



**PALM DESERT
HILLSIDE OBJECTIVE
DESIGN STANDARDS**

EXISTING CONDITIONS & OPPORTUNITIES REPORT

March 2025

Prepared by:

JK A

IN THIS REPORT

- ◆ Existing Regulations
- ◆ Summary of Key Issues
- ◆ Hillside Precedents
- ◆ Consultant Considerations
- ◆ Questions for the City Council



PROJECT OBJECTIVES

- ◆ Explore, understand, and define the **built form and character of hillside development in Palm Desert.**
- ◆ Optimize **engagement** with residents, City staff, and decision-makers to understand expectations of **hillside development.**
- ◆ Translate community values into **objective design standards** that **foster the natural identity of the hillside** and acknowledge the **balance between nature and development.**



PROJECT TIMELINE

PROJECT INITIATION & EXISTING CONDITIONS

- ☒ Project Kickoff
- ☒ Hillside Tour with City Staff
- ☒ Existing Conditions Report
- ☒ **City Council Study Session**

TECHNICAL REPORT

- ☒ Case Studies
- ☒ ODS Findings and Recommendations Outline
- ☒ Decision-Maker Study Session

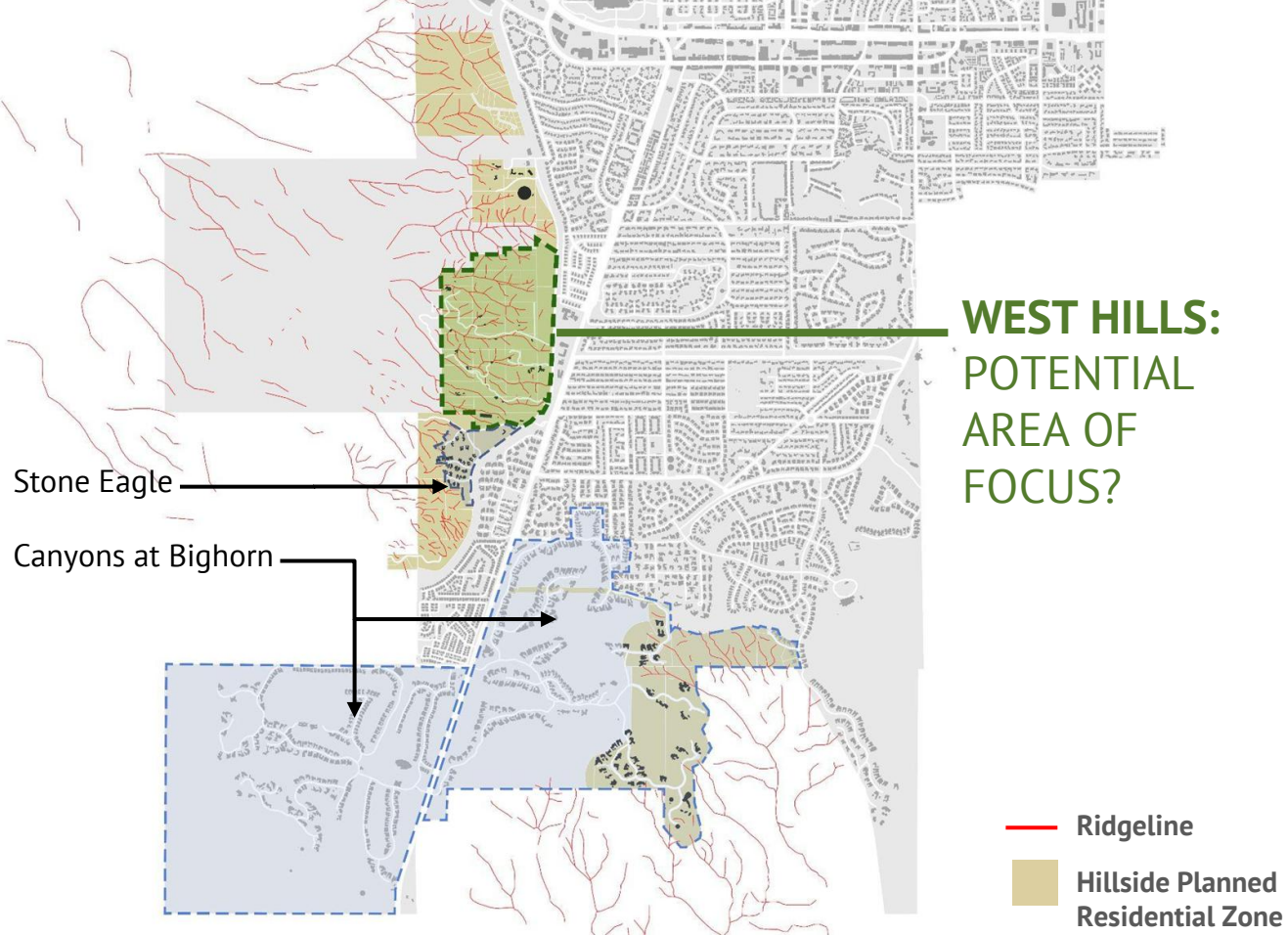
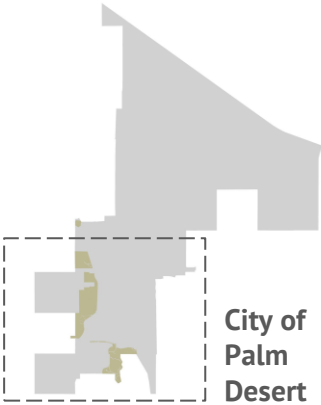
OBJECTIVE DESIGN STANDARDS

