



Design Review - Planning Staff Level Review for Smaller Developments

About Design Review:

New buildings and certain changes to existing buildings require Design Reviews, per Article 32 – Zoning, § 4-4 Design Review. Design Reviews are conducted with Planning staff prior to permit approval. Certain aspects of the review process are governed by the Baltimore City Design Manual and the Zoning Code, while other aspects are more nuanced and site- or project-specific. The Design Manual and Zoning Code cannot regulate every aspect of a development project and are considered the baseline standards for architectural and urban design. Improved outcomes occur from nuanced site- and context-specific conversations during the Design Review process.

Review Format:

During the Pre-Development Meeting (PDM), Design Review will be determined, along with other Development Reviews such as Site Plan and Landscape Reviews. A staff person will be assigned for Design Review and will coordinate with the development team from the initial PDM through the permit submission.

- Development projects required to have a staff level review **must submit preliminary drawings to Planning staff prior to applying for permits.**
- Drawings must clearly show building design; typically, **site plans, building plans, elevations, sections and / or 3-dimensional drawings are required** for review.
- Reviews can be scheduled as needed, and are held either in person or virtually. When scheduling the review, **development teams must clarify if they would like a virtual or in-person meeting.**
- **Reviews may also be conducted via email**, with drawings sent as attachments. Written comments may be provided by staff in lieu of verbal comments.
- Following the review, teams are expected to provide design responses to staff comments and work with Planning staff to complete design review prior to submitting for permits.

What types of construction trigger Design Review?

Reviews are intended to help new residential developments and changes to existing buildings meet minimum code requirements prior to permit submission.

The Baltimore City Design Manual was developed to ensure new construction projects complement existing historic fabric. In general, the following project types are subject to Article 32 – Zoning, § 4-4 Design Review and the Baltimore City Design Manual; however, this is not a comprehensive list of projects requiring design review:

- New detached and semi-detached dwellings.**
- New rowhouses – infill within an existing block, a new rowhouse group on an existing block, and new rowhouse communities.**
- Additions to existing buildings that are visible from the front or side of the building, meaning they are visible from the street on which the property is addressed.**
- New multi-family / mixed-use buildings, or substantial additions to these building types. Note that review by the Urban Design and Architectural Advisory Panel (UDAAP) may be required.**
- New commercial buildings, or substantial additions to commercial buildings. Note that review by UDAAP may also be required.**

Baltimore City Department of Planning

Development Factsheet: Design Review Topics

Design Review - Planning Staff Level Reviews



Frequently Asked Questions:

Typically, the Design Review process for smaller commercial buildings, new single family detached dwellings, semi-detached dwellings, new infill rowhouses or group of rowhouses within an existing rowhouse block is handled at staff level. Development teams or property owners should contact Planning early enough in the design process to afford the possibilities of significant changes as advised by Planning staff to meet the minimum requirements of the code. Site context should be clearly illustrated through rendered area plans or photographs. Additionally, scaled site plan and massing studies that portray building bulk, height, and setbacks may be required.

1. **Is design review a code requirement?** Yes, per Article 32 – Zoning, § 4-4 Design Review and the Baltimore City Design Manual, design review is required by code. A permit may be held, suspended or disapproved if the design of a new building, renovation or addition does not meet the minimum requirements of the Zoning Code or Design Manual.
2. **How do I know if my building project needs Design Review?** Typically design review is required for all new building projects, major renovations, additions, decks, signs and some projects in special districts. There are additional requirements for projects located within Historic Districts.
3. **Can my project get an exception from the Design Manual requirements?** A small number of projects may qualify for an Administrative Exception. To qualify for an exception, projects must demonstrate a unique need, such as needing a specific solar orientation to achieve a net-zero energy certification, or other very specific unique condition or hardship.
4. **I'm building an upper-floor addition on my rowhouse – does it need to be set back from the façade?** To see whether your addition is required to be set back 10' from the front façade, see section IV. Design Standards, 2.4 Additions to existing rowhouses – Upper-floor additions in the Baltimore City Design Manual. If your rowhouse is part of a coordinated group or if your building is located on a street less than 30' in width, the upper floor addition must be set back 10' from the front façade in most cases.
5. **If the building footprint doesn't change but I'm adding usable square footage, is it considered an "addition"?** Yes, per Article 32 – Zoning, §1-302, Definitions: an addition is defined as "Addition" or "enlargement", when referring to a structure, means construction that increases the height, length, width, or floor area of the structure. Additions are subject to Design Review.

Written comments are typically provided by Planning for ease of revising drawings to comply with Design Review. When the Planning determines that the project meets the minimum requirements of Article 32 - Zoning Code and the Baltimore City Design Manual, the development team will receive notice of permission to proceed.

Helpful Links and More Information:

Department of Planning Resources Webpage: <https://planning.baltimorecity.gov/planning-resources>

Article 32 – Zoning Code:

[https://legislative.baltimorecity.gov/sites/default/files/Art%2032%20-%20Zoning%20\(rev%2002JUN23\).pdf](https://legislative.baltimorecity.gov/sites/default/files/Art%2032%20-%20Zoning%20(rev%2002JUN23).pdf)

Baltimore City Design Manual:

<https://planning.baltimorecity.gov/sites/default/files/TransForm%20Design%20Manual-%20Final%202019%20Update%20-%20No%20Mayor%20Name.pdf>