

# Design Review

This page provides an overview of design review programs for cities and counties in Washington State, including their uses and legality, local examples, and links to award programs and other resources.

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## Overview

Design review is the local government practice of examining public and private projects for their aesthetic, architectural, or urban design quality and compatibility with nearby development. Design review focuses on the appearance of new construction, site planning, and such concerns as landscaping, signage, and other aesthetic issues. Design review typically involves reviewing development projects for their consistency with a community's adopted standards or criteria addressing community character and aesthetic quality.

Design review is common for commercial and multifamily development, downtown development, development in historic districts, and for projects within certain transportation corridors. In many communities, design review is conducted by an appointed design review board of volunteers that include architects, landscape architects, urban designers, and other design professionals as well as general citizen representatives. Some communities have administrative design review that is handled by city staff, typically planning or urban design staff.

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## Why Design Review?

There are many reasons why communities enact design review programs. In some older established communities, the interest is in ensuring the compatibility of new development with existing character. Design review can help to enhance desirable pedestrian characteristics and the aesthetic quality of the streetscape. Another reason for design review is to avoid monotony in new construction. Design review is sometimes used to create an identity or a special physical character in an area of new development.

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## Legality of Design Review and Selected Court Decisions

Until 1993, there were no Washington appellate cases ruling on the validity of design review ordinances. That year, the Washington State Court of Appeals decided in [Anderson v.](#)

*Issaquah*, 70 Wn. App. 64, 82 (1993) that Issaquah's design review regulations were invalid due to vagueness. However, the issue of how far a city may go in regulating design is far from settled, and it is important for communities to develop meaningful design standards. In light of the Issaquah case, MRSC strongly advises cities, towns, and counties to review their proposed design review programs and criteria with their attorney's office.

The following are selected court decisions addressing design review:

- *Anderson v. Issaquah*, 70 Wn. App. 64, 82 (1993) The court ruled that Issaquah's design review regulations were invalid due to vagueness. It found the guidelines deficient because they did not give meaningful guidance to the applicant or the design review board. The court affirmed the legitimacy of design review by stating that aesthetic standards are an appropriate component of land use governance.
  - *Swoboda v. Town of La Conner*, 97 Wn. App. 613 (1999) In a challenge to the constitutionality of the town's historic preservation ordinance, the court determined that the ordinance contained ascertainable standards to protect against arbitrary and discretionary enforcement and defined prohibited or required conduct with sufficient definiteness, and therefore was not unconstitutional as applied. The town's preservation ordinance involves design review within the historic district.
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## General Design Review Information

This section includes basic design review information, including links to selected local design review boards.

### General Information on Washington Local Programs

- Gig Harbor [Design Review Process](#)
- Puget Sound Regional Council, [Featured Tool: Design Guidelines](#), Tools to Promote Housing Affordability – General introduction to design guidelines for affordable housing; includes case studies from Washington cities
- [Seattle Design Review Program](#) - Includes background on design review program, publications and guidelines
- Seattle's Design Review Program: Successes and Opportunities, [Full Report](#) and [Report Highlights](#), Office of the City Auditor, Seattle, 12/2006 - Evaluation of Seattle design review program and recommendations for improvement

### Local Design Review Boards

- Bellingham [Design Review Board](#) - Purpose of board, typical decisions, and membership information

- Kirkland [Design Review Board](#) - Includes rules of procedure and design review process brochure
  - Langley [Design Review Board](#) - Small city example
  - Pacific County, [Oysterville Design Review Board](#) - Reviews construction within Oysterville Historic District
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## Design Elements of Comprehensive Plans

A design element is an optional element of a comprehensive plan ([WAC 365-196-445](#)). Quite a few communities have included urban or community design elements in their comprehensive plans.

- Bellevue Comprehensive Plan [Urban Design and the Arts](#) (2015)
  - Bellingham Comprehensive Plan, [Community Design Chapter](#) (2016)
  - Bothell - Imagine Bothell Comprehensive Plan (2015) - See [Urban Design Element](#)
  - Clark County Comprehensive Plan, [Ch. 11 - Community Design Element](#)
  - Edmonds Comprehensive Plan, [Community Culture and Urban Design Element](#) (2016)
  - Kennewick Comprehensive Plan, [Urban Design Element](#) (2017)
  - Oak Harbor Draft Comprehensive Plan, [Urban Design Element](#) (2016)
  - Shoreline Comprehensive Plan, [Community Design Goals and Policies](#) and [Community Design Supporting Analysis](#)
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## Design Review Guidelines and Code Provisions

See our [Design Review Guidelines and Code Provisions](#) page.

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## Design Excellence

This section includes illustrations of successful designs and examples of design excellence, including design awards and visual preference surveys.

### Illustrations of Good Design

Illustrations of successful examples of development projects can be helpful in encouraging good design. The MRSC [Planning Illustrated page](#) includes sections relevant to good design.

- [Image Banks](#) - Images of Multiple Planning-Related Subjects (MRSC Planning Illustrated page)
- [Density Mitigated by Design](#) (MRSC Planning Illustrated page)

## Design Awards

Some communities and organizations give awards to recognize excellence in design. Among the best known of these are the annual American Institute of Architects (AIA) awards given by many local and state chapters.

- Seattle AIA [Honor Awards for Washington Architecture](#)
- Clark County [Community Pride Design Awards](#) - last updated 2013
- Puget Sound Regional Council [Vision 2040 Awards](#) - Recognizes outstanding projects that help to achieve regional growth, economic, and transportation strategy
- [BetterBricks Awards](#) (Oregon, Idaho, Puget Sound area, and Southwest Washington) - Recognizes energy-efficient commercial building projects
- Washington Chapter American Planning Association (APA) - [Annual awards](#) for excellence in planning jointly awarded by the Washington APA and the Planning Association of Washington (PAW)

## Visual Preference Surveys

The Visual Preference Survey (VPS) was developed by architect Anton Nelessen and is an effective tool for educating and involving community members in land use planning. The process involves members of the community in ranking images of a community or region, including photographs of streets, houses, stores, office buildings, parks, open space, and other key civic features. The results of the VPS are useful in developing land use plans and transportation planning projects.

- A Nelessen Associates, Inc. [Vision Planning Process](#) – Background and description of VPS process from its creator
- Bellevue [Eastgate/I-90 Land Use and Transportation Project Visual Preference Survey Summary Report](#), 06/2011
- Bremerton Manette Subarea Plan, [Visual Preference Survey](#) - Concise summary of results of VPS
- Cheney [Visual Preference Results](#) , Unified Development Code Project, 04/ 2012 - Well-organized VPS with good photos
- Ellensburg [RM Zones – Visual Preference Survey](#) - Example of a simple approach to a VPS focused on multifamily zones
- Mukilteo Downtown Business District Subarea Plan, [Visual Preference Survey - Results](#), 2008
- [Snapshots of a Community's Preferences](#), by Jeff Schommer, The Charrette Center - Basic information on VPS