- ☒ Administrative Draft ODS
- ☒ Public Review Draft ODS
- ☒ Public Hearing Draft ODS

PUBLIC HEARINGS

- ☒ Public Hearings
- ☒ Final ODS

HILLSIDE PLANNED RESIDENTIAL

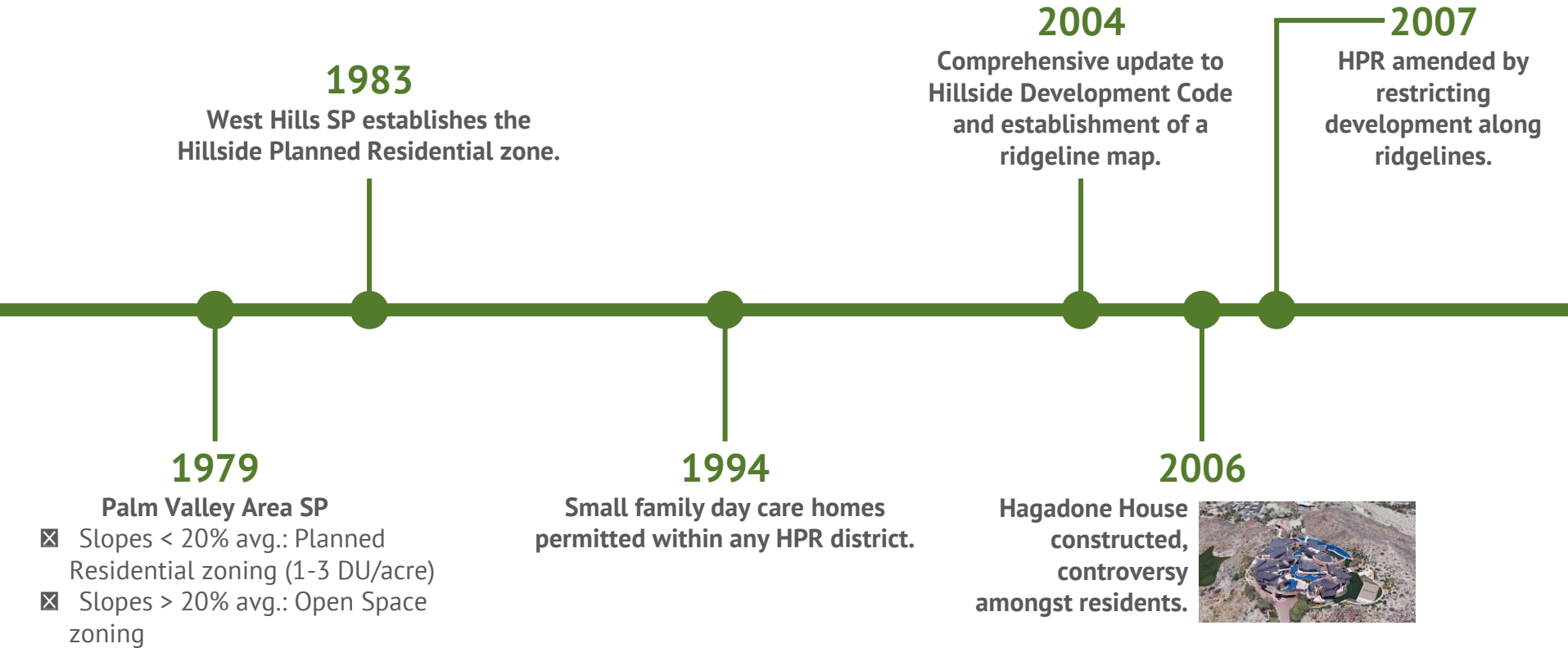


EXISTING REGULATIONS

- ◆ History of Hillside Zoning
- ◆ Palm Desert General Plan
- ◆ Hillside Planned Residential (HPR) Development Standards



HISTORY OF PALM DESERT HILLSIZE ZONING



GENERAL PLAN

Land Use 1.2 Open space preservation.

