-family unit should not dominate the site. It should complement the existing neighborhood character, providing for adequate space, light, and a sense of openness.
- A variety of architectural elements may be utilized to provide façade articulation, but should be visually compatible and match the overall architectural style of the building.
- Buffer attached housing units from existing single-family homes with landscaping, setbacks, private open space, and/or grade changes.
- Provide for adequate on-site parking that minimizes the visual impacts of parked vehicles and allows for quick exit in the event of a wildfires or other natural disaster.

WHY?

- ☑ Attached multi-unit homes can contribute to more housing opportunities and achieve a desired density while still preserving the character of single-family communities.
- ☑ Multi-family homes designed to mimic detached single-family homes can help maintain a sense of character in single-family neighborhoods in semi-rural and rural areas.



Multi-unit homes should be designed to be compatible with the existing single-family character of semi-rural and rural communities.

10.0 References

Relevant County Codes and Regulations

- County of San Diego, Consolidated Fire Code Health and Safety Code §13869.7, including Ordinances of the 17 Fire Protection Districts as Ratified by the San Diego County Board of Supervisors, First Edition, October 17, 2001 and Amendments to the Fire Code portion of the State Building Standards Code, 1998 Edition.
- County of San Diego, Department of Planning and Land Use. The Zoning Ordinance of San Diego County. (www.co.san-diego.ca.us)
- County of San Diego, General Plan as adopted August 3, 2011.
- County of San Diego, Guidelines for Determining Significance and Report Format Requirements, (<http://www.sdcounty.ca.gov/dplu/procguid.html#guide>)
- County of San Diego, LID Handbook, December 2007. (www.sdcounty.ca.gov/dplu/docs/LID-Handbook.pdf)
- County of San Diego, Multiple Species Conservation Program, County of San Diego Subarea Plan, 1997.
- County of San Diego, Ordinance Number 9670. An ordinance amending the County Building Code to add certain fire-resistive construction standards.
- County of San Diego, Rural Subdivision Design and Processing Guidelines, October 2010.
- County of San Diego. Resource Protection Ordinance, compilation of Ord. Nos. 7968, 7739, 7685 and 7631. 1991.
- County of San Diego, Watershed Protection, Storm Water Management, and Discharge Control Ordinance, Ordinance Nos. 9424 and 9426. Chapter 8, Division 7, Title 6 of the San Diego County Code of Regulatory Ordinances and amendments. (www.amlegal.com).
- County of San Diego, Public Road Standards and Flexibility in Road Design. <http://www.sdcounty.ca.gov/dpw/docs/pbrdstds.pdf>

Suggested Readings

- County of San Diego, Community Plans and Design Review Guidelines for the unincorporated communities.
- Urban Land Institute, Development Case Studies (<http://casestudies.uli.org>).
- US Green Building Council, Natural Resources Defense Council, and the Congress for the New Urbanism. A Citizen's Guide to LEED for Neighborhood Development. (http://www.nrdc.org/cities/smartgrowth/files/citizens_guide_LEED-ND.pdf).
- Arendt, Randall. 1996. Conservation Design for Subdivisions: A Practical Guide to Creating Open Space Networks. Washington, D.C., Island Press.
- Arendt, Randall et al 1994. Rural By Design: A Handbook for maintaining Small Town Character. Chicago: Planners' Press, American Planning Association.