



SAN FRANCISCO PLANNING DEPARTMENT

Executive Summary Residential Roof Decks Policy Informational Briefing

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Project Name: Residential Roof Decks Policy
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Recommendation: **None – Informational Item Only**

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SUMMARY

Roof decks are a popular means of providing an outdoor amenity area to augment open space in a dense urban setting. However, because of their elevated location they also enable a potential intensification of uses that can negatively impact the quality of life of adjacent residents and therefore enhancements to such spaces need to be carefully considered in the design review process. As such, potential adverse impacts such as noise, diminishment of privacy, and reduction of light to adjacent properties should be mitigated. Vertically projecting appurtenances that provide access to roof decks, such as stair and elevator penthouses, as well as windscreens and solid parapets can also add unwelcome visual impacts onto adjacent properties.

BACKGROUND

In recent years, the Planning Commission has seen an increasing number of requests for the Discretionary Review of small-scale residential projects involving roof decks and accompanying stair and elevator penthouses. In order to ensure a consistent and predictable approach to evaluating the appropriateness of these rooftop features, the Planning Commission directed Planning staff to study and develop an internal policy taking into consideration the following issues:

- Size of decks, and the cumulative impacts of multiple decks
- Availability of usable open space at grade
- Appropriateness of front decks vs. balconies
- Roof decks serving as common vs. private usable open space
- Pattern of roof decks in the surrounding neighborhood
- Greening of rooftops
- Quality of life impacts including privacy, noise, intensity of use and programming (ie. fire pits, bbqs, hot tubs)
- Shadowing of vertical appurtenances onto adjacent light wells/side setbacks
- Visual clutter and sight lines from adjacent properties

ISSUES AND CONSIDERATIONS

Planning Code

Currently, building permits proposing roof decks on low-density residential buildings with no related expansion to the building envelope can be approved over-the-counter without triggering review by the Residential Design Advisory Team (RDAT), and do not require a pre-application meeting or Section 311 neighborhood notification.

The Planning Code exempts stair penthouses to a maximum 10 feet above the prescribed height limit, provided they do not exceed 20 percent of the roof area. Likewise, elevator penthouses are exempted to a maximum of 16 feet. Also exempt are railings, parapets and catwalks, with a maximum height of four feet, and unenclosed seating areas limited to tables, chairs and benches, and related windscreens, lattices and sunshades with a maximum height of 10 feet, regardless of the area they occupy.

The Planning Code does not restrict the number or horizontal surface area of roof decks.

The Planning Code requires minimum amounts of usable open space designed for outdoor living, recreation or landscaping, and allows for such areas to be located on roofs. The amount required varies by zoning district, from 300 square feet in RH-1 and RH-1(D) zoning districts to 100 square feet per unit in RH-3 zoning districts. In each of these districts, common usable open space may be substituted for private usable open space at a ratio of 1.33. Usable open space on a roof deck shall have a minimum horizontal dimension of six feet and a minimum area of 36 square feet if private, or at least 15 feet in every horizontal dimension and a minimum area of 300 square feet if credit as common usable open space.

Residential Design Guidelines

While the Planning Code exempts certain rooftop appurtenances from the prescribed height limit, the design of such features are reviewed in the context of the "Residential Design Guidelines" as adopted and periodically amended for specific areas or conditions by the City Planning Commission. The impacts on adjacent properties and neighborhood context to be considered and balanced with respect to the reasonable development rights of property owners are outlined and commonly applied in the following guidelines of the Planning Department's Residential Design Guidelines under Rooftop Architectural Features:

- "Sensitively locate and screen rooftop features so they do not dominate the appearance of a building."
- "Design stair (and elevator) penthouses to minimize the visibility from the street."
- "Design parapets to be compatible with the overall building proportions and other building elements."
- "Design windscreens to minimize impacts on the building's design and to light of adjacent buildings."

Building Code

The Building Code does not permit roof hatch access for buildings with three or more dwelling units. In situations where roof hatch access is viable, the minimum hatch opening size must allow for a 36" stair width and a length to provide for a minimum of 80" headroom below until the hatch can be operated. The Building Code requires a minimum interior head height of 80" and a minimum interior stair width of 36" for stair penthouses providing both private and common roof access.

PROPOSED RESIDENTIAL ROOF DECKS POLICY

Currently, projects proposing roof decks on low-density residential buildings with no related expansion to the building envelope can be approved over-the-counter without triggering review by the Residential Design Advisory Team (RDAT) or Section 311 neighborhood notification. Projects proposing roof decks with stair or elevator penthouses and/or other expansions to the building are assigned to a planner for more detailed review, and will require RDAT review and Section 311 neighborhood notification. The size and location of the proposed roof decks and stair and elevator penthouses are reviewed on a case-by-case basis in a qualitative approach, devoid of any definitive numerical thresholds.