Balance the development of the city with the provision of open space, and especially the hillsides surrounding the City, so as to **create both high quality urban areas and high quality open space.**

Land Use 1.5 Hillside Development.

Limit development and grading in areas with slopes greater than 20 percent and **limit the density and intensity of development** in areas with slopes of between 10 and 19 percent.

Environmental Resources 2.3 Hillside grading.

Continue to **require the preparation of a grading analysis on hillside development** to pre-determine where development should occur so as to **minimize the impact of new development on views of the city's hillsides.**

Environmental Resources 2.4 Public facilities.

Plan public facilities, roads, and private development to **take advantage of the city's mountain and hillside views**, especially as the City Center develops.

Environmental Resources 2.5 Dark sky.

Limit light pollution from outdoor sources, especially in rural, hillside and mountain areas, and open spaces, to maintain darkness for night sky viewing.

EXISTING DEVELOPMENT STANDARDS

Density	min. 1 DU; max. 1 DU per 5 acres
Grading	<p>Preserve natural contours of the land to avoid extensive cut and fill slopes to reduce the need for a staircase effect within developments. Architecture/landscape design which blends with the natural terrain to the greatest practical extent.</p> <p>Retention and protection of undisturbed viewsheds, natural landmarks, and features including vistas and the natural skyline as integral areas.</p>
Building Pad Area	Area that is permanently disturbed by grading: max. 10,000 SF.
Access Road/ Driveway	<p>Permanent grading disturbance of natural terrain for development of access to the approved building pad: max. 3,000 SF.</p> <p>Roads shall be located/ designed to blend with the natural terrain to the greatest practical extent, consistent with other grading provisions.</p>
Renaturalization	All cuts, fills, or other areas temporarily disturbed by grading shall be renaturalized, colored, and landscaped to blend with the adjacent undisturbed natural terrain to the satisfaction of the City Council.
DU Size	max. 4,000 SF per lot, inclusive of total SF of DU, garage, and accessory building size

ODS	Design Guideline
☑	
	☑
	☑
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☑	
☑	
	☑
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Not required if:

- Commission and Council approve a precise plan of design.
- If a property owner can demonstrate that a previous building pad was approved by the City or County before incorporation, no public hearing is required. Building size would be limited to 35% of the lot, max. 50% with ARC approval. Enlarging a previously approved existing building pad would require a new public hearing.

EXISTING DEVELOPMENT STANDARDS (CONT.)

Coverage	Max. 35% for previously approved existing building pads, max. 50% with ARC approval
Ridges	Development on or across ridges is prohibited.
Building Pads/ Architecture Design	Designed to eliminate or minimize any visual impact on the City to the maximum extent feasible.
Common Open Space (COS) - select one	<p>a. Dedication of COS to the City, which is subject to formal acceptance.</p> <p>b. Establishment of an association or nonprofit corporation of all property owners or corporations within the project area to ensure perpetual maintenance of all COS.</p> <p>c. Retention of ownership, control, and maintenance of all COS by the developer; all privately owned COS shall continue as such and shall only be used in accordance with the development plan; appropriate land use restrictions shall be contained in all deeds to ensure that the COS is permanently preserved according to the development plan; said deed restrictions shall run with the land, be for the benefit of present as well as future property owners, shall contain a prohibition against partition of COS.</p>
Design Criteria	<p>The overall plan shall achieve an integrated land and building relationship.</p> <p>Open spaces, pedestrian and vehicular circulation facilities, parking facilities, and other pertinent amenities shall be an integral part of the landscape and particular attention shall be given to the retention of natural landscape features of the site.</p> <p>The layout of structures and other facilities shall affect a conservation in street and utility improvements.</p> <p>Recreational areas, active and passive, shall be generally dispersed throughout the development and shall be easily accessible from all dwelling units.</p> <p>Architectural unity and harmony within the development and with the surrounding properties shall be attained.</p>

ODS	Design Guideline
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SUMMARY OF KEY ISSUES

EXISTING MUNICIPAL CODE:

