PLANNING COMMISSION STAFF REPORT

DATE: JANUARY 7, 2009 STUDY SESSION

SUBJECT: DISCUSSION OF DEVELOPMENT STANDARDS FOR HILLSIDE SITES

FROM: Craig A. Ewing, AICP, Director of Planning Services

On July 2, and October 1, 2008, the Planning Commission discussed the City's regulations addressing development in hillside areas, with special focus on the definition of a hillside lot. Out of those discussions, the Commission concluded that a hillside lot would be any lot that had an average slope of 10% or more over that portion of the lot which excluded the required yard areas.

At the October meeting, staff also proposed to identify some design principles that could be adopted into Section 93.13 (Hillside Development) as a way to guide applicants and the Commission in the design and review of future hillside projects. The Commission and AAC, may wish to consider the Siting and Design guidelines from the ESA-SP zone developed for the Chino Cone as a basis for hillside review. The applicable ESA-SP guidelines are attached.

Below are a number of other guidelines related to grading, siting, building dimensions, architectural design, and landscaping. At this point, staff is not recommending any of these, as some may not be appropriate in their current wording. With the ESA-SP guidelines, they are intended to provide a point of departure for discussion between the Commission, AAC and staff.

Grading

A. Preservation of Landforms. Prominent landforms within the community, including, but not limited to ridgelines, knolls, valleys, creeks (either dry or active), or other unique topographic features or viewscapes, shall be maintained.

B. Slopes. The height of retaining wall(s) exposed to view shall be deducted from the permitted height of the slope.

1. Cut Slopes.

a. Height Threshold. Unless approved by the Planning Commission, the sum of the vertical heights, at any one section through the site, of any finished cut slopes created for the purpose of developing a residential dwelling or accessory use site, shall be limited to the height of the proposed structure wherever it is to be concealed from general view by that structure, or to a maximum of ten feet where exposed to general view.

b. Width Standard. Unless approved by the Planning Commission, the lateral extension (width) of the finished cut slope shall not exceed the maximum width of the structure by more than twenty (20) feet,

with an additional twenty (20) feet allowed for tapering to existing grade.

c. Gradient Threshold. Unless approved by the Planning Commission, maximum exposed cut slope at any one section through the site shall not exceed that allowed by the city's building code in effect at the time of grading permit issuance, and shall be further limited to the average existing grade plus twenty (20) percent grade. The existing and modified slopes shall be indicated on the topographical map by section cut lines spaced not more than twenty (20) feet apart.

2. Fill Slopes.

a. Height Threshold. Unless approved Planning Commission, the vertical height of any finished fill slope created for the purpose of developing a residential dwelling site shall not exceed ten feet.

b. Gradient Threshold. Unless approved by the Planning Commission, maximum fill slope shall not exceed that allowed by the city's building code in effect at the time of grading permit issuance, and shall be limited to the average natural grade plus twenty (20) percent grade. The existing and modified slopes shall be indicated on the topographical map by section cut lines spaced not more than twenty (20) feet apart.

3. Slope Contours. Any manufactured slope, and the radius of any slope forming a transition between manufactured and natural slope shall follow the natural topography to the greatest extent possible. In no event shall less than a twenty-five (25) foot radius be used for the convex blending curvature at the outside corners and edges of any cut slope or fill slope or for the concave curvature where a cut slope or fill slope meets natural grade. The top and bottom of any cut slope or fill slope shall be rounded with a radius of not less than five feet.

4. Road or Driveway Cut/Fill. For a driveway or roadway, the maximum total vertical height of any combination of finished cut and fill slopes from grade shall not exceed eight feet unless approved through administrative (or higher) review.

C. Drainage.

1. Debris Collection. Where applicable, lot designs and the location of proposed improvements shall permit accommodation of debris from potential land slippage and/or erosion without damage to improvements or other properties downslope, and with access to a street to provide for cleanup and removal.

2. Runoff and Subsurface Discharge. Passage for bulked-flow and subsurface runoff shall be provided to a safe point of discharge, such as a street, channel or debris basin, in a manner such that damage to improvements, slopes, or other properties will not result. Natural stream gradients should not be flattened.

3. Overflow Route. An emergency overflow route for flood and debris flows which exceed the design capacity of planned drainage, flood control and debris facilities and devices shall be provided. Overflow routes shall direct overflows away from slopes and improvements and toward safe points of discharge.

4. Downdrains. All required exposed downdrains shall follow an oblique, rather than vertical, path down the slope, and shall be screened to the maximum extent possible by color and/or appropriate vegetation.

Siting

A. Minimum Setback Dimensions. Minimum setback dimensions shall conform to the standards for the underlying zone, except that a front setback reduction for one-story construction to no less than twenty (20) feet may be approved through an administrative (or higher) hearing, upon finding that the reduced setback:
   1. Minimizes grading, building visibility, or paving; and
   2. Achieves compatibility with the neighborhood setting.

