

Memorandum

DATE	September 25, 2025		
TO	Sean Mullin, Planning Manager Town of Los Gatos SMullin@losgatosca.gov	FROM	Urban Planning Partners: Curtis Banks, Project Director Carla Violet, Project Manager Claire Mei, Project Planner Lisa Wise Consulting: Monica Szydlik, AICP, Senior Associate David Bergman, Director Jessica Chilingirian, Associate

RE: Los Gatos Objective Design Standards (ODS) Update Focus Groups Summary

This memo describes our findings from the Los Gatos ODS Update Focus Groups held on September 9, 10, and 11, 2025. Across eight virtual meetings, we engaged three participant groups—architects (1 session), developers (1 session), and residents (6 sessions). The feedback presented here includes responses to two icebreaker questions and perspectives on three key topics: high-quality building design, architectural style, and height transitions. Insights are organized by participant type, with a brief summary of participant feedback included at the top of each topic.

ARCHITECT ATTENDEES

1. Bess Wiersema, Principal + Owner at Studio 3 Design, Inc., residential and interiors
2. Jaclyn Greenmyer, Kohlsaas & Associates, single-family residential, some multi-family and mixed use
3. Jessie Delucchi, Kohlsaas & Associates
4. Jennifer Kretschmer from Kretschmer Architects

DEVELOPER ATTENDEES

1. Annette Seaborn, real estate agent/developer, owns 8 rentals and a 4-unit cottage in Los Gatos
2. Leumas (left the call early)

RESIDENT ATTENDEES

1. David Fradin, Los Gatos resident, has experience in environmental design.
2. Mary Pope-Handy has been a realtor for 20 years. She is concerned about fires and dense housing near the exits; she thinks Los Gatos needs more multi family.
3. Edgardo Laber is a resident of Los Gatos. He doesn't want to see unnecessary requirements that prevent quick building. He wants the Town to be a place where his kids can afford to live.
4. Mitzi Anderson is a resident of Los Gatos. She is somewhat familiar with the guidelines.
5. Linda, resident, multigenerational household with a young person's perspective and a disabled person's perspective.
6. Susan, resident, HPC and Planning Commission member
7. Ryan Rosenberg, GP and HEU advisory committee member.
8. Jeffrey Barnett, Planning Commission member, participated in developing original ODS.
9. Julie Southern, resident, house burned down in 1997 wildfire.
10. Joya Chatterjee, resident, involved in Chamber of Commerce.
11. Reva Cuthbertson, resident.
12. Daniel Snyder, advisory group to North 40
13. Dan Ross, North 40 advisory committee, General Plan advisory committee
14. Ricardo Avila, priest at St. Luke's Church
15. Lee Ann Wade, residential construction company owner
16. Peter Hertan, involved in various commissions
17. Katherine Schmidt, interested in urban design and planning
18. Kathryn, resident, remodeled an 1887 building
19. Carl, resident, lives in a neoclassical revival mansion home
20. Lee, resident, Historic Preservation Committee
21. Kevin Riley, professional planner
22. Bent Jensen, resident, from Denmark
23. Kevin, resident, lives in the historic district overlay

WHAT ARE YOUR FAVORITE BUILDINGS IN LOS GATOS?

- La Cañada
- Buildings at the NE corner of Highway 9 and University
- Former funeral parlor/current Gardenia restaurant
- Beckwith Block on East Main St (built ca.1893)
- Fretwell building
- Condos near Forbes Mill across pedestrian bridge from town. Blends in with the woods, lots of trees.
- Old Victorian homes
- Eichler homes
- Brick building on main street - southern kitchen location. Historic building, maintained well
- St. Lukes Church

- The new Whole Foods at Los Gatos Blvd and Amaden;
- The library
- Former funeral home, current Gardenia restaurant (great Victorian character)
- Corner N Santa Cruz and Main (distinctive roofline)
- Residential development along Grant Bishop Lane (good design, nice attic windows, and good diversity of design)
- Theatre
- Park side restaurant at 145 W Main Street (has the "Old California adobe" look)
- Robson project off Los Gatos Blvd
- Templeton Lane by Kennedy (Craftsman style, exterior articulation, finishes, colors)
- Los Gatos High School (classical design that doesn't get old)

WHAT ARE YOUR LEAST FAVORITE BUILDINGS IN LOS GATOS?