- ☒ Vague descriptions and design guidelines which are **subjective and open to interpretation** by Staff and decision-makers
- ☒ There are **exceptions available to any standard**
- ☒ **Limited objective standards**
- ☒ There is **no clear definition of viewsheds** or **relationship between developments and viewsheds**
- ☒ There are **no grading design standards**

HILLSIDE PRECEDENTS

- ◆ Blaine County, Idaho
- ◆ Los Angeles Hillside Ordinance and Mulholland Drive Specific Plan
- ◆ Palm Springs, California
- ◆ Pitkin County, Colorado
- ◆ Salt Lake County, Utah
- ◆ Santa Barbara, California



Add a slide summarizing the key issues with the existing code:

- Vague descriptions and design guidelines which are subjective and open to interpretation by staff and decision makers
- Exceptions available to any standard
- Limited objective standards
- No clear definition of view sheds or relation between development and view shed
- No grading design standards

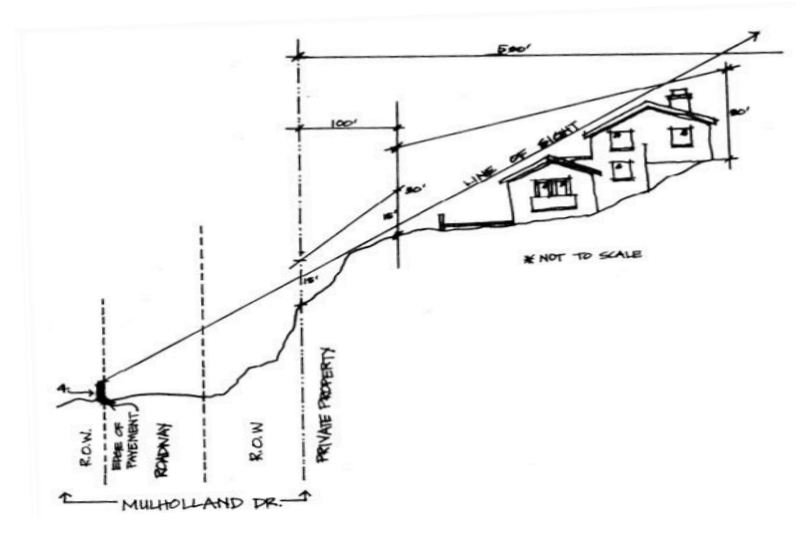
Use these issue identifications to prime council to understand why we looked at precedents of these other cities to show there are ways to address the issues we raise in this presentation

BLAINE COUNTY, IDAHO:

- ❑ On lots located adjacent to public lands, all buildings and other structures (except for perimeter fencing): **a min. 30' setback from federally managed and state endowment lands**
- ❑ Buildings and structures on lots of **five or more acres** shall have a **minimum 50' setback from public lands**
- ❑ Protection of skylines, ridges, knolls, tree and shrub clusters, and rock outcroppings to **preserve hillside appearance**

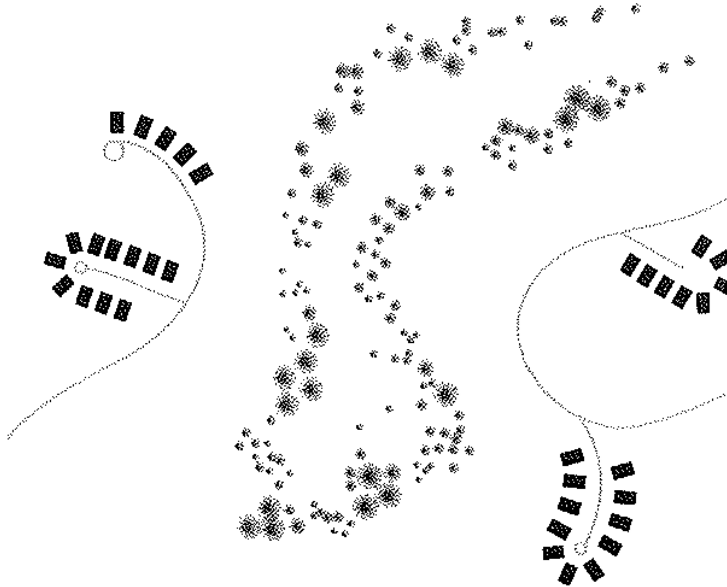
LOS ANGELES HILLSIDE ORDINANCE AND MULHOLLAND DRIVE SPECIFIC PLAN:

- ❑ **Visibility studies and/or viewshed analyses** depicting the relationship between a hillside building pad and a lower elevation corridor