B. Ridgeline Protection.
   1. Sites and Structures. Proposed building sites and/or structures shall not detrimentally impact a primary ridgeline or knoll.
   2. Fences and Freestanding Walls. Fences and freestanding walls shall be located away from any ridgeline or crest of any slope so that such fences and walls are not visible against the sky from offsite.

C. Watercourse Protection.
   1. Blockage. Blockage of watercourses, canyons, or streambeds is prohibited, and any alteration of such features is discouraged.
   2. Approval by Other Agencies. Development in the vicinity of Blue Line Streams is subject to Army Corps of Engineers and California Department of Fish and Game approval prior to any issuance of grading or building permits.

Building Dimensions

A. Height. Maximum allowed building height is twenty-eight (28) feet as measured from the lowest finish grade adjacent to the building or directly beneath a projecting wall surface, to the highest roof structure, aside from the following exceptions as measured from the same grade:
   1. Downslope Wall Height. Maximum allowed height of the downslope wall, aside from architectural extensions per the following subsection, shall be twenty (20) feet as measured from the lowest finish grade adjacent to the wall or directly beneath its outermost projection, except that for any project on a lot or parcel with an average slope of less than forty (40) percent, an upper wall section set back 6 feet or more from the building line established by the lower wall may be considered a separate wall.
   2. Architectural Extensions. A maximum height of forty (40) feet for architectural extensions of up to twenty (20) feet in width or depth may be allowed, subject to approval through an administrative (or higher) hearing. Such extensions shall not be used for inhabited floor area above the highest floor level of the rest of the house.
   3. Stepped Massing. A maximum overall height of thirty-five (35) feet may be allowed, subject to approval through an administrative (or higher) hearing, for buildings which, in stepping down the slope, diminish effectively viewed bulk, provided that at no point around the perimeter of the building is the twenty-eight (28) foot height limit exceeded except for architectural extensions per preceding subsection (A)(2) of this section. A building is considered to step down the slope if the line connecting its corresponding components is no steeper than the average of the natural slopes adjacent to the entire structure.
   4. Vertical Additions. Any vertical addition to any habitable structure shall be subject to approval through an administrative (or higher) hearing.
   5. Retaining Walls Adjacent to Buildings. Any retaining wall less than twenty (20) feet from a building wall may be considered a part of that building wall for the purposes of calculating building height.

B. Overall Horizontal Dimension Guideline. Maximum horizontal dimension shall not exceed one hundred twenty (120) feet, unless approved by the Planning Commission.

Architecture (Note: Many of these guidelines apply to more traditional architecture and may not be appropriate in a Modern context.)

A. Roof Pitch. The dominant roof pitch at the downslope side shall correspond to the natural slope of the site, and no more than twenty-five (25) percent of the total roof area should be flat.
B. Vertical Accents. Vertical accents are encouraged and shall be accompanied by a vertical break in wall surface.
C. Symmetry. Overall symmetry is strongly discouraged.
D. Wall Modulation.
    1. Separation Between Breaks. A vertical break or breaks in each wall surface shall be provided at least each forty (40) feet on the first floor and each twenty (20) feet on the second floor.
    2. Break Dimensions. The breaks in plane recommended in preceding subsection (D)(1) of this section shall consist of significant projecting or recessed areas.
E. Surface Depth. Creation and expression of surface depth, through the use of deeply recessed wall openings, reveals, moldings, cornices, and similar devices, are encouraged.
F. Cantilevers. Cantilevers and dominant overhangs, except for eaves, are discouraged.
G. Brightness. Reflectance value (LRV) shall not exceed fifty (50) percent for walls or fences, or thirty (30) percent for roofs.
H. Reflectivity. Reflective glass and glossy roofing materials are discouraged.
I. Roof Elements. Reflective roof elements such as skylights and solar panels shall not produce substantial glare from offsite view, and shall not dominate the view of the building from close range.

Landscaping

A. Planting and Maintenance. Plants shall be established and maintained in accordance with the approved plan. Planting should be installed as early as possible following finish grading in order to allow timely granting of occupancy permits Landscaping proposed to screen any part of the project must reasonably be expected to grow to an effective level in four years (see Section 11.35.070).
B. Irrigation. No automatic irrigation system shall be allowed unless moisture sensor shutoff is provided to prevent over-saturation. Drip irrigation is encouraged wherever consistent with soil retention. Plant materials of similar water needs shall be grouped on the same irrigation valve.
C. Screening.
    1. Retaining Walls. Any retaining wall over three feet in height shall be screened from offsite view by a building or by landscaping.
    2. Building Screening. Where building bulk as seen from downslope is a concern, effective mitigation through landscape screening shall be provided.
    3. Accessory Structures. Accessory structures shall be screened from offsite view.
D. Plant Characteristics. The plant palette shall be consistent with the objectives of erosion control, overall drought tolerance, and incorporation of native plants. Transitional plant character shall be provided in areas separating natural slope growth from planted and irrigated areas.
E. Tree Sizes and Quantities. Sizes and quantities of new trees and existing trees to remain shall maximize retention and planting of mature trees, with a guideline of

twenty-five (25) percent of the new and existing trees either mature or of minimum thirty-six (36) inches box size at planting.

