



City of El Cajon

Community Development Department  
Planning Division  
**DISCRETIONARY PROJECTS PROCESS  
AND REQUIREMENTS GUIDEBOOK**

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## **A Guide to Discretionary Project Reviews**

- Purpose of discretionary 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 locating your business 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,

**Melissa Ayres, AICP**  
*Director of Community Development*

**Manjeet Ranu, AICP**  
*Planning Manager*

## 2. How is My Project Subject to Discretionary 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 discretionary review process applies to all projects requiring a discretionary action, including legislative decisions and discretionary 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 on a discretionary project is 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 <sup>1</sup> | STAFF REVIEW TIMES <sup>2, 3, 4</sup> | APPLICANT RESPONSE TIMES <sup>5</sup> | TOTAL PROCESS TIME <sup>6</sup> |
|--------------|--|----------------|------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Level 1-EZ   | Easy Ministerial Permits <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Eligible over-the-counter permits on Wednesdays</li> <li>• Eligible electronic submission permits on Mondays</li> </ul>  | Staff          | 1                                  | Cycle 1: same day                     | None                                  | Same day                        |
| Level 1-S    | Simple Ministerial Actions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Building permits               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Tenant improvement</li> <li>○ Residential addition</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Signs</li> <li>• Business License</li> <li>• Tobacco License</li> <li>• Special Operation License</li> <li>• Freeway-oriented Sign – Director level approval</li> <li>• Landscape Documentation Package</li> <li>• Temporary Use Permit</li> <li>• Temporary Subdivision Sign</li> </ul> | Staff          | 1                                  | Cycle 1: 2 weeks                      | None                                  | 1 – 2 weeks                     |
| Level 1-C    | Complex Ministerial Actions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All permits within SP-182 area</li> <li>• Building permits               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ New construction</li> <li>○ Valuation greater than \$80,000, pursuant to City Council Policy C-7 (public improvements and dedications)</li> <li>○ Storm water requirements triggered</li> </ul> </li> </ul>   | Staff          | 2                                  | Cycle 1: 3 weeks<br>Cycle 2: 1 week   | Cycle 1: 2 weeks                      | 3 – 6 weeks                     |

| REVIEW LEVEL | TYPE OF ACTION   | DECISION-MAKER  | MAXIMUM REVIEW CYCLES <sup>1</sup> | STAFF REVIEW TIMES <sup>2, 3, 4</sup>                    | APPLICANT RESPONSE TIMES <sup>5</sup> | TOTAL PROCESS TIME <sup>6</sup> |
|--------------|--|---|------------------------------------|--|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Level 2      | Minor Subdivision Actions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tentative Parcel Map (timeline per Chapter 16.24; discretionary action)</li> <li>• Lot Line Adjustment (timeline per Chapter 16.34; ministerial action)</li> <li>• Final Parcel Map (ministerial action)</li> <li>• Certificate of Compliance (ministerial action)</li> </ul> | City Engineer<br>or<br>Community Development Director | 2                                  | Cycle 1: 3 weeks<br>Cycle 2: 2 weeks                     | Cycle 1: 2 weeks                      | 3 – 7 weeks                     |
| Level 3      | Administrative Discretionary Permits <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• AZP</li> <li>• SDP</li> </ul>  | Community Development Director                        | 3                                  | Cycle 1: 4 weeks<br>Cycle 2: 2 weeks<br>Cycle 3: 1 week  | Cycle 1: 2 weeks<br>Cycle 2: 1 week   | 4 – 10 weeks                    |
| Level 4      | Discretionary Permits <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• CUP</li> <li>• Minor CUP</li> <li>• Variance</li> <li>• Vesting Tentative Parcel Map (Minor Subdivision)</li> <li>• Expansion of nonconforming use or structure</li> <li>• Certificate of Modification</li> <li>• Adult entertainment permit</li> </ul>                           | Planning Commission                                   | 3                                  | Cycle 1: 4 weeks<br>Cycle 2: 3 weeks<br>Cycle 3: 2 weeks | Cycle 1: 3 weeks<br>Cycle 2: 2 weeks  | 7 – 14 weeks                    |

