



CITY OF MURRIETA

City Council Meeting Agenda

Report

6/17/2025
Agenda Item No. WS1.

TO: HONORABLE MAYOR AND MEMBERS OF THE CITY COUNCIL

FROM: David Chantarangsu, AICP Development Services Director

PREPARED BY: Chris Tracy, AICP Senior Planner, Advanced Planning

SUBJECT: Hillside Updates (DCA-2021-2396) - Workshop 3

RECOMMENDATION

Receive a presentation by staff, receive public comments, discuss the proposed Ordinance, and provide direction related to policy options under the proposed Ordinance framework.

PRIOR ACTION/VOTE

On March 29, 2022, the City Council directed staff to review the hillside development standards (Non-Action Item).

On June 28, 2023, the Planning Commission recommended the introduction and first reading of an Ordinance providing updates to the hillside development standards amending Murrieta Municipal Code (MMC) Chapters 8.20, 15.52 and updating portions of Title 16 (Vote 4-0-1) (Attachment 1).

On August 15, 2023, the City Council hosted a workshop on this item. The City Council requested additional information. The workshop was continued to a future meeting date (Vote 5-0-0) (Attachment 2).

On March 5, 2024, the City Council hosted a second workshop on this item. Due to additional time needed for the discussion and feedback, the workshop was continued for a second time (Vote 5-0-0) (Attachment 3).

CITY COUNCIL GOAL

Maintain a high performing organization that values fiscal sustainability, transparency, accountability and organizational efficiency.

BACKGROUND

The City Council directed staff at its annual priority and goal setting workshop on March 29, 2022, to review the hillside development standards, as there were concerns about how they were being interpreted. The overall goal of these updates is to re-draft the development standards into language that is more concise and accurate for applicants and staff. With these proposed modifications, staff anticipates that the proposed modifications would improve readability, resolve code inconsistencies, incorporate best practices, and simplify

standards to make them more user-friendly to staff and applicants. The City's existing hillside development standards, contained in Chapter 16.24 (Hillside Development) of the Murrieta Development Code (MDC), were added in 1997 to support the City's 1994 General Plan land use goals and policies associated with the City's hillside features. The General Plan continues to contain goals and policies in hillside areas to "maintain the natural character and the environmental and aesthetic values of sloped areas."

For details about the historical context of the hillside development standards and why these updates are being brought forward, please refer to the "Background Section" as provided within Attachments 1, 2, and 3. Staff is bringing forward these updates in a continued workshop format for the City Council to review the proposed standards and provide input ahead of a future public hearing.

Feedback from Council Workshop 2

As noted above, on March 5, 2024, the City Council hosted a second workshop on this item. Due to additional time needed for the discussion/feedback, it was continued a second time. Detailed informational maps of the City's hillside areas were included, which are provided in Attachments 4 through 10 for reference and for context. Attachment 4 depicts the overall Hillside Overlay area as mapped using digital geographic information data. Exhibits 5-10 display specific areas of the City within the proposed Hillside Overlay area at a greater level of detail.

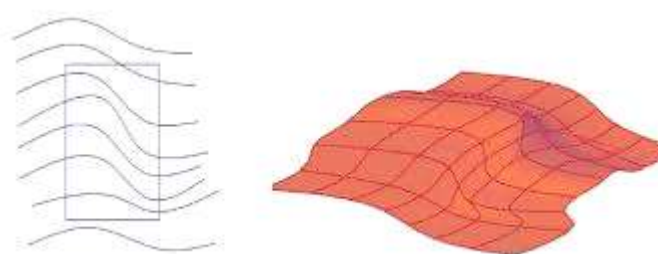
Following are some of the key takeaways from that meeting's public commentators, staff's analysis of each topic, and potential solutions:

"Having an Alternative to Geographic Information Systems (GIS) mapping for determining Slopes":

Issue: Having an alternative to the Geographic Information Systems (GIS) mapping and slope information. The concern related to this issue was that the GIS data source may not be up to date or as accurate as possible, and therefore, there needs to be an alternative method for determining this information as it relates to evaluating a project site within a hillside area.