cc: Palm Springs Zoning Code Section 92.21.1.05.H and I (ESA-SP Zone Siting and Design Guidelines, and Findings of Approval)

Palm Springs Zoning Code Excerpt

ESA-SP / Environmentally Sensitive Area – Specific Plan Zone
Section 92.21.1.05.H and I

H. Site Planning and Design. The site planning and design of development shall have as their objective: The minimal disturbance of the underlying landforms, site topography and surface environment of each planning area and any adjacent planning area, and the introduction of buildings, structures, and landscaping which appear and function as integral parts of the site's natural environment. The following principles describe how the objectives for site planning and design would be fulfilled.

1. Guiding Principles. General criteria: The following elements are preserved in the site plan:
    a. Natural features, environmental functions and cultural features, as determined by the Environmental Analysis.
    b. View corridors, as determined by View Analysis.
    c. The existing and proposed trail system.
    d. Natural topography.
    e. Natural vegetation.
    f. Natural water channels and drainage ways.
    g. Significant visual features, such as peaks, ridgelines, rock outcrops, boulder fields, and significant stands of vegetation.
2. Guiding Principles. Design:
    a. Development of Planning Area 5A harmonizes with and does not overshadow Visitors Center.
    b. Buffers in setbacks fluctuating between seventy-five (75) to one hundred twenty-five (125) feet (average one hundred (100) feet) are developed on properties fronting North Palm Canyon Drive to screen development from motorists' views.
    c. Buffers in setbacks fluctuating between fifty (50) to seventy-five (75) feet (average sixty-two and one-half (62.5) feet) are developed on properties fronting Tramway to screen development from motorists' views.
    d. All rooftops in Planning Areas 5 though 8 are screened from highway view using berms, landscape materials and setbacks.
    e. Passive solar control is incorporated into the architecture. Recessed window and entry openings and deep roof overhangs are examples.
3. Guiding Principles. Walls and fences:
    a. Perimeter or property boundary walls and fences are avoided.
    b. Site walls and fences enclose the minimum area necessary to provide privacy or code compliance (swimming pools, etc.).
    c. Walls and fences do not cross significant desert vegetation, water channels or significant topographic features.
    d. Walls are designed to avoid unbroken lines, using undulations, offsets, notches and similar features.
    e. Walls and fences are screened with landscaping and boulders to minimize visual appearance.
4. Guiding Principles. Lighting:
    a. Exterior lighting fixtures are shielded to eliminate off-site views of any direct light source. All lighting is directed downward with no up-lighting of landscaping.

b. Maximum height for commercial, free-standing lighting fixtures is eighteen (18) feet.

5. Guiding Principles. Landscaping:
   a. The plant palette for any project is limited to drought-tolerant plants, except as may be approved within a specific plan. Invasive plants are not used.
   b. Landscape lighting is not allowed, except as may be approved within a specific plan.
   c. Irrigation is of a non-spray design.
   d. Turf areas are not visible from street views, except as may be approved within a specific plan.
6. Guiding Principles. Energy conservation:
   a. Comprehensive energy conservation and green building principles are incorporated into project design, construction and operation.

I. Findings Required for Approval. Any application for development project within the ESA-SP zone may only be approved if, in addition to the findings contained in Section 94.04.00 of the Palm Springs Zoning Code, the following findings are made:
1. The project demonstrates a complete and integrated vision for design, operation and use through the use of exemplary site planning, architecture, landscape architecture, materials and color principles and techniques.
2. The project is harmonious with, adapted to, and respectful of, the natural features with minimal disturbance of terrain and vegetation.
3. The project is properly located to protect sensitive wildlife habitat and plant species, and avoids interference with watercourses, arroyos, steep slopes, ridgelines, rock outcroppings and significant natural features.
4. The project will be constructed with respect to buildings, accessory structures, fences, walls, driveways, parking areas, roadways, utilities and all other features, with natural materials, or be screened with landscaping, or be otherwise treated so as to blend in with the natural environment.
5. The project utilizes landscaping materials, including berms, boulders and plant materials which, insofar as possible, are indigenous and drought-tolerant native species.
6. The project grading will be terrain sensitive and excessive building padding and terracing is avoided to minimize the scarring effects of grading on the natural environment.
7. The project meets or exceeds open space area requirements of this Section and in accordance with the conservation plan, and adequate assurances are provided for the permanent preservation of such areas.
8. The project provides the maximum retention of vistas and natural topographic features including mountainsides, ridgelines, hilltops, slopes, rock outcroppings, arroyos, ravines and canyons.
9. The project has been adequately designed to protect adjacent property, with appropriate buffers to maximize the enjoyment of the subject property and surrounding properties.
10. The project will not have a negative fiscal impact on the city or its citizens.