| REVIEW LEVEL | TYPE OF ACTION   | DECISION-MAKER | MAXIMUM REVIEW CYCLES <sup>1</sup> | STAFF REVIEW TIMES <sup>2, 3, 4</sup>                    | APPLICANT RESPONSE TIMES <sup>5</sup> | TOTAL PROCESS TIME <sup>6</sup> |
|--------------|--|----------------|------------------------------------|--|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Level 5      | Legislative, Policy Planning, Regulatory and Discretionary Permits <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• General Plan amendment</li> <li>• Zoning Reclassification</li> <li>• Zoning code amendment</li> <li>• Specific Plan</li> <li>• PRD</li> <li>• PUD</li> <li>• SP 182 discretionary permits</li> <li>• SP 462 discretionary permits</li> <li>• CUP for Electronic Message Display Sign</li> <li>• Tentative Map (Major Subdivision)</li> <li>• Vesting Tentative Map (Major Subdivision)</li> <li>• Final Map (Major Subdivision)</li> <li>• Reversion to Acreage</li> <li>• Certificate of Correction or Amending Map</li> <li>• Discretionary permits involving sites with inconsistency between General Plan and zoning</li> <li>• Historic Resource Designation</li> </ul> | City Council   | 3                                  | Cycle 1: 4 weeks<br>Cycle 2: 3 weeks<br>Cycle 3: 2 weeks | Cycle 1: 3 weeks<br>Cycle 2: 2 weeks  | 11 - 18 weeks                   |
| Level CIP    | CEQA for City Projects Separate of Entitlements <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Negative Declaration</li> <li>• Mitigated Negative Declaration</li> <li>• Environmental Impact Report, etc.</li> </ul>  | 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 discretionary review. The process includes five basic steps:

- Step 1: Pre-application Conference
- Step 2: 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.

A project planner is assigned to manage your project through the process and will be your single point of contact. The project planner facilitates the review, but does not represent your interests.

### Step 1: Pre-application Conference

The purpose of a pre-application conference 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 with the project. A pre-application is recommended for all projects, although it is not required.

The pre-application conference will generally include an interdisciplinary team of City staff. It should be held about 30 days prior to your anticipated submittal date to allow you time to subsequently finalize your application materials. There is no fee for this meeting. 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: Application Submittal**

To submit your application, it must be done by appointment scheduled in advance for all Level 5 project reviews, unless waived by the Planning Manager. Otherwise, it is recommended for projects that will subsequently meet the criteria for a Level 1-C review through Level 4. The 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 rejected and not taken in by staff.

## **Step 3: Staff and Agency Review**

If staff has determined the application materials to be of sufficient quality and completeness to accept, then a file is created. At this point, a project planner is assigned. A letter is sent notifying you that the City acknowledges receiving the application, assigned a project planner and a tentative overall project schedule is provided. 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 groups. Three weeks is the typical requested response deadline to referral comments.

During the referral period, the project planner 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. Within this 30-day review from application intake, the project planner 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).

The initial 30-day completeness check is consolidated into a cycle review letter – an enhancement to the process over state regulations. The goal is that this letter identifies all the issues to address with the project. The initial tentative processing schedule provided with the application acknowledgement letter may be revised. If the project is deemed incomplete, a letter is sent noting the deficiencies along with courtesy review comments. The applicant must attend a meeting with the project planner 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 simple projects with few issues – the project application is complete and ready for the decision-maker.

A CEQA determination is also made concurrently with the completeness check – another enhancement to the process over state regulations. 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. Public notice is prepared by staff for public hearings (Levels 4 and 5). Public 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 the PowerPoint presentation for a Planning Commission 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.

