



### Asking the Right Questions and Getting the Right Answers

As expressed at the workshop, sometimes getting clear consistent answers to one's questions is a challenge with planning departments. Here are some recommendations:

1. **Be prepared** : before contacting the agency, have the property address and assessor's parcel number handy. This will enable the planner to look up the zoning on your property quickly.
2. **Do a little research** beforehand: virtually all planning departments have websites these days with links to the relevant codes and development standards. Try to research your questions before making contact with the planning department; this will allow you to better refine your questions. Most planning department websites are located within the official County or City government website where the department is based.
3. **Important questions to ask:**
  - a. What kind of planning or building permits will I need to accomplish my project?
  - b. What materials do I need to submit for an application? Be aware, most require plans prepared by at least a draftsman, and possibly an architect and/or engineer.
  - c. How much are the fees? These would include:
    - i. Application fees
    - ii. Development impact fees (parks, fire protection, etc)
    - iii. Infrastructure fees
    - iv. Off-site improvements
    - v. Building permit fees
  - d. How long does the permitting process take?
  - e. Are there other regulatory agencies that need to review my project?
  - f. Will there be any public hearings about my project, or will the review occur at the administrative level?
  - g. If it will be heard at the planning commission (or other body), who are the commissioners?
  - h. If I obtain approval, what will the likely conditions be?
4. **Arrange a pre-application meeting** with a planner to go over your conceptual ideas (before you have sunk much money into them) and scope out your project. It's best to approach planning departments with some moderately well developed ideas, rather than the wide open "What can I do with my property?" Usually pre-application meetings are free, but some planning agencies charge a fee. It is well worth it in my opinion.
5. **Always try to get a confirmation in writing** about your requirements or answers to your questions. This can be done possibly via email communication or by "snail mail" (formal letter) as a confirmation after a pre-application meeting or phone conversation.
6. If there are conflicting interpretations of rules, **request a zoning letter**. This may take a month and it will have a nominal cost (\$40-\$200), but you will receive a formal written letter from the planning department stating all of the requirements of the zoning and clarifying any questions you may have asked.