Background/Analysis: Staff concurs that having an alternative method is a reasonable approach if there is any doubt that the data being pulled has a discrepancy.

Potential Solution: Staff is suggesting the use of AutoCAD or a similar industry-benchmarked CAD-related platform as approved by City Engineering (Potential industry alternatives include Sketch-up 3D, Civil 3D, TerraModeler, etc.).



Example of AutoCAD 3D Terrain Modeling

Image Source: <https://www.designworkshopsydney.com.au/autocad-3d-lofted-terrain/>

For context, AutoCAD is a widely utilized software application for computer-aided design and drafting in the

Civil Engineering and Architectural industries. It should be noted that it supports various coordinate systems and projections, allowing data to be displayed in the correct spatial context. It can also ensure that imported data aligns properly with existing drawings and allows users to geo-reference their drawings by assigning real-world coordinates (latitude and longitude) to a drawing.

“Moving the Geogrid wall type outside of the Wall section”:

Issue: The speaker suggested moving the Geogrid wall type outside of the Wall section of the Municipal Code, as the retaining wall criteria does not apply because it uses reinforcement in the soil behind the wall.

Background/Analysis: For context, this is a type of retaining wall that uses geogrid material to reinforce the structure and provide stability. The following images illustrate this wall type:



Image 1 - Geogrid Wall Installation



Image 2 - Geogrid Wall Installation

Image 1 Source: <https://www.paramountmaterials.com/products/retaining-wall-reinforcement-grid>

Image 2 Source: <https://pavetool.com/blogs/pave-tool-blog/how-to-install-geogrid-for-retaining-wall>

In a geogrid wall, the geogrid mesh layers are placed between the layers of soil and extend horizontally into the backfill or slope. The geogrid mesh acts as a reinforcement and is designed in a manner to resist lateral forces such as pressure from the surrounding soil or water (Images 1 and 2).



Image 3 - Conventional Retaining Wall Installation

Image 3 Source: <https://www.retainingwallcompanies.com/walls/concrete-masonry.html>

This type of wall is very similar to that of a conventional retaining wall in terms of appearance and functionality (Image 3); therefore, staff recommends that it should be treated as a wall and be subject to the same

placement and height criteria as a typical wall.

“Looking at the retaining wall height as being measured from the face of a wall, rather than from the footing”:

Issue: The speaker suggested that the retaining wall height be measured from the face of a wall, rather than from the footing.

Background/Analysis: Staff prefers to measure walls from the top of a wall footing and not the finished grade adjacent to a wall face. Finished grades can change or be artificially raised or lowered by grading, or other variables. These variables may include settlement, erosion, landscaping modifications, or future grading changes, all of which can alter the apparent grade and compromise the reliability and consistency of height measurements taken from the wall face. For this reason, staff recommends a more stable and standardized point of reference which is the top of a wall footing.

Potential Solution: A suggested solution here could be to measure from the top of the footing (rather than at the bottom) since that is a known metric. This approach provides a consistent, verifiable point of reference that is established during construction and is less likely to be affected by future site alterations such as backfill settling, landscaping changes, or erosion. Using the top of the footing also aligns with typical construction documentation and inspection practices, making it easier to verify and review during plan checks and field inspections.

“A six-foot wall height is too restrictive for the maximum height for retaining walls within a Hillside Area”:

Issue: The speaker suggested that a six-foot wall height is too restrictive for the maximum height for retaining walls within a Hillside Area.

Background/Analysis: Staff’s concern is that placing taller walls in highly visible locations may conflict with hillside standards aimed at reducing visual impacts. Prominent wall faces can obstruct scenic views, disrupt the natural landscape, and appear visually intrusive, particularly when they are uniform in color and texture. In residential settings, larger monolithic structures can sometimes feel out of place and create a sense of imbalance.



