



Planning Director Code Interpretation REVIEW OF RAILING DETAILS IN THE HISTORIC DISTRICT

Issue

How are railings in the Historic District reviewed consistently and equitably, given the increased metal costs?

Applicable Snohomish Municipal Code (SMC) provisions

SMC 14.05.050 Administration and interpretation

- A. The City Planner shall interpret and apply this Development Code consistently. As may be necessary, the City Planner shall render new interpretations in writing, file said interpretations, and apply said interpretations in future like instances.
- B. In the event of conflict, 1) specific provisions shall prevail over general provisions, 2) text shall prevail over headings, captions, illustrations, and citation references, and 3) Chapter 36.70B RCW shall prevail over this Development Code.
- C. Regulations, conditions, or procedural requirements that are specific to an individual land use shall supersede regulations, conditions, or procedural requirements of general application.
- D. A land use includes the necessary structures to support the use unless specifically prohibited or the context clearly indicates otherwise.
- E. The word “shall” is mandatory and the word “may” is discretionary. The word “should” is mandatory unless the City Planner determines that application of the particular provision is not necessary to implement the purposes of the Development Code as set forth in SMC 14.05.020.

SMC 14.225.030 Design Standards

- A. The following design standards are hereby adopted in the Historic District, copies of which shall be kept available in the office of the City Planner:
 - 1. “The Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for Rehabilitation and Guidelines for Rehabilitating Historic Buildings,” as they now read or are hereafter amended;
 - 2. “Snohomish Historic District Design Standards,” as adopted by a resolution of the City Council.
- B. In the event of conflict between the above standards, the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards shall control.
- C. The above design standards shall be subject to interpretation in accordance with SMC 14.05.050 and obtaining variances in accordance with Chapter 14.70 SMC.

Applicable Design Standards

Historic District Design Standards

Purpose & Intent

The purpose of these design standards is to promote the continued preservation of the character of Snohomish's Historic District and historically significant buildings, and to encourage the design of compatible new development that is creative, high-quality, and expressive of its own time. New development that respects and relates to the scale of existing buildings and reflects the Historic District's character will protect the investment of businesses and property owners and attract visitors to the community into the future.

Site Elements – Fences | Walls | Railings

Standard V.3.B.2 (Page 69)

2. Materials

The following materials may not be used in the visible construction of fences, walls, and railings.

1. Chain link or wire mesh of any kind
2. Plastic or vinyl of any kind, including plastic lumber
3. Barbed wire and razor wire
4. Hollow metal tubing smaller than one inch outside diameter.
5. Plywood, chipboard, particleboard, and other engineered wood products
6. Pipe fittings used for plumbing or steam fitting (threaded sweat fittings)
7. Cast concrete without decorative texture or treatment
8. Plain concrete block, or "cinder block"
9. Plate or sheet metal, flat or corrugated, less than 1/8-inch thick, unless used as a decorative element and comprising less than eight square inches in area, and 20 percent of overall surface area of the fence, wall, or railing.
10. Exposed pressure treated wood with perforated surface
11. Expanded metal mesh of any kind
12. Solid bar stock smaller than 3/8-inch round section, or 1/4-inch-by-3/4-inch rectangular sections, unless tapered sections made from thicker bars
13. Bright finished aluminum or stainless steel, unless used for fasteners only
14. Bright surface plated metal of any kind, including chrome and nickel plating, unless used for fasteners only

Standard V.3.B.2.4 (Page 70)

4. Metal

- a. Metal pickets shall have a modulated top end; plain square ends shall not be used, unless the top element is used specifically for grasping.

- b. Pipe and metal tubing may be used only as vertical posts, and only if capped with a decorative finial, unless the top element is used specifically for grasping. Finials shall incorporate historic references. Plain pipe railing shall not be used.
- c. Industrial style railing shall not be used. Industrial style railing includes a guardrail or handrail that is fabricated from pipe or tubing using industrial flush-welded fittings for joining, radius bends and attached elements. Such railings are characterized by a limited use of different sections, lack of modulated lines and no use of decorative elements.

Standard V.3.B.2.6 (Page 71)

6. Railings

Guardrails and handrails may be fabricated from pipe or tubing provided they conform to the following criteria.

- a. At least two different sections must be used. For example, a guardrail incorporating two-inch pipe posts with one-inch screening elements.
- b. All vertical elements, including posts and pickets, must have modulated top ends. The end may be a decorative cap, finial, bend, or integrally worked end element. Flush welded end caps shall not be used.
- c. Unless used specifically for grasping, all horizontally oriented top elements must have a decorative element such as a finial placed at intervals not greater than six feet. Add-on elements used to discourage skateboarding shall be consistent with the overall design.
- d. Industrial style railing shall not be used. Industrial style railing includes a guardrail or handrail that is fabricated from pipe or tubing using industrial flush-welded fittings for joining, radius bends and attached elements. Such railings are characterized by a limited use of different sections, lack of modulated lines and no use of decorative elements.

Interpretation

Discussion:

The standards applicable to railings, particularly V.3.B.2(4), V.3.B.2(12), and V.3.B.2.6.a, are highly specific and can add significantly to the cost of a project without contributing in a proportional manner to the project's aesthetic benefits or historic character. Similarly, the specificity of the standards do not necessarily support the intent of the design standards, which is "to promote the continued preservation of the character of Snohomish's Historic District and historically significant buildings, and to encourage the design of compatible new development that is creative, high-quality, and expressive of its own time".

While new development should reflect the character of the Historic District and its buildings, it may not be necessary to *replicate* the pre-1930s metalwork that was and more common in the era for a number of factors unrelated to design choice. According to the Federal Reserve Bank, metal prices in the 1930s era of the Historic District were at an all-time low due to the Great Depression. Today, metal prices have increased significantly, even accounting for inflation.

Moreover, building appurtenances, such as railings, awnings, signs, and other temporary elements are part of the building design because they are attached to the building but can be removed without causing damage to the building itself. While designing railings for longevity is preferred overall, it should not be mandatory in the same way that a storefront or other architectural element is. Those architectural elements have the potential to irreparably change or cause damage to a building, while railings do not.

Analysis:

The standards of V.3.B.2(4), V.3.B.2(12), and V.3.B.2.6.a do not substantively further the intent of the Metal and Railing sections of the standards, or the overall intent of the Historic District Design Standards. The standards place a cost burden on the applicant that is onerous and out of proportion with the benefit that strict adherence to the standards brings to the community.

Conclusion

The specific standards of V.3.B.2(4), V.3.B.2(12), and V.3.B.2.6.a shall not be mandatory design standards.

Dated this 3rd day of October, 2025.



Brooke Eidem, AICP
Planning & Development Services Director

NOTE:

This decision is made pursuant to the authority granted to the Planning Director in accordance with SMC 14.05.050. Any aggrieved party to the Planning Director's Decision and administrative determination may appeal the decision to the Hearing Examiner following the procedures contained in Chapter 14.75 SMC. If no timely appeal is filed, then the Planning Director's Decision shall be final. Appeals must be filed with City Clerk within 14 days from the date of this decision. Appeals must include a filing fee of \$500 (five hundred dollars).