Orange County Planning and Inspections Department

SPECIAL USE PERMIT FACT SHEET

The purpose of this fact sheet is to provide a breakdown of Orange County's Special Use Permit submittal and review process.

The information contained herein provides an explanation on the nature of the permit proceedings, the presentation of evidence, burden of proof, what constitutes testimony and who can present evidence, and your rights with respect to challenging a decision to either approve or reject a SUP application.

1. ***What is a Special Use Permit*?**

   A Special Use Permit (SUP) is a permit allowing for the establishment of certain uses, in certain districts, that are considered worthy of additional scrutiny in their proposed location. Such uses typically require special review for design, location, and impact on surrounding properties.

   Orange County has 2 different categories of SUP, specifically:

   i. **Class A** reviewed and acted upon by the Board of County Commissioners (BOCC), with a recommendation from the Planning Board, and

   ii. **Class B** reviewed and acted upon by the Orange County Board of Adjustment.

2. ***What is considered a 'Special Use'?***

   A SUP is required for those specific land uses identified within the Orange County Unified Development Ordinance (UDO) Table of Permitted Uses contained within Section 5.2.

   These uses are identified in the UDO's Table of Permitted Uses with an 'A" for Class A SUP and a 'B' for a Class B SUP. Some uses may be permissible in certain districts without restriction (referred to as "uses by right"), but require the SUP in districts where their impact calls for special consideration. Applicants are entitled to be granted a SUP if they can show that specific standards would be met.

3. ***When are such applications reviewed?***

   Review of a SUP application occurs during a previously scheduled and advertised public hearings held by either the BOCC or the Board of Adjustment.

   The review of an application is a carried out in a quasi-judicial process.

   The typical cadence associated with the review of a SUP is broken down in Section 2.7 of the UDO and can be summarized using the following flow chart:

4. ***What does quasi-judicial process mean?***

Quasi-judicial decisions arise in a variety of local government settings.

During a quasi-judicial hearing, the Board (i.e. BOCC or Board of Adjustment) responsible for rendering a decision acts much like a panel of judges. The Board hears factual evidence and sworn testimony presented at the public hearing and then makes a determination on whether the permit can be issued based on the competent, substantial, and material evidence presented.

Put differently a quasi-judicial decision is one that requires the board hearing the matter to find facts and make decisions by applying those facts to the standards in the Unified Development Ordinance.

5. ***Who may speak or present evidence at the public hearing?***

Both individual applicants and those individuals supporting, or opposed to, the application are encouraged to attend. Individuals may represent themselves or be represented by an attorney and they may have expert witnesses testify for them.

The cost for attorneys or expert witnesses is borne by the individual seeking counsel or expert testimony, not the County. The County will not pay for, or reimburse, expenses incurred by an individual in their quest to support or oppose a SUP application.

While not required by State or County regulations, all parties with an interest in a SUP application are strongly advised to have an attorney represent them.

Engineers, architects, real estate agents, planners and other non-attorneys may only appear as expert witnesses; they may not represent an applicant or those opposed to an application.

Only those with standing may speak or present evidence.

6. ***What are the responsibilities of the applicant?***

The applicant bears the ultimate responsibility for producing and submitting competent, substantial, and material evidence for the body reviewing the application to conclude the proposal complies with applicable County regulations.

If they fail to submit evidence demonstrating compliance, the request is denied.

If, however, the applicant proves they comply, and there is insufficient evidence submitted to the board hearing the case demonstrating they do not comply, the applicant is entitled to have the application approved.

7. ***What standards must be met by the applicant?***

All applicants must show compliance with the General Standards for all SUPs, as detailed within Section 5.3.2 of the UDO, and any specific development standards associated within the proposed use.

The General Standards, as contained in Section 5.3.2, read as follows:

> *(a) The use will maintain or promote the public health, safety and general welfare, if located where proposed and developed and operated according to the plan as submitted;*
>
> *(b) The use will maintain or enhance the value of contiguous property (unless the use is a public necessity, in which case the use need not maintain or enhance the value of contiguous property); and*
>
> *(c) The location and character of the use, if developed according to the plan submitted, will be in harmony with the area in which it is to be located and the use is in compliance with the plan for the*

subject. In this case it would not be considered as 'competent' evidence and would be inadmissible.

ii. Substantial evidence: evidence that which a 'reasonable mind' would regard as sufficiently supporting a specific result.

Would this persuade the average person to make a certain conclusion? Does it do more than speculate?

iii. Material evidence: evidence that is relevant to the issue being considered.