Image Source: <https://allanblock.com/newsletter/tech-news-issue2.aspx>



Images 5 and 6 - Examples of Tall Retaining Walls at highly visible locations

“We have had inconsistent application of the hillside criteria since its implementation in 1997”:

Issue: The speaker stated that the hillside criteria have been inconsistently applied since their first implementation.

Background/Analysis: The primary challenge has been ongoing confusion among both staff and project applicants regarding when the regulations apply to a specific property. This uncertainty often stems from vague or subjective language in the existing criteria, as seen within the MDC. This has likely led to inconsistent interpretations by different reviewers. A likely contributing factor has been the absence of a codified hillside area map within the Municipal Code, something that would provide a clear and reliable point of reference. Additionally, the current hillside provisions in the MDC lack clear guidance on when and where the regulations are triggered, further compounding the issue.

Potential Solution: To address this issue, it is essential to have clear and well-defined criteria, as in the proposed Ordinance, and further implemented within the MDC for all stakeholders involved to ensure that standards are applied consistently at projects and properties. This clarity will help reduce ambiguity during the permitting and inspection processes, minimize disputes or misinterpretations among stakeholders, and create a more predictable framework for both developers and staff. By establishing uniform guidelines, the City can better maintain the integrity of its built environment and uphold community expectations.

“Look at having Specific Plans hatched with the outline of the boundaries of the Hillside Area”:

Issue: The speaker suggested hatching out the Specific Plan Areas within the parameters of the Hillside Overlay Map boundaries (such as Greer Ranch, Murrieta Oaks, Copper Canyon, The Vineyard, and Murrieta Springs).

Background/Analysis: Applying a hatched overlay to areas within Specific Plan boundaries presents a challenge, as it may create confusion because Specific Plans include their own hillside development standards. This could lead to situations where an applicant refers to both the Specific Plan and the hillside regulations, resulting in conflicting guidance.

Such overlaps may cause inconsistencies in interpretation, delays in the review process, and an increased need for clarification from planning staff. More importantly, if two sets of standards appear to apply

simultaneously, it could raise questions about enforceability and ultimately weaken the clarity and authority of both.

“The General Plan’s Goals and Policies for hillside areas are obsolete since these areas are no longer visible as they once were due to development within the City since 1997”:

Issue: At the previous workshop, a speaker mentioned that the General Plan’s Goals and Policies for hillside areas are obsolete since these areas are no longer visible as they once were due to development within the City since 1997.

While it's true that development throughout the City since 1997 has affected the visibility and context of some hillside areas in some portions of the City, that does not render the General Plan’s Goals and Policies obsolete. In fact, those policies were often created not just to protect views, but to guide responsible development, minimize environmental impacts, preserve natural terrain, and ensure safety in areas of the City prone to erosion, landslides, or wildfire.

For context within the General Plan, as described within the Conservation Element, under Hills and Ridges, “Murrieta’s natural setting offers views and vistas of features that have both scenic and ecological value. A variety of rolling hillsides, mountain ranges, the Valley floor, and varied natural vegetation contribute to the unique visual character of Murrieta, as well as the surrounding region. The Hogbacks are a prominent visual feature within the Murrieta landscape that can be seen from many vantage points. This ridgeline crosses the eastern portion of the City and supports areas of relatively undisturbed natural vegetation along the western slope.



Image 7 - View of Los Alamos Hills from Sports Park



Image 8 - View westward of the Santa Rosa Plateau

Image Source: <https://www.google.com/maps>



Image 9 - View westward of the Santa Rosa Plateau

Image Source: <https://www.google.com/maps>

Views of the Santa Rosa Plateau occur along the I-15 and I-215 Freeways, as well as from lands located to the west of the Hogbacks. Views from these locations also include the largely undisturbed ridgelines that extend to the north and south of the Plateau, combined with hillside areas supporting chaparral habitat. Oak woodland habitat and a variety of canyons are also present along the foothills of the Santa Ana Mountains and

add to the existing visual character.