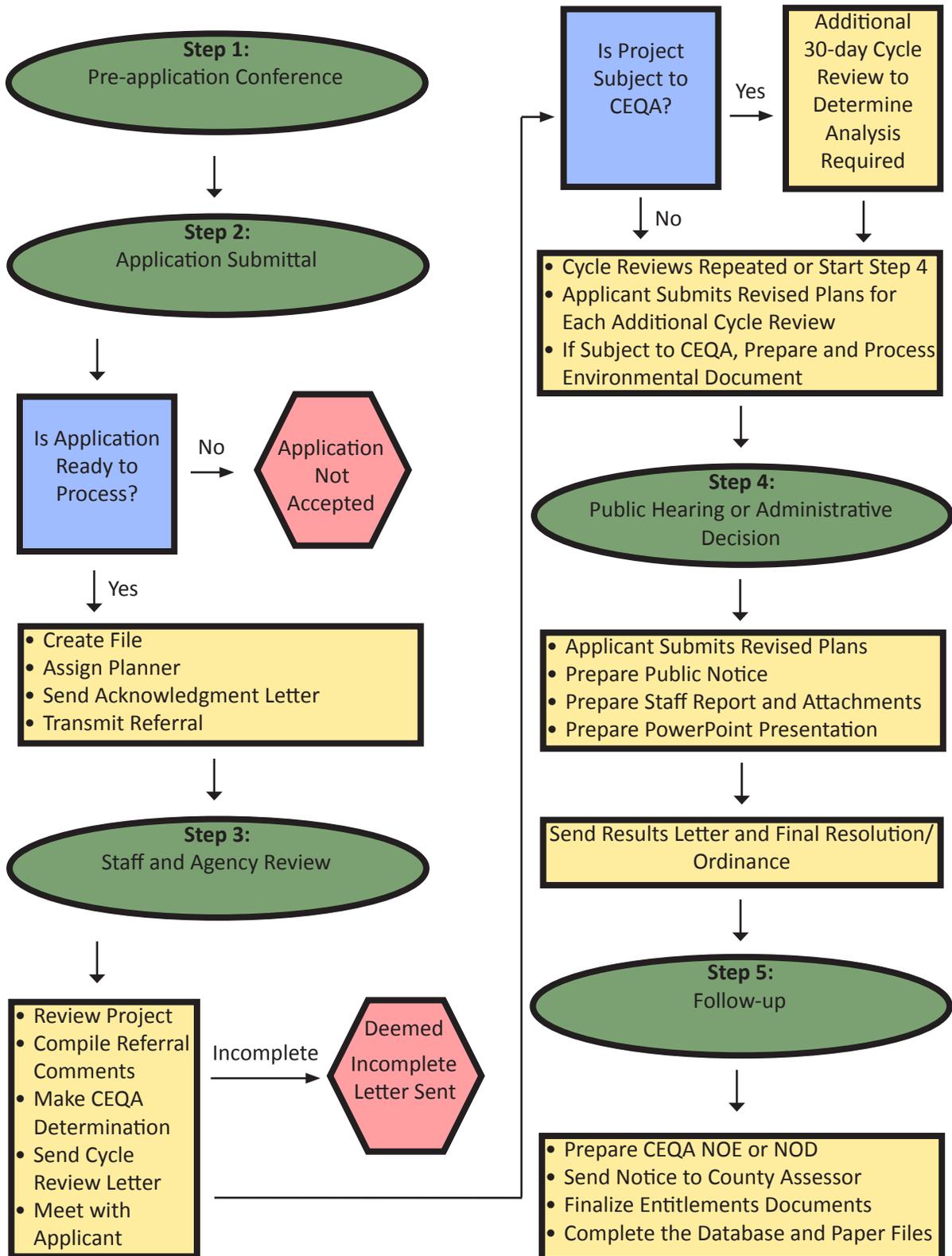
For Level 4 reviews, the Planning Commission will hear the request along with the staff recommendation and any public testimony. It will then make a decision to approve, approve with conditions or deny the request. Within ten days after the Planning Commission has adopted a resolution stating its decision 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 to approve, approve with conditions or deny the request. The item will then be forwarded to the City Council for final action. However, if the Planning Commission denies a Level 5 discretionary project, it only proceeds to a City Council hearing upon the filing of a formal appeal.

#### **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. The revised plans are subsequently submitted on three-millimeter thick, photographic Mylar media with matte finish. Staff will clean out the file and retain documents per 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.

## Discretionary Project Review Process



## 5. Instructions, Forms and Checklists

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

All documents linked in this guidebook are available in the Planning Division of the Community Development Department during normal business hours.