For example if a board is reviewing an application for a kennel (i.e. a place where dogs/cats are housed and cared for a period of time) an individual who is opposed may submit documentation denoting noise complaints from other kennels throughout Orange County. This could be construed as 'material evidence'.

Documentation denoting animals have died in kennels throughout the county and, as a result, this specific application should be denied is not relevant to the case at hand as it has no specific relationship to what is being proposed. This would be deemed immaterial evidence and would not be admissible.

As a general rule, anyone with knowledgeable information (i.e. relevant) to the case may provide factual information, but only experts may provide opinion testimony.

Even expert testimony must be competent (i.e. the expert has qualifications relevant to the issue) and material before the decision-making board can rely on it.

Hearsay evidence is testimony that the witness does not know of his or her own personal knowledge, including that which someone else told the witness and the use or introduction of signed petitions and letters.

The board may only hear testimony that focuses on the applicable standards and criteria established in the UDO. Unless they are a qualified expert, witnesses are not competent to testify about the impact of a proposed land use on the value of nearby property, the danger to public safety resulting from increases in traffic or other matters that require special training or expertise like the level of noise that will be generated.

13. ***Can conditions be imposed on a SUP***?

Generally, the board hearing the application may attach conditions to the approval of an SUP as it relates to compliance with applicable standards. For example, a condition may require the applicant to increase the size of a required setback or land use buffer in order to ensure the project complies with that specific standard as detailed within the UDO. The Board cannot impose conditions addressing an issue not related to an existing standard such as establishing hours of operation, color of buildings, etc.

Conditions cannot require the applicant to take action with regard to a piece of property that is not a part of the application being considered, and conditions cannot require the alteration of a special use permit previously issued to a third party.

14. ***Is there a record of the proceedings***?

Complete records must be kept of the hearings. Detailed minutes must be kept noting the identity of witnesses and giving a complete summary of their testimony. Any exhibits presented are retained by the board and become a part of the file on that case. An audio recording of the hearing is also made.

15. ***How are parties notified of the decision***?

The board rendering a decision on the application is required to make a formal decision on the application (i.e. approve or deny) in writing and shall be based on the determination of facts and their application to the specific standards for the particular use and the general standards contained in the

SECTION 2.7: SPECIAL USE PERMITS

2.7.1 Generally

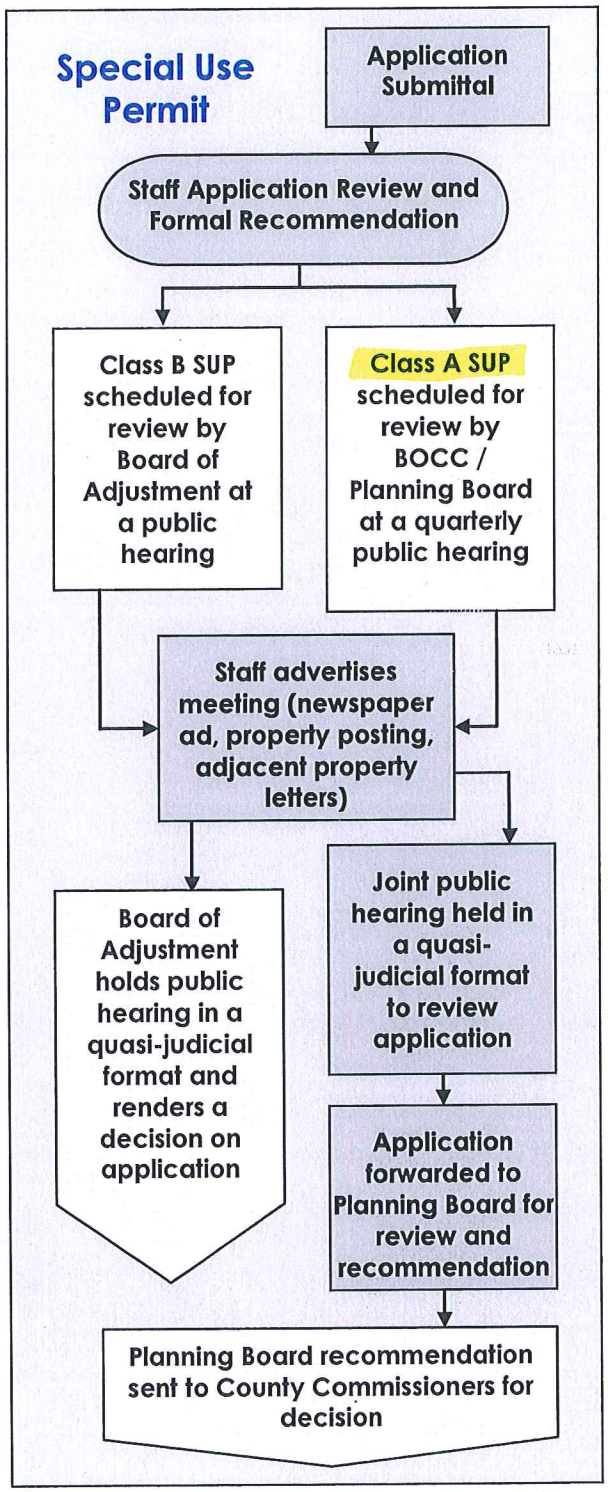
(A) Any use or development designated by applicable zoning district regulations contained within Article 5 as a special use, or as allowed only pursuant to a special use permit (either Class A or Class B), may be established in that district only after the use or development is authorized by a validly issued and recorded special use permit.