SALT LAKE COUNTY, UTAH:

- ☒ **25% density bonus incentive** over the base density for **cluster developments** - which reduce infrastructure costs and environmental impacts



PITKIN COUNTY, COLORADO:

- ☒ Development standards **categorized by slope percentage** of parcel
- ☒ Detailed standards and guidelines for **retaining walls**, including maximum height, a max. two tiers of terracing, and material/color
- ☒ Heavy on infrastructural standards, such as **detention/stormwater, drainage, irrigation, utilities**

PALM SPRINGS, CALIFORNIA:

- ☒ **Minor hillside streets** (serving 4 lots or less) require a **minimum 32' curb to curb width** and a minimum 40' right-of-way
- ☒ **Hillside collector streets** (serving more than 4 lots) require a **minimum 36' curb to curb width** and a minimum 40' right-of-way
- ☒ **Curb-to-curb width exceptions** include but are not limited to:
 - A min. 24' foot travel way is provided, adequate vertical and horizontal sight distance is provided
 - Roadways provide **adequate access for emergency equipment** and that the fire department may require **upgraded fire protection systems** both on and offsite

SANTA BARBARA, CALIFORNIA:

- ☒ **Height Maximums:** In rural areas: the height of any structure should not exceed 16' wherever there is a 16' drop in elevation within 100' of the proposed structure's location
- ☒ **Montecito Hillside Overlay Zone:** project grading shall not exceed 1,500 cubic yards of cut or fill (excavation not apparent from the exterior not included), unless additional grading is necessary to allow reasonable development of the property or to achieve reasonable vehicular access

CONSULTANT FINDINGS & CONSIDERATIONS

- ◆ Views To Hillsides
- ◆ Views From Hillsides
- ◆ Use of Native Landscape
- ◆ Cluster Development
- ◆ Site Access Standards



VIEWS TO HILLSIDES:

Views of the hillsides and mountains from the City are iconic, but due to ongoing single-family development, hillsides are increasingly subject to change in a manner that decreases the conservation of the hillside setting.



CONSIDERATION:

Develop more robust viewshed standards to the hillsides from roadways and streets and across the field of view of larger developments.

< Calle de los Campesinos looking west, uphill

VIEWS FROM HILLSIDES:

Views from the mountainsides and hills to the City are spectacular, but there are cases where these views are compromised by subsequent development in the hillsides.



CONSIDERATION:

Standards for **hillside building pads, pads in relationship to ridgelines, access roads and drives**, and the **screening and visibility of new construction** could further reduce the visibility of new homes and conserve viewsheds from and across the mountain sides. Additionally, **more robust standards for individual developments in the hillsides that address the fit and character of development** could be developed. Areas where standards could be further expanded include, but are not limited to:

- ◆ Grading extent
- ◆ Height in relationship to ridgelines
- ◆ Roofline silhouette(s)
- ◆ Extent of scale, mass, bulk and transparency
- ◆ Use of color(s)
- ◆ Use of material(s)
- ◆ Extent of visible exterior lighting

< *South Cliff Rd looking east, downhill*

USE OF NATIVE LANDSCAPE:

The native desert landscape of the hillsides contributes significantly to the sense of place and identity of both the mountains and the city, but present landscape standards do not fully incorporate use of native and similar flora requirements.



CONSIDERATION:

Develop more robust standards for landscape in the hillside areas that conserves and fosters the native landscape characteristic of these locations.

< *Canyons at Bighorn*

CLUSTER DEVELOPMENT:

Planned single-family residential developments emphasize individual lot development as opposed to cluster development that maintains more conserved open space.



CONSIDERATION:

Develop incentives for clustering of development in hillside areas that conserves more open space.

< *Canyons at Bighorn*

SITE ACCESS STANDARDS:

Existing roads in some of the hillside areas do not meet minimum access standards that ensure life safety access. In some hillside areas, evidence of erosion due to water flow is visible and utilities are exposed.



CONSIDERATION:

Develop more base standards and requirements for individual property development in relationship to access, fire safety, flooding, and utilities that ensure life safety for both residents and first responders.

< *South Cliff Road*



QUESTIONS FOR CITY COUNCIL

- ◆ Should we concentrate our efforts in the West Hills area?
- ◆ Should we develop design standards for architectural and landscape fit in the landscape?
- ◆ Are there particular viewsheds that are important?
- ◆ Should we look further into hazard issues and opportunities for cluster development?
- ◆ Are there issues we haven't brought up that we should consider in this exercise?

THANK YOU!