The Murrieta Municipal Code establishes guidelines for future development proposed in the City's hillsides. Chapter 16.24, Hillside Development, provides measures for the long-term protection of existing natural topography and scenic character whenever feasible through the regulation of grading activities, intensity, and density of development proposed, structural massing, building height, and other characteristics in order to minimize potential impacts on the existing viewshed."

Although visibility may have declined from certain vantage points within the City since 1997, the underlying objectives remain as pertinent as ever. Principles such as preserving slope stability, protecting native habitat, and ensuring that development blends appropriately into the natural terrain are all still desirable strategies as implemented by the City's General Plan and Goals and Policies. These standards are crucial for preserving natural landscapes, preventing soil erosion, ensuring public safety, and maintaining the aesthetic and environmental integrity of development in these Hillside Areas.

The following images visually demonstrate the importance of consistently applying hillside standards at a project site, highlighting undesirable techniques involving mass grading, over-excavation, and the use of highly visible retaining walls in hillside areas throughout parts of the western Inland Empire.

Inland Empire - Hillside Grading Examples



Image 10 - Earlier in the Development of the Project - Example of mass-grading hillsides that don't blend into a hillside with hard edge lines.



Image 11 - Later in the Development of the Project



Image 12 - Example of manufactured hillsides that do not blend into a hillside with hard edge lines.



Image 13 - Before - Example of over-excavation/retaining walls that do not blend into a hillside with hard edge lines.