- Market Hall
- High rise apartment on college avenue - ugly
- North 40
 - Materials: poor quality
 - Architecture: Tiny little blocks everywhere, looks like a bunch of shoe boxes, low pitched roofs
 - Not cohesive, not enough articulation, poor quality materials, design exhibits a "coldness," units seem dark, no yard, should've been a 20-story building with open windows and a dog park

GENERAL COMMENTS - SUMMARY

Architects: Found 5-ft frontage rule unworkable; ODS assume single buildings instead of clusters; interpretation inconsistent; planners struggle with drawings; point system encourages low-quality, repetitive design.

Developers: Historic Preservation Committee slows projects; historic rules make buildings unusable.

Residents: Want ODS to be recommendations, not requirements; concerned about costs; standards should vary by neighborhood; need interim solutions for displaced businesses; want designs that create warmth and community.

GENERAL COMMENTS - DETAILED NOTES

Architects

- It's hard to do anything within 5 feet; it doesn't allow for people, decent trees, a bike zone, it's a weird number. (Note, this refers to the required building placement at max. 5 ft from the front setback line for 75% of building frontage.)

- The ODS assume development assume single buildings only. What about when development consists of several small buildings. How do the standards apply, or differ? A few buildings are better than one massive one.
- There are issues with how planners review projects (the writing, the rules, the interpretation). Planners (and Planning Commission) themselves often cannot read drawings.
- Interpreting the standards has been challenging.
- We need different standards for the Downtown proper and the other downtown.
- The current point structure is problematic. Some boxes (e.g., crown molding) are the easiest boxes to check, so those start to dictate the overall style, and that ends up being very limiting. And everyone does it. If everyone is picking the 3 same things, then everyone kind of getting the same style. Plus, some of these “easy points” are not very friendly to smaller buildings, are more tailored to large buildings.
 - Sometimes designers just need the points and end up sacrificing quality.
 - Let the architects explain how they can achieve same goal without the checklist.
 - Attendees are hoping to see the standards become more user friendly and flexible so applicants can actually check the boxes instead of going after waivers.

Developers

- Old and historic things have so many rules, HPC is difficult and if you can't make meeting it takes 3 more months, need their approval they think they know everything.
- Things that make Los Gatos quaint also make them old and unusable.

Residents

- The ODS shouldn't be requirements, only recommendations.
- The ODS should not be cost-prohibitive, require expensive design measures.
- The ODS should require trees between buildings if sidewalks are too small.
- The ODS should create warmth and a feeling of community.
- Need interim solutions for businesses that have to vacate/relocate during construction (e.g., Ace Hardware)
- The standards are not appropriate for all neighborhoods in town.
- There should be a distinction between standards for Los Gatos Blvd vs. the Downtown.
- Consider access. In the new plan for the Lodge site, there is an access issue for route 9. Needs better access, way in/out.
- Should allow developers to develop multiple buildings to make more uniform but different (think of places like Paris, Santana Row, Santa Barbara as good examples)

HIGH QUALITY DESIGN - SUMMARY

Architects: No specific comments.

Developers: Mahogany windows required by the Town were a failure — costly, leaky, impractical; want more durable alternatives.

Residents: Value sustainability, durability, solar access; like traditional styles (Spanish, Victorian, farmhouse) with some modern; want variety in materials/colors, articulation, and porches; dislike boxy, cheap, monotonous designs.

HIGH QUALITY DESIGN - DETAILED NOTES

Architects

NA

Developers

- The Town required mahogany windows, and they leak constantly. It has been 25 years, and the FG participant has redone them 10-15 times and they still leak, are cracked, don't open, and need to be replaced again. Iron clad on the outside and wood on the inside would work better.

Residents

- Likes:
 - **Sustainable design**
 - Energy efficient materials - high ceilings are luxurious but a waste of energy
 - **Durability/longevity**
 - No leaking
 - Attention paid to sunlight access for solar
 - Design
 - Timeless designs: a mix of Spanish styles, Victorian, brick/stone buildings, farmhouse style.
 - There is room for some modern design.
 - Window, door, and porch design are important
 - Materials and Colors
 - **Fire safe materials**
 - Varied use of materials.
 - High-quality stucco
 - **Different colored stucco, brick, wood**
 - Don't like buildings made of steel and glass
 - Materials like wood siding or hardie board, shingles
 - **Don't object to siding materials other than wood**
 - Sturdy railings
 - **Muted, natural colors, earth tones**
 - Articulation
 - Exterior articulation – not just boxes

