

## Our Community Development Department in September 2025

Dear Laguna Beach Neighbors:

Folks have been writing about City government of late. I don't mind the attention – I like it when people ask. It's better than having people wonder about what's so, and what's not. So today starts a response - maybe consider it Part 1 of a multi-part series.

Consider yourself bored – err, warned.

Today I'm writing about our Community Development function. Remember that Community Development combines:

- **Planning** – this is primarily about the Zoning Code and the General Plan, and can be broken down into:
  - Zoning Plan Check (ZPC) or “Current Planning”. Where our staff helps determine if, say, a residential rebuild or new home is compliant with our Zoning Code.
  - Advanced Planning. Where we update our Housing Element, or the Open Space and Conservation Element, or parking requirements citywide. In our case, we spend so much time in residential zoning plan check that we don't spend enough time on Advanced Planning.
  - Other stuff – planners also work on View Restoration / Preservation Orders, Temporary Use Permits, residential building reports, tree removal requests, historic assessments, and more.
- **Building**. Where Planning-approved projects go through another, separate plan check and field inspections to verify that projects are designed and constructed per building codes.
- **Code Enforcement**. Where a team of staff has the tough job generally of telling residents and businesses that they shouldn't have done something – worked without permits, or after hours, or let vegetation get too big, sold stuff on a sidewalk without a permit, let their building deteriorate, and more.

Recently someone identified Community Development as a **case study in inefficiency**. The writer's accusation seemed (to me) poorly targeted to the staff. That's wrong. But the process **is** inefficient! The writer also compared our staffing levels to my former workplace in Newport Beach.

Here's the thing: this is built-in inefficiency (whether I like it or not), and it's part of us – and it's not part of Newport Beach. To be more specific:

- We have Design Review (DR). Newport Beach does not. Newport Beach uses formulaic zoning – fit within a box, you're basically good – build it. We have subjective

neighborhood input and public review built into one's home design approvals. This is a huge difference.

- We have nearly 100% of our community in the Coastal Zone. Not so in Newport Beach.
- Our Local Coastal Plan (LCP) is an intertwined knot (I say that respectfully) of twenty five (25!!) different old and new documents and plans – and nearly each project reviewed in Zoning Plan Check has to comply with the LCP. *Even our Design Review elements are in the LCP.* Newport Beach's LCP consists of two main stand-alone documents – which are also (importantly) more recently updated than our LCP.
- Per our Code, many of our Public Works projects go one-by-one to the Planning Commission for Design Review and for consistency with the LCP. With full planning analyses, site noticing and detailed staff reports. Which can be appealed to the City Council (the South Laguna Fire Station's call-up report was 129 pages). Not so in Newport Beach – capital projects don't go to the Planning Commission and have no formal design review.

Let me hammer home the Design Review point further. As so many Laguna Beach residents know, Design Review is complex, lengthy, and costly. One home project can go through multiple backs-and-forth just to get out of Zoning Plan Check (and that's just the beginning!), then be staked, have a staff report written, go through "early neighborhood communications," be noticed for a public meeting, have a public meeting held, a public meeting continued, another notice, revised staking, another public meeting, project approval, a wait time for an appeal, an appeal made, an appeal hearing noticed, an appeal-based staff report written, an appeal hearing held, an appeal hearing continued, a remand to the Design Review Board, and...

... I could go on. Admittedly, what I just described tends to be the exception, not the rule. But it happens. Even the "lite" version of this – one to two DRB hearings, happy neighbors, no appeal - still takes a boatload of staff resources and time. Every month, planners put out 30 to 40 separate staff reports on ZPC items.

Add multiple complexity factors if your home is historic (or had whispers of historicity), or is on a blufftop, or near a watercourse, or on a steep slope, or needs a revocable encroachment permit, or if you're including an ADU along with your house design.

The CD Zoning Plan Check team, as a process improvement and training tool for new staff, has a checklist of over 300 items that need to be verified in ZPC. Over 300!

I am NOT criticizing the overall concept of Design Review here. One can effectively argue that it has made Laguna Beach special, and kept us different from other places that may all look alike.

I do think, though, that criticizing the staff – or the staff numbers – is misguided.

Between now and 2015, a lot happened. COVID-19 put our CD team way behind, for many reasons. Long-time staff retired (with their institutional knowledge), and more residents (new and long-time) decided to invest a lot in their Laguna Beach homes. We got months behind in our ZPC reviews.

Further, the planning and zoning world got a lot more litigious. State housing law got more complex. The amount of time our staff – including our legal team – had to put into staff reports to buttress findings and supporting arguments grew and grew. Some of our long-timers who remained said, “it wasn’t this way before!” They’re right - it wasn’t! But nor were we faced with high-risk consequences or litigation and high-stakes timelines under State law.

When Council members talked with me as a city manager candidate in spring 2024, they were focused on improving the CD process. It was one of the first things I tackled. Did I do it well? I’m not sure yet.

In August of 2024, folks may not have had their plans checked for 57 days *on average*, and some knotty projects were 100s of days delayed. But by June 2025 - and thanks to a strong All CD Team effort - we were at 18 days’ average turnaround time and almost always met our maximum 30-day turnaround time for each iteration of Zoning Plan Check. This is despite the number of applications under review growing from 192 in August 2024 to 291 in June 2025.

Month	Number of Applications Under Review	Average Turn-Around Time	Max Turn-Around Time
August 2024	192	57 days	over 100 days
June 2025	291	18 days	almost all under 30 days

Are we at the ideal place yet? No. But we’re trying.

We couldn’t have done this – and can’t continue to do this - without one of two things: (1) more staff to work on ZPCs; or (2) we change the processes to make ZPC in Laguna Beach simpler and faster.

In August 2024, we embraced both.

“Simpler and faster” is easier said than done. We’ve worked on a “Design Review Efficiency Ordinance” for several months. With public drafts, joint meetings, and

[informational sessions](#). We soon will have a final draft to the Coastal Commission staff, the Planning Commission, and City Council.

Trying to make design review more efficient – even if we could ALL agree on the elements of that (by the way, many folks agree on some, but not all of the possible changes) – means amending codes, environmental review and more public hearings once we’ve landed on a firm document.

Sigh.

In conclusion, I so respect our Community Development team. They are talented folks who can work anywhere, yet they chose to and continue to work in Laguna Beach. In a complex code environment, with smart, tough customers and savvy designers/architects. Despite sometimes unfair criticisms lobbed at them on social media, or from a process-upset resident telling them how inefficient *they* are.

Someday, we may be able to get by with less folks. But the code’s got to change. Or AI needs to take some massive leaps forward. That’s not today.

Please be kind to your Community Development staffer – they are helping protect the community you (and I) hold dear. Every one of them has my admiration and appreciation.

And if you have ideas to help improve the process, I’m all ears.

Thank you for reading this much and this far. I’m always open to your questions and comments.

Sincerely,

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