

ATTACHMENT G

Variance Information

VARIANCES:

A variance is a constitutional safety valve to prevent a property from becoming unusable if the zoning code were strictly applied. It protects against an unconstitutional taking by allowing the owner to seek a deviation from the applicable zoning so as to enjoy the benefits (i.e., property rights) afforded to other properties in the vicinity and under the same zoning designation.

The findings for a variance must satisfy each prong of a four-prong test. Specifically, an applicant must demonstrate that: 1) they will suffer practical difficulties and unnecessary hardships in the absence of the variance; 2) these hardships result from special circumstances relating to the property that are not shared by other properties in the area; 3) the variance is necessary to bring the applicant into parity with other property owners in the same zone and vicinity; and 4) the proposed variance will not be contrary to public interest, safety, health, and welfare.

GENERAL:

1. Courts view variances as an exception rather than the rule. The requirements for variances under California law are very strict.
2. Variance findings should be as detailed as possible, and provide specific facts and rationale to support each of the factors.
3. The justification for a variance shall be based solely on comparative information describing the disparities between the subject property and surrounding properties.
4. The burden of demonstrating that the variance findings are met shall be the responsibility of the applicant. Depending on the request, the applicant may need the assistance of professional engineers and attorneys to develop the necessary data and facts supporting their request.
5. Profit motive, benefit to community, practical difficulty, superior building standards, lack of opposition, operational efficiencies and attractive architectural features all may have value and be desirable from a planning perspective, but these factors are legally irrelevant when considering a variance application.
6. A variance cannot be granted to allow a use or activity which is not otherwise expressly authorized by the zone regulation governing the parcel or property.
7. An applicant must provide sufficient information to ensure that granting the variance does not result in a special privilege to the applicant and a method of doing that is through comparison to other properties within the vicinity under the same zoning designation. It is not a valid legal argument that a neighboring property received a variance in the past.

DEFINITIONS:

Unnecessary Hardship. Hardship is generally evaluated based on economics and effective use. If the property can be put to effective use, consistent with its existing zoning, without the deviation sought, it is not significant that the variance sought would make the applicant's property more

valuable, or that it would enable the applicant to recover a greater income, nor that it would relieve the applicant from undesired costs in compliance with the existing restrictions. An unnecessary hardship occurs where the natural condition or topography of the land, such as peculiarities of the size, shape or grade of the parcel, places the landowner at a disadvantage vis-à-vis other landowners in the area. The hardship must relate to a unique condition of the property and not be self-induced or pertain to the plight or desires of the owner. The hardship must be specific to the property; not personal to the owner or applicant.

Special Circumstances. An applicant must show special circumstances applicable to their property as compared to other properties in the vicinity and with the same zoning designation. Special circumstances can be documented through the use of GIS mapping to show the conditions of properties in the vicinity *compared* to the conditions of an applicant's property. Without such a comparison or other evidence in the record showing the conditions of surrounding properties, this finding cannot be made.

Parity. Variances are intended to bring the property up to parity with such other properties and must not amount to a grant of special privileges over and above those privileges enjoyed by such other properties in the vicinity and zone. Parity is based on equality of the property rather than equality of the owners. There must be an affirmative showing that the subject property differs substantially and in relevant aspects from other parcels in the zone, otherwise the granting of a variance would amount to a "special privilege."

Effect of Variance on Public Welfare. Any decision to grant or deny a variance must be consistent with public interest, safety, health, and welfare, and must not be contrary to the intent or spirit of the general plan or the zoning ordinance. This factor requires staff to consider whether the applicant's project serves other policy goals, including non-zoning regulations or policies. These non-zoning regulations may also contribute to the applicant's hardship by placing other restrictions that do not relate to zoning, but which might render a particular use impossible under current zoning regulations.