- Tall windows, especially on the 2nd and 3rd stories, creates a welcoming feel.
- Buildings over 3 stories should provide more articulation and variety, considering how they relate to the buildings next to them
- Porches and other projections are important
- Heights building to building should vary
- Several people enjoy the glass and openness of the library
- Support for the open space and use of stone on the corner of Santa Cruz and Main
- Support for use of decals and other details
- Underground parking or parking in the back
- Dislikes:
 - Design
 - Dislike anything boxy, plain, or with weird shapes/curves.
 - No cheap-looking design
 - design that lacks detail, that is not distinctive
 - Corrugated steel, like on North 40, looks cheap
 - Small windows as they create a closed-off feeling
 - Monotony
 - Flat fenestration
 - Materials and Colors
 - T-1 11 – looks cheap, impermanent, low quality
 - Mismatched colors

ARCHITECTURAL STYLE - SUMMARY

Architects: Dislike prescriptive rules (continuous roof pitch, plate heights); want variation and flexibility; question “fake” frontages when parking is hidden.

Developers: Favor taller, larger, more modern mixed-use projects; appreciate Los Gatos’ eclectic, mixed style.

Residents: Support broad variety of styles if high-quality and compatible; dislike post-modern 70s designs and flat, monotonous facades; mixed feelings about glass/modern buildings; prefer good articulation and authentic details; okay with well-integrated small multiplexes.

ARCHITECTURAL STYLE – DETAILED NOTES

Architects

- If all of the parking is in the back, then what use is the frontage? It is fake, a movie storefront.
- There are challenges with buildings of 400 – 500 units being pedestrian-friendly. Where can you even put a building that massive? Should it be close to road like in downtown San Jose where they have a walkable downtown? Or should we push it back, so the height is not so intimidating?

- Dislike for the ODS that require continuous plate height and continuous roof pitch. We need more variation!
- The ODS are too specific about ways to conform to rules. They don't represent enough variety in ways to comply so that different styles can work. The Town wants variety and interesting architecture, but this pigeonholes us too much.
- Current ODS not friendly to middle housing.
- Some items in the checklist are too traditional (e.g., 8 ft arcade) and no one is doing that anymore.
- There is a need for more contemporary and modern design.

Developers

- There was a time when you could build the house you wanted and be creative with little bit of everything. The beauty of this Town is that it is a mix of everything.
- Need higher stories and to develop bigger and more mixed-use, likes modern and glass designs

Residents

- Setbacks
 - Architectural compatibility means similar setbacks, similar footprints to some of the classic neighborhoods
 - Do not like buildings with a solid flat wall up against the sidewalk in a neighborhood with a 20 ft setback
- Articulation
 - Windows should have some articulation – flat windows, or windows with minimal trim, look cheap
 - Windows and facades need depth, should not be just flat
 - Defining a better roof is more important than the roofing materials. Overhangs under 1' look visually cheap.
- Support for a variety of architectural styles
 - Los Gatos Blvd has lots of different types of buildings. It's different from El Camino Real, and we should keep it that way. Let's prevent development like we see on El Camino Real in Sunnyvale and Mountain View.
 - Accepting variety. Avoiding monotony.
 - Monolithic styles that lack articulation are not good
 - There is a feeling that people want to preserve what makes Los Gatos what it is.
 - Almost every style/design is appropriate: Eichler/mid-cent modern, Victorians, Pueblo style, Craftsman, Spanish, Victorian, Modern farmhouse, Contemporary
 - Architectural style is not as important
 - Compatibility comes down to how it presents at the street and how it relates to the neighbors behind
 - Don't want fake-looking imitations of historic styles

