

ARCHITECTURAL REVIEW COMMISSION

PURPOSE

The City of San Luis Obispo has a number of unique characteristics, including ideal climate, spectacular natural vistas and an outstanding man-made environment that has evolved from historic traditions of the community. The Architectural Review Commission (ARC) has a vital role in the preservation and enhancement of the beauty and visual character of the City.

FUNCTIONS

The primary goals of the City's design review process are to:

- Maintain the community's quality of life for residents;
- Maintain property values;
- Attract growth in the local economy; and
- Preserve the City's natural beauty and distinct visual character.

The Commission is responsible for establishing (with Council approval) guidelines for determining what is "good design." These Community Design Guidelines are published in the form of a booklet with pictorial illustrations to help applicants understand the Commission's goal of maintaining a high level of architectural excellence in the City.

The Commission spends the majority of its time reviewing development plans for private and City projects after visiting project sites. They work with applicants and their designers to ensure that projects are consistent with required ordinances and standards as well as the Community Design Guidelines. Although Commissioners do consider the rights and desires of property owners/developers, they must make their decisions pursuant to the General Plan, Community Design Guidelines, ordinances, and other standards and procedures set forth in State and City law. When the ARC is the final reviewing body, the Commission may be responsible for environment determinations pursuant to the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA).

Good design, obviously, is a subjective matter. For this reason, the guidelines state generalized preferences for different types of projects and components of design, but also provide for flexibility to encourage creative designs. To allow for flexibility and to encourage excellence, the Commission may add to and modify project conditions at the public hearing where projects are considered. This "give and take" discussion with designers helps create projects that are not only designed technically well, but enhance and are compatible with the character of the immediate neighborhood and the City at large. It is important to understand that the Commission does not seek to dictate any particular style of architecture, but instead seeks a harmonious variety of compatible building styles.

SCOPE OF AUTHORITY

Most building projects in the City, including exterior remodeling, require ARC approval before a building permit can be issued. The only types of projects that do not require ARC approval are:

1. Individually built houses, with a few exceptions, as determined by the Community Development Director
2. Small projects, such as minor sign exceptions, building additions or remodels, or a new or small structure that is minor, or incidental to a larger, previously approved project (known as minor or incidental projects – require planning application and fee, but don't involve a hearing)
3. Very minor changes or additions to an existing building, or other site feature (known as aesthetically insignificant projects – no separate planning application is required)
4. Signs that meet the minimum standards of the sign ordinance (and are not part of a larger project that does require ARC approval).

In reviewing a specific project, the ARC looks at all of the project components that affect its exterior appearance and site design. Plans need to include complete information on site planning, grading, building design, colors, materials, signage, and lighting. Given the range of projects reviewed by the ARC, additional information or presentation products are sometimes requested to help the Commission and interested public better understand the project. The ARC is not concerned with interior function and design, except where it may impact the exterior appearance.

Occasionally, some of the factors considered by the ARC, such as site layout and parking, may overlap with the jurisdiction of the Planning Commission. This overlap is to be expected and does not necessarily mean that the two committees are duplicating work. The Planning Commission primarily concerns itself with general site design only in connection with land-use decisions, leaving the details to the ARC. However, when a specific site layout is approved by the Planning Commission, the ARC is expected to work with the general layout established by the Planning Commission action.

ARC approval by itself does not take the place of a building permit or other special approvals that might be required for a new project. Complete architectural review guidelines and more information about the ARC are contained in the Community Design Guidelines, which are available at the Community Development Department.

STATUS

The Commission, usually referred to as the ARC, was established by City ordinance in November, 1973. It is staffed by planners in the Community Development Department who do initial evaluation of development plans, confer with designers, prepare meeting agendas and assist the Commission in its duties. The Commission is responsible directly to the Council, which hears all appeals of ARC decisions. (SLOMC Chapter 2.48, Ordinance No. 600 [1973 Series]; Guidelines amended by Resolution No. 5086 [1983 Series]; Ordinance No. 1138 [1989 Series]; Ordinance No. 1417

[2002 Series]). Commissioners are compensated at \$50.00 per meeting with a monthly maximum of \$200.00. (Resolution No. 9189 [2001 Series]).

MEMBERS

The ARC has seven citizen members appointed by the Council. The only special qualifications for membership are a proven interest in the City's physical environment and the ability to make positive and fair aesthetic evaluations.

TERMS/LIMITS

Members of the Commission serve a term of four years. Members are eligible for re-appointment for an additional four years. Members are subject to a term limit of eight years, or two consecutive four-year terms.

MEETINGS

The ARC meets at 5:00 p.m. on the first and third Monday of each month in the Council Hearing Room, City Hall.