(B) This section sets forth required review and approval procedures for submittal, review, and approval of applications for special use permit.

(C) A special use permit authorizes its holder to use or develop a particular parcel of land in a particular way, as specified by the terms and conditions of the special use permit.

(D) A special use permit imposes on its holder the responsibility of ensuring that the authorized use or development continues to comply with the terms and conditions of approval.

(E) Issuance of a special use permit does not relieve the holder of the special use permit of the additional responsibility of obtaining a building permit or any other permit or approval required by any other applicable law.



2.7.2 Review and Approval Flow Chart

The review and approval process for Special Use Permits is shown in the procedure's flowchart.

2.7.3 Application Requirements

(A) Applications for a Special Use shall be submitted on forms provided by the Planning Department in accordance with Section 2.2 of this Ordinance.

(B) Applications shall include:

(1) A full and accurate description of the proposed use, including its location, appearance, and operational characteristics.

(2) The name(s) and address(es) of the owner(s) of the property involved.

(3) Relevant information needed to show compliance with the general and specific standards governing the Special Use (See Articles 5 and 6).

(4) For Class A Special Uses 26 copies of the site plan, and for Class B Special Uses 10 copies of the site plan, prepared by a registered North Carolina land surveyor, landscape architect, architect, or engineer, which shall contain the information listed in Section 2.5.

(5) If the application involves a Preliminary Subdivision Plat, 26 copies of the Plat prepared in accordance with Section 7.14 shall be provided.

(6) A list of all parcels located within 500 feet of the subject parcel and the name and address of each property owner, as currently listed in the Orange County tax records.

(7) Elevations of all structures proposed to be used in the development.

(8) For Class A Special Uses 26 copies and for Class B Special Uses 10 copies of the Environmental Assessment and/or Environmental Impact Statement, if required by Section 6.16.

(9) Method of disposal of trees, limbs, stumps and construction debris associated with the permitted activity, which shall be by some method other than open burning.

(10) Statement from the applicant indicating the anticipated development schedule for the build-out of the project.

(11) Statement from the applicant in justification of any request for vesting for a period of more than two years (five years maximum).

2.7.4 Staff Review

(A) The Planning Director shall cause an analysis to be made of the application by qualified representatives of the County and other agencies or officials as appropriate.

(B) The Planning Director shall submit the analysis to the Board of County Commissioners and the Planning Board, in the case of Class A Special Uses, or the Board of Adjustment, in the case of Class B Special Uses.

(C) The appropriate Board reviewing the application shall receive and enter the analysis into evidence during the public hearing. The analysis shall be subject to examination by all interested parties and the Planning Director shall be subject to cross-examination regarding the analysis.

(D) The Planning Director shall not make a recommendation on the general findings detailed within Section 5.3 of this Ordinance

2.7.5 Neighborhood Information Meeting

(A) Before a Public Hearing may be held for a Special Use the applicant is required to schedule a minimum of one neighborhood information meeting. The purpose of the meeting is to obtain surrounding property owner input and comments on the proposed development project and allow staff an opportunity to explain the review process associated with the request.

(B) The applicant shall obtain property owner mailing address information from the Orange County Planning Department, which shall utilize Orange County Land Records data, and shall mail certified notices of the meeting date and time to each property owner within 500 feet of the property for which a Special Use has been requested.

(C) The applicant shall mail notice of the Neighborhood Information Meeting a minimum of 14 days prior to the date of the meeting.

(D) The applicant shall post a sign on the property advertising the date, place, and time of the meeting a minimum of 10 days prior to the date of the meeting.

