

Santa Cruz Planning Commission to consider eliminating public hearings for affordable housing

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5–7 minutes

SANTA CRUZ — At its meeting Thursday evening, the city of Santa Cruz Planning Commission will consider eliminating public hearings for 100% affordable housing projects, alongside other agenda items at its last meeting of the year.

The meeting begins at 7 p.m. with oral communications, or the portion of the meeting where community members can speak to issues not on the meeting's agenda but are within the Planning Commission's purview. The governing body will then consider four public hearing items.

The first public hearing concerns a series of improvements along Swanton Boulevard and the western end of Delaware Avenue, which includes the creation of a multi-use trail, sidewalks and pedestrian striping along Swanton Boulevard, two protected intersections on Delaware Avenue where it intersects with Swanton Boulevard and Natural Bridges Drive, and sidewalks, dedicated bike lanes, pedestrian striping and modified vehicle lanes along Delaware Avenue, among other improvements. According to [the agenda report](#), the project is funded by the California Department of Transportation's Active Transportation Program Cycle 6, and to

remain compliant with the grant funding's timeline, the project must receive approval by April 2026.

The Planning Commission will also [consider an item](#) allowing modifications to an existing communications tower on Encinal Street that would increase the tower's 50-foot height by about 22 feet, which requires a special use and design permit.

The commission will then hear from the city's Planning and Community Development Department about its intent to eliminate public hearings for 100% affordable housing projects in the city, which would include those hearings conducted by the Planning Commission and the Santa Cruz City Council. To accomplish this, planners are seeking to establish a special zoning area in the city called a zoning overlay district.

According to the agenda report, "Within the [Affordable Housing Ministerial Approval Overlay District](#), any 100 percent affordable housing development could opt to seek ministerial approval, meaning approval with a building permit and no discretionary permit. Developments under these provisions would be required to submit a preliminary application and receive comments from city staff prior to filing a building permit application. To support the ability of the community to provide input where it can have the greatest potential to influence a project's design, the process would require a community meeting after preliminary application submittal but prior to building permit submittal."

The [agenda report](#) states that because only objective standards apply to affordable housing projects, as opposed to subjective standards, governing bodies such as the Planning Commission should be left out of a potential project's planning process to facilitate the production of housing. However, public health and safety concerns can be expressed at public hearings, such as the

recent appeal hearing held by the [Santa Cruz City Council meeting in September](#), where concerns about an inadequate and unsafe loading zone led to changes in the project.

At [the community meeting held in late November](#), which introduced the idea of eliminating public hearings for 100% affordable projects, attended by seven community members, a member of the city's planning department mentioned that city staff are moving away from using the term "affordable" and instead swapping it out with "below market rate" because affordable housing is not an accurate descriptor due to the [state's income guidelines](#).

In Santa Cruz County, the 2025 area median income for a family of four is \$132,800, which is used as the baseline figure to determine income levels as defined by the state. A low-income household in Santa Cruz County is considered to be a family of four making between \$98,901 and \$158,700 per year, which is notably about \$25,000 more than the area median income. Moderate income, which is also considered a low-income designation, is defined as a family of four earning up to \$159,350 per year, also higher than the area median income. If the proposed zoning overlay district is established, a development in the district could consist of all moderate-income level units and be considered 100% affordable.

The agenda report highlights the ways that the proposed overlay district would go beyond the scope of state laws by "eliminating barriers still in place by state law, such as requirements for a specified percentage of units to be at certain affordability levels, requirements for units to be in permanent supportive housing, or requirements related to the amount or type of residential amenity or commercial space, which would instead be governed by existing local regulations."

According to the [agenda report](#), if the city were to create the

Affordable Housing Ministerial Approval Overlay District, 100% affordable housing projects would also be exempt from California Environmental Quality Act review. The overlay district would also modify details regarding the city's Heritage Tree Ordinance.

Following the Planning Commission's consideration of the proposed zoning changes Thursday evening, the agenda report states that it will be considered in a first reading by the City Council, tentatively Jan. 27, 2026, and a second and final reading in February.

To view the agenda, visit santacruzca.gov.

IF YOU GO

What: City of Santa Cruz Planning Commission meeting.

When: 7 p.m., Thursday.

Where: Santa Cruz City Hall, 809 Center St.