Planning staff have developed a series of thresholds with which to evaluate both new construction and alteration projects proposing roof decks and stair penthouses in the RH-1, RH-1(D), RH-2 and RH-3 zoning districts. The Department recommends adopting a policy whereby projects deemed to comply with the thresholds may continue to be approved over-the-counter if there are no other Planning-related issues or proposed expansions to the building. Permit applications routed to a planner for other reasons that also are within these thresholds will not trigger RDAT review, while those that do not comply will be reviewed by RDAT on a case-by-case basis and may be reduced in scope or deemed acceptable based on the surrounding context. In the event of a DR hearing, a summary of compliance with this policy will be appended to the staff report. In addition to the controls for deck size and separation, the prevalence, location, and size of other related decks in the immediate context shall be established and considered before approval. The proposed thresholds are as follows:

Size

Maximum total cumulative deck area of no greater than 1/3 the roof area.

Because decks are elevated open spaces, they often enable uses that come into conflict with the privacy of adjacent neighbors, and buffers or separation alone may not be sufficient to ameliorate these concerns. The Department's recommended threshold of 1/3 of the roof area is a sufficient size to accommodate enjoyment and connection to open space, but considerably less than a full floor, and usually only requires one means of egress per the Building Code, whereas roof decks above this threshold commonly require a second means of egress.

Setbacks

Minimum 5-foot setback of deck guardrails from all building edges except the rear building wall.

Setbacks of 5 feet are recommended from shared side lot lines and from the edges of light wells. Side setback requirements may not be necessary where a roof deck abuts a neighboring blind wall.

While there continues to be some discussion surrounding the appropriateness of roof decks at the front of buildings, the Department believes that, when properly set back from the main front wall, these roof decks can be beneficial by providing opportunities to increase “eyes-on-the-street”.

Access

Internalized staircase or roof hatch only for single-family dwellings. One minimally sized stair penthouse, only when required by Building Code, permitted for multi-unit buildings.

The Department recommends creating a hierarchy of preferred means of access; prioritizing less obtrusive means such as roof hatches and internalized stairwells, while allowing for stair penthouses in circumstances where they have minimal impacts on access to light and air, as well as visual clutter.

In order for a stair penthouse to be considered “minimized”, Planning staff recommends a sloped roof providing an internal vertical clearance and landing no larger than the minimum required by the Building Code, to be set back 5 feet from shared side lot lines and from the edges of light wells. Roof access within the recommended 5-foot setback area shall be provided by means of a roof hatch or internalized staircase.

BASIS FOR RECOMMENDATION

The Department’s recommended roof deck policy attempts to strike a balance between allowing for the reasonable provision of outdoor open space on the roofs of low-density residential buildings, which will improve livability in a dense, urban setting, while protecting the quality of life for adjacent neighbors. It also aims to ensure a consistent departmental review process and more predictable outcomes.

The Planning Department recognizes that roof decks in residential neighborhoods serve a purpose of enhancing access to passive open space, but due to their location may be susceptible to an intensity of use that creates negative impacts that spill over to adjacent properties. Therefore, adoption of the above-noted controls and performance criteria to mitigate these potential impacts is proposed.

In order to encourage the concentration of usable open space closer to ground level where outdoor activities tend to have fewer impacts on adjacent properties, these guidelines do not apply to any decks less than 3 feet above grade, which can be built without a building permit.

COMMUNITY OUTREACH

On July 18, 2018, the Planning Department sent an emailed bulletin to all subscribers of the City’s registered neighborhood groups, representing a total of 207 recipients. The bulletin summarized the Department’s developing roof deck policy, solicited feedback, and advised the public of the August 30, 2018 Planning Commission hearing where Planning staff would present the results in an informational presentation.

Planning staff received a number of telephone and email inquiries in response, most requesting additional information, although some requested in-Department meetings or conference calls to provide more detailed feedback, which was generally positive and underscored the public appetite for clearer guidelines and procedures for reviewing projects proposing roof decks and rooftop appurtenances.

NEXT STEPS

Pending the additional feedback from the Planning Commission, as well as any additional public comment received at the August 30, 2018 hearing, Planning Department staff will draft a resolution for the Commission to adopt at a later hearing, formally implementing the recommended roof deck policy.

In order to successfully implement this policy, Planning staff recommends that the aforementioned thresholds be incorporated into a revised Deck Handout publication available at the Planning Information Center and online, as well as in the Residential Design Guidelines when they are next amended.

The Commission may also wish to direct Planning staff to begin developing similar guidelines for roof decks on larger, multi-unit residential and mixed-use projects.

REQUIRED COMMISSION ACTION

This item is being presented for informational purposes only. No formal action by the Planning Commission is required.