(E) The meeting shall be held a minimum of 45 days prior to the date of the Public Hearing.

(F) Neighborhood information meetings for telecommunication facilities shall be held in accordance with the provisions of Section 5.10.8 (B) (2).

2.7.6 Notice Requirements for Class A Special Use Permits

(A) The Planning Director shall give public notice of the date, time and place of the public hearing to be held to receive comments, testimony and exhibits pertaining to the application for a Special Use.

(B) Such notice shall be published in a newspaper of general circulation in Orange County once a week for two successive weeks, with the first notice to be published not less than ten days nor more than 25 days prior to the date of the hearing. In computing the notice period, the day of publication is not to be included, but the day of the hearing is to be included.

(C) The Planning Director shall post on the affected property a notice of the public hearing at least ten days prior to the date of said hearing.

(D) Written notice shall be sent by certified mail to all adjacent property owners not less than 15 days before the hearing date. Adjacent property owners are those whose property lies within five hundred feet of the affected property and whose names and addresses are currently listed in the Orange County tax records.

2.7.7 Notice Requirements for Class B Special Use Permits

Notice Requirements for Class B Special Use Permits shall follow the procedures in Section 2.12.6.

2.7.8 Nature of Proceedings

(A) The review of Special Use Permit applications shall be conducted during a public hearing by the decision-making board.

(B) The review of a Special Use Permit application is a quasi-judicial process, where the Board responsible for rendering a decision acts much like a panel of judges. The Board hears factual evidence and sworn testimony presented at an evidentiary hearing, and then makes findings of fact supported by competent, substantial, and material evidence.

(C) The chair or presiding officer of the hearing shall swear all parties intending to present evidence or testimony during the hearing.

(D) The chair or presiding officer may take whatever action is necessary to limit testimony to the presentation of new factual evidence that is material to the application, to ensure fair and orderly proceedings, and to otherwise promote the efficient and effective gathering of evidence. Such actions may include:

(1) Barring the presentation of obvious hearsay evidence,

(2) Barring the presentation of non-expert opinion,

(3) Interrupting digressions into immaterial testimony,

(4) Interrupting repetitive testimony,

(5) Reasonably limiting the time allotted each witness or cross-examination,

(6) Providing for the selection of spokespersons to represent groups of persons with common interests,

(7) Interrupting personal attacks, and/or

(8) Ordering an end to disorderly conduct.

(E) Where the Board finds compliance with the general standards, specific rules governing the specific use, and that the use complies with all required regulations and standards,

(C) Where vesting in excess of two years is requested, the project is located in an area where current issues under study do not involve potential amendments to the Comprehensive Plan and/or this Ordinance.

2.7.11 Required Findings

(A) A resolution or motion to approve the application must include the findings of fact and conclusions of law that support the decision. Any proposed conditions of approval must also be included in the resolution or motion to approve the application.

(B) A resolution or motion to deny the application must state findings of fact and conclusions of law that support the decision.

(C) If a resolution or motion to approve the application fails, the application is deemed denied. Those members voting against the resolution or motion must state which of the conclusions of law they could not reach as well as findings of fact on which their inability to reach the conclusions is based.

2.7.12 Conditions of Approval

(A) The Board of County Commissioners or the Board of Adjustment, as appropriate, may impose such reasonable conditions upon approval of a Special Use as will afford protection of the public health, safety and general welfare, ensure that substantial justice is done, and equitable treatment provided.

(B) Conditions shall run with the land and use, and shall be binding on the original applicant(s) as well as all successors, assigns and heirs.

(C) The Special Use Permit shall include a statement that if any condition of a Special Use Permit shall be held invalid or void, then the permit itself shall be void and of no effect.

(D) It shall be stated in the Special Use Permit that the Permit shall automatically expire within 12 months of the date of approval if the use has not commenced or construction has not commenced or proceeded unless a timely application for extension of this time limit is approved by the Board of County Commissioners as provided in Section 2.7.13.

2.7.13 Notification of Board Action

(A) The Planning Director shall send a notice of the relevant Board's action on the application by certified mail to the applicant. A copy of the decision shall be filed in the Planning Department within five business days of the relevant Board's action.

(B) The Planning Director, in the case of approval or approval with conditions, shall issue the necessary permit in accord with the Board's action.

(C) The Planning Director, but not a designee, shall certify that the Special Use Permit with any imposed conditions is as approved by the Board of County Commissioners or Board of Adjustment, as appropriate, with a report provided to the County Manager.