Image Source: <https://www.google.com/maps>

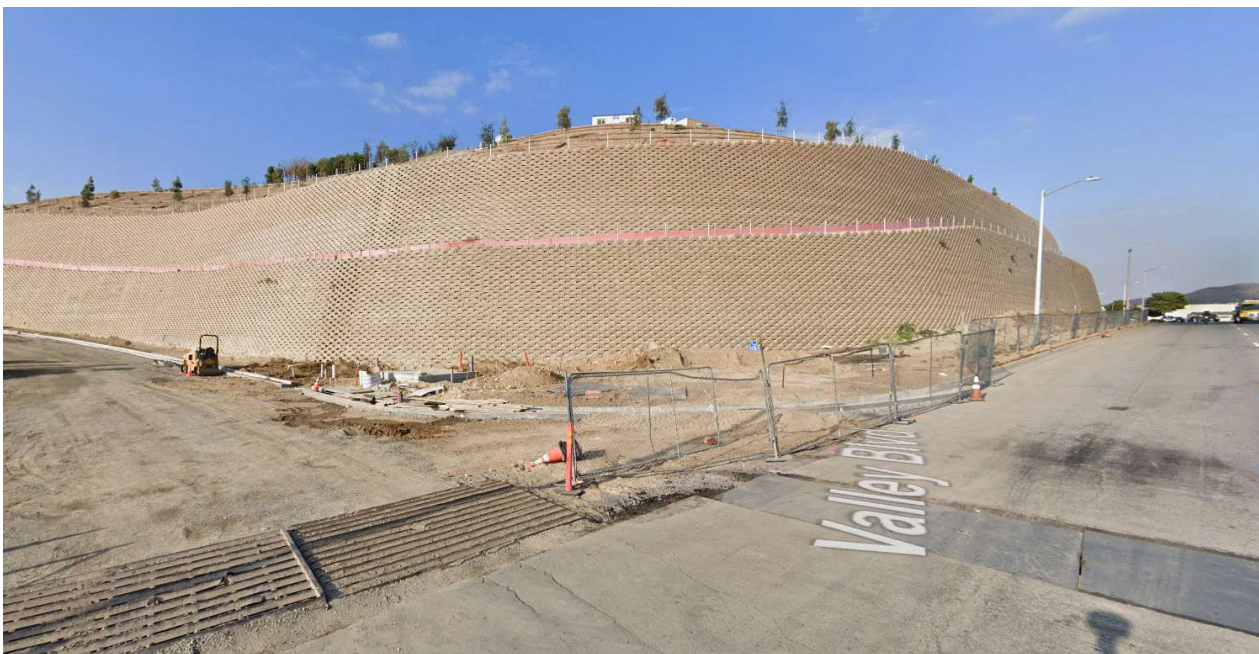


Image 14 - After

Image Source: <https://www.google.com/maps>

Draft Ordinance

As requested during the previous workshop discussion, the following is a summary of the less critical and more critical updates for Council consideration in the development of the Ordinance Updates. A copy of the draft Ordinance is provided in Attachment 11, and previous correspondence from Workshop 2 is provided in Attachment 12. In terms of the draft Ordinance, it has been revised to be more streamlined in both the content and structure as it relates to the proposed amendment. Staff are available to walk through the details of each section to provide additional context and to support further discussion.

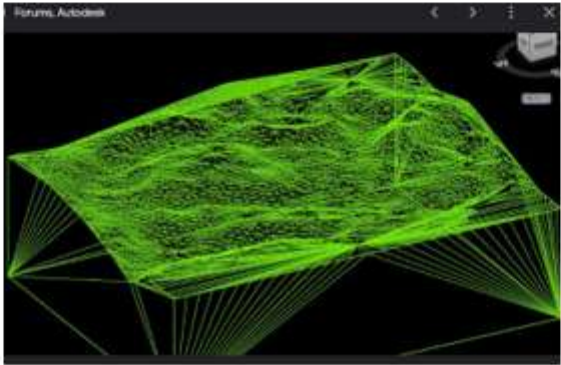
Please note that references to the Commercial Zones, Office Districts, Business Park and Industrial Zones, and Innovation Zones have been removed, as these areas are not impacted by the current version of the Hillside Area Overlay Map. In addition, the Prominent Ridgelines Map exhibit has been omitted following further review, as staff concluded that the applicable locational criteria for structures and screening methods can be effectively implemented without the need for a reference map.

Staff will present a final version of the Ordinance at the conclusion of these workshops once all components have been finalized under the Ordinance Introduction phase. This final version will reflect input gathered from stakeholders, incorporate any necessary revisions based on feedback, and ensure alignment with the City's broader advanced planning objectives.

Hillside Updates Ordinance Review

Less Critical	More Critical	What does it potentially do?	
	X	TABLE 16.08-3 RESIDENTIAL (SINGLE-FAMILY) ZONES GENERAL DEVELOPMENT STANDARDS Add a footnote that refers to the Hillside standards for the maximum building height.	
	X	TABLE 16.08-4 RESIDENTIAL (MULTI-FAMILY) ZONES GENERAL DEVELOPMENT STANDARDS Add a footnote that refers to the Hillside standards for the maximum building height.	
X		16.08.030 "Single-family Residential Design Standards and Design Features" Cross-reference to the Retaining Walls section for retaining wall criteria.	
X		16.08.040 Multi-family Residential Design Standards. Cross-reference to the Retaining Walls section for retaining wall criteria.	
X		TABLE 16.14-2 SPECIAL PURPOSE DISTRICTS GENERAL DEVELOPMENT STANDARDS Cross-reference to Hillside standards as a footnote for maximum building height.	
	X	SECTION 16.18.080 "HEIGHT MEASUREMENT AND HEIGHT LIMIT EXCEPTIONS" - The current method is difficult to discern. - Easier way to measure height with new images and tools. - A new method for measuring height on a slope is proposed to be taken five feet off of a building edge with a ten-foot allowance to accommodate varying topography.	