- Buildings should use details and features appropriate and authentic to the architectural
- Compatibility is more about quality of a style than if it looks like your neighbors. Like variety of architectural styles – no need to look like neighbors. Similar massing is good, but style can be varied.
- Do not like post-modern design from the 70s.
- Example addition: Miles & University, raised an old Victorian up and brought it closer to the sidewalk – so now it's visually dominating.
- Some are not bothered by modern buildings with glass and stone in a setting with a lot of trees while others do not like glass buildings in their town
- House along Alta a few doors in from Los Gatos Blvd that is modern, doesn't fit. But we like the library, so should an applicant be able to build something more modern.
- Main Street project is a great example of beautiful design that is compatible with the neighborhood and takes cues from the Los Gatos High School design. The Robson homes on Los Gatos Blvd are also more compatible with a variety of materials.
- Small MF
 - 2, 3, and -4-plexes – When done well, they look nice. When they look nice, with appropriate roofs, courtyards, doorways, etc., as opposed to a motel with a flat roof, they are good.
 - Fourplex Example: south on University Ave before bridal shop, before getting Old town on eastern side of the street. May have been a motel. It's ugly and horrible. Small, older cheap homes. 20 feet wide, u-shaped, poor use of space. One parking space, very tight spaces, added parking issues on the street.
 - Townhouses and small multiplexes should be well integrated into the neighborhood they go into
- Don't want to be too prescriptive because that will limit new development
- 6 story condo buildings in San Francisco - all look awful. Something more classic.
- Support tall mixed-use buildings to enable more walkable environment (residential above commercial)
- Balconies big enough to be usable
- Like in Detroit, tall buildings on corridors with single family behind
- Commercial and restaurant usage on ground floor
- Design garages so they can convert to housing in the future
- Specific Design Ideas (Green Building Focused):
 - Energy Efficiency
 - Lighting with motion detectors
 - Reflective paint for roofs
 - Passive cooling; specifically, thicker walls and circulating water through somewhat permeable materials (walls that "sweat" and dispense heat)
 - Water Efficiency

- Rain guards (Big Basin Way and Cupertino have these). Silicon Valley is sinking because of over-pumping of aquifer.
- Water barrels and plumbing from laundry room for water recycling
- Mechanical Equipment
 - Solar
 - Covered parking should have solar panels.
 - Solar electricity-producing windows, locally manufactured
 - Require EV charging
 - Heat pumps
- Landscaping
 - Vertical gardens on side of the building
 - Planting more trees
 - Edible landscaping/herb gardens (like in Northeast)

HEIGHT TRANSITIONS – SUMMARY

Architects: Concern about new multi-family on commercial lots “sticking out” due to mismatched setbacks with neighbors.

Developers: No specific comments.

Residents: Support for step-backs (e.g., 5 ft per story), especially near neighborhoods; landscaping and trees soften tall buildings; want gradual height increases in neighborhoods but accept taller buildings on boulevards/corridors; concerned about looming walls; some examples (Los Gatos Hotel positive, ACE/Whole Foods negative).

HEIGHT TRANSITIONS – DETAILED NOTES

Architects

- If a multi-family or mixed-use building develops on a commercial lot, then you’ll have commercial uses abutting the residential, where the setback is generally deeper. With the building placement standards, the new building will stick out. Especially when there is parking in the front setback of the neighboring commercial buildings.

Developers

NA

Residents

- Step-backs
 - Building should step-back so they don’t appear massive. The building across from Los Gatos high school is huge, it should fit in better.
 - Support for upper-story step-backs
 - Support for 5 feet step-back per story

- Feeling that step-backs create good design and would not limit number of units. Units may get smaller, but developers will still be motivated to get their desired number of units, regardless of the step-back
- There are locations where no set back or step-back is needed – existing context has no setback
- The Los Gatos hotel was controversial, but they nestled it in and transitioned well, with setbacks and green space. But the new ACE development has no transition to the surrounding neighborhood.
- The Whole Foods is too close to the Boulevard – it's a looming building and very modern that would have benefited from greater setbacks.
- Preference to have building setback away from the lower density home.
- Los Gatos Blvd, where more density is needed – shouldn't require transitions. Along major boulevards and freeways, no need for rear step-backs. Maximize density there.
- Landscaping
 - Having tall buildings near single family areas or in general should be accompanied by trees, especially evergreen
 - Example: Chase Bank on Santa Cruz Ave – already have tall trees, so it doesn't matter how tall the building is.
- Concentration
 - Los Gatos Blvd, where more density is needed – shouldn't require transitions. Along major boulevards and freeways, no need for rear step-backs. Maximize density there.
 - Support for slowly going up in height
 - A story beyond what is existing in a neighborhood is fine. If the area is two stories, then new buildings at 3 stories are fine. But going up to 4 or 5 stories in a two-story neighborhood is too much
 - Need transitions for larger homes to smaller homes, as well as taller buildings to shorter buildings
 - Preference to have taller buildings on main corridors
- Visual impact of what you see from those roads doesn't matter.
- Solid walls could feel imposing. Important to break it up.
- Support for varying the roof types allowed by the height of the roof