(D) Once the Special Use Permit has been certified, the applicant shall record the permit with the Orange County Register of Deeds in a format prepared by the Planning Director. Failure to do so within 90 days from certification shall invalidate the Special Use Permit.

2.7.14 Time Limits and Extensions

(A) If a request is received before the Special Use permit expires, the Board of County Commissioners, for good cause shown, may extend the expiration deadline six months upon the favorable recommendation of the Planning Board.

(B) The application for an extension request shall be submitted a minimum of six months prior to the expiration of the Special Use Permit.

(C) No changes shall be made to the terms and/or conditions of approval.

(D) Only one approval of a time extension is permitted, and it shall be based on evidence presented by the applicant showing that permits have been pursued in a timely manner, and that delays have resulted from factors beyond the control of the applicant.

(E) For developments which require approval of a Special Use Permit, the applicant may request that the Special Use Permit be vested as a Site Plan for a period of not less than two nor more than five years. For vesting purposes, Site Plans and Preliminary Plats may also be approved as a Special Use Permit at the request of the applicant. See Section 2.5 for information regarding site plans.

2.7.15 Changes to Approved Plans

(A) The Planning Director is authorized to approve minor changes in the approved plans of Special Uses, as long as they are in harmony with action of the approving Board, but shall not have the power to approve changes that constitute a modification of the approval. A modification shall require approval of the Board having jurisdiction.

(B) The following criteria shall constitute a modification:

(1) Any change in a condition imposed during the approval of a special use permit.

(2) Any change in use or enlargement of approved use.

(3) Any increase in intensity of use. An increase in intensity of use shall be considered to be an increase in usable floor area and/or an increase in the number of dwelling or lodging units.

(4) Structural alterations which significantly affects the basic size, form, style, ornamentation, and/or character of the building as shown on the approved site plan or described in the applicant's narrative.

(5) Substantial change in the amount and/or location of open space, recreation facilities or landscape screening.

(6) Any increase in the size or number of approved signs.

(7) Any change in parking areas resulting in an increase or reduction of 5% or more in the number of spaces approved.

(8) Substantial changes in pedestrian and/or vehicular access or circulation.

(9) Any change in a setback required by the provisions of this Ordinance or imposed as a condition of approval.

(10) Any change in the location or extent of street and utility improvements or rights-of-way, including water, sewer and storm drainage facilities, which would provide a different level of service.

(11) For telecommunication facilities, a modification shall also include the following:

(a) An increase in the existing vertical height of the structure by more than:

(i) 10% in the height of the tower, or

(ii) The height of 1 additional antenna with separation from the nearest existing antenna not to exceed 20 feet

(b) A substantial change to the physical dimensions of the wireless support structure which alters facts or conditions relied upon by the County when granting the original permit. It shall be the County's burden to demonstrate that such a scenario constitutes a substantial change to the physical dimensions of the wireless support structure.

(c) The addition of an appurtenance to the body of the telecommunication facility that protrudes horizontally from the edge of the wireless support structure the greater of:

(i) More than 20 feet or

(ii) More than the width of the wireless support structure at the level of the appurtenance.

Except where necessary to shelter the antenna from inclement weather or to connect the antenna to the tower via cable.

(d) Increasing the square footage of the existing equipment compound by more than 2,500 square feet

(C) The Planning Director shall, before making a determination as to whether a proposed action is a minor change or a modification, review the record of the proceedings on the original application for approval of the Special Use. The determination shall be based upon the request of the applicant, the review of the record of the approval of the original request and the Planning Director's findings under the criteria of subsection (B) above.

(D) The Planning Director shall, if it is determined that the proposed action is a minor change, state the findings in writing to the applicant. The applicant shall file an amended site plan, or written statement, outlining in detail the minor change(s) proposed. The Planning Director shall file the amended site plan or written statement with the approved site plan.

(E) If it is determined that the proposed action is a modification, the Planning Director shall require the applicant to submit a request for modification of the approved special use permit. The following procedures shall be adhered to in the case of a modification:

(1) The applicant shall provide an amended site plan and written narrative outlining the specific changes requested.

(2) The Planning Director shall submit the request to the Board that approved the original application.

(3) The Board shall set a public hearing to receive testimony concerning the modification request. Any public hearing called pursuant to a modification of an approved special use permit shall be held in conformity with the relevant public notification requirements contained in this Article.

(4) The Board may approve, approve with conditions, or deny the application for a modification.

(5) The Planning Director shall file the Board's action in the Planning Department as an amendment request to the original application and shall notify the applicant of the Board's action.