Less Critical	More Critical	What does it potentially do?	
		How does it work? - Measure the ground 5 feet away from the lowest place next to the building. Use the lower of the current or planned ground level there. - A building's height is based on this spot. - Can add the allowed height plus the ground height difference between the low and high spots (but only up to 10 extra feet if that difference is more than 10 feet). Picking the Right Starting Point: - If the ground around the building doesn't change much (10 feet or less), measure from the highest spot. - If the ground changes a lot (more than 10 feet), start from a point 10 feet above the lowest spot.	
X		Section 16.18.140.D.4.b "Setback Regulations and Exceptions" - New Step-back at 12 feet high to accommodate landscaping. - Provides central design information for retaining walls to make it <u>easier to follow</u> for internal staff and the public.	
X		Section 16.22.030 "General Height Limitations", Table 3-3 "Maximum Height of Fences, Hedges, and Walls" Renaming Table.	 Improvement
X		16.22.040 "Exceptions to Height Limitations – <u>Non-Retaining Walls</u>" Clarification of the applicability of this section to non-retaining walls.	 Improvement

X		16.22.060 “Walls Required Between Different Zoning Districts” - Cleanup of existing standards with the addition of the Innovation (INN) Zone. - This could be fixed within a future overall code update, if needed.	
X		16.22.070 “Special Wall and Fencing Requirements” - Addition of retaining wall criteria in a central location. - Currently lacking.	
X		16.24.010 “Purpose” Very minor updates to the section.	
	X	16.24.020 “Applicability” - This has been a main area of confusion. - Fixing application errors for slopes of twenty-five (25) percent or greater. - Designated criteria within the boundaries of a Hillside Overlay Map	
	X	16.24.030 “Definitions” - Removal of the Average Slope Calculation Definition and replacement with mapping provisions.  - Corrects/updates existing definitions consistent with other portions of the MMC.	

	X	16.24.040 “Application Submittal Requirements” - Minor updates covering submittal information / technical reports. - Clarifies what <u>a hillside condition is</u>.	 Improvement
	X	16.24.050 “Project Review Procedures” - Adding cross-referencing to the Hillside Overlay Map for applicability. - Clarification of “Commission” to mean “Planning Commission”. - Updates to provide objective criteria versus subjective criteria.	
	X	16.24.060 “Hillside Development Standards” - Updates to grading terms to match City standards. - Changes to fuel modification based on Fire standards. - Includes updated graphics.	 Improvement
	X	16.24.070 “Hillside Development Guidelines” - Updates covering criteria for site design, driveways & roads, architecture, walls & fences, landscaping, grading techniques (minimal, contour, landform), and drainage requirements. - Provides updated graphics.	 Improvement
	X	16.24.080 “Exceptions” <u>New Section</u> for Exceptions to Hillside Standards.	
X		16.28.090 “Reserved” <u>New Section</u> reserved for future updates.	
	X	16.28.100 “Hillside Overlay Map” <u>New Section</u> with Hillside Overlay Map. - Reference to the City’s online Geographic Information System (GIS) as an additional mapping resource for project review.	

X	16.28.080 "Landscape Standards" • Relabels Table 3-5 to Table 16.28-2 to make it easier to locate. • Adds percentages to the table that were missing from a prior code update.	 Improvement
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FISCAL IMPACT

None.

ATTACHMENTS

1. Planning Commission Ordinance Introduction Staff Report, June 28, 2023
2. City Council Workshop 1 Staff Report, August 15, 2023
3. City Council Workshop 2 Staff Report, March 5, 2023
4. Citywide - Hillside Overlay Map Exhibit
5. Focused 2 - Hillside - Los Alamos Hills Area
6. Focused 3 - Hillside - Greer Ranch Area
7. Focused 4 - Hillside - Murrieta Hills Area
8. Focused 5 - Hillside - Bear Creek Area
9. Focused 6 - Hillside - Western City Quadrant - Northwest Section
10. Focused 7 - Hillside - Western City Quadrant - Southwest Section
11. Draft Ordinance - Title 16 - Strikeout-Underline
12. Correspondence - Prior to Workshop 2