



# Identify Existing Conditions Before You Design

Identify critical areas and other environmental aspects of your site before designing your project. The earlier you identify these site conditions and the more accurately you document them in your application materials, the faster and potentially cheaper your permitting process will be. You are also more likely to protect the critical area functions that we all benefit from.

→ See Handout CA-1, *Critical Area Functions*.

## Identify and Document

### Watershed Context

Determining your site's watershed context is the first step to understanding your site. Watershed context describes the site in terms of its surroundings, considering its location relative to significant features such as freeways, developments, local roads, lakes, and streams.

Document your site's watershed context on a project vicinity map. The map should be based on an aerial photo and include a scale and a north arrow. Aerial photos and related information are often publicly available.

→ See Handout CA-3, *Site Planning Resources*.

### Site Context

Next, identify critical areas and other environmental aspects (e.g., stands of trees, existing vegetation) on and adjacent to your site. Document these areas on your site plan along with property boundaries, roadways, easements, and yard setbacks.

→ See Handout L-1, *Single-Family Site Plan* for a full list of site plan requirements. This site plan will serve as the foundation for your project design and permitting.

#### 1 Identify critical areas on and adjacent to your site.

The city regulates the following critical areas in its Land Use Code (LUC) 20.25H.025:

- streams
- wetlands
- shorelines
- flood hazard areas
- geological hazard areas
- habitats for species of local importance

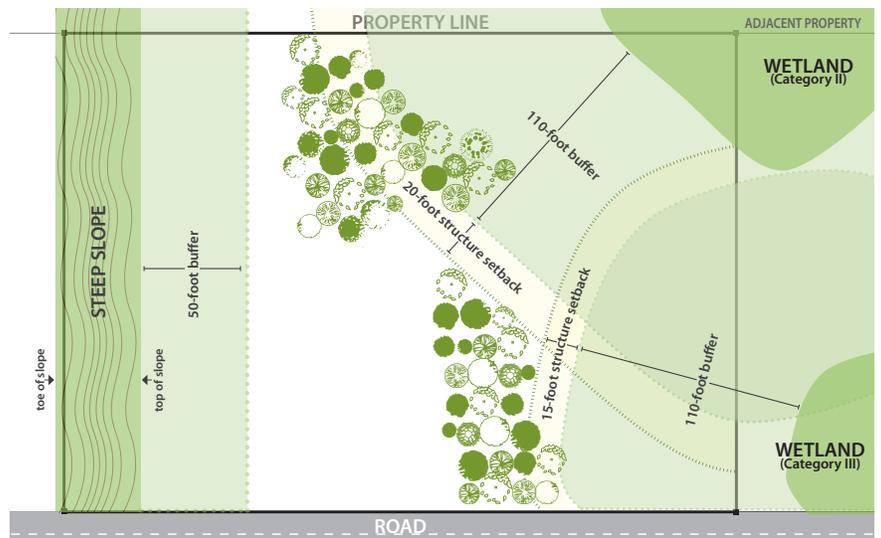
Sometimes critical areas are obvious to the untrained eye, but often you'll need an environmental professional to determine whether your property supports critical areas or not. → See Handout CA-4, *Hiring an Environmental Professional*.

#### 2 Determine critical area buffers and setbacks.

Most critical areas are assigned buffers, areas that moderate the effects of development near critical areas. Critical area buffers and setbacks cross property boundaries. Additionally, some critical areas are assigned setbacks from the buffers (LUC 20.25H.035A). Buffer and setback widths vary depending on the type of critical area and the quality of the functions it provides. These determinations are based on a functional assessment performed by a qualified environmental professional. → See Handout CA-1, *Critical Area Functions*.

#### 3 Depict critical areas, buffers, and setbacks on your site plan.

The following conceptual graphic illustrates critical areas and their buffers and setbacks, as well as a stand of significant trees, on and adjacent to an example site. Remember, this information should be depicted on your site plan with other relevant site information.



# Design

Design your project in the context of the existing conditions that you have depicted on your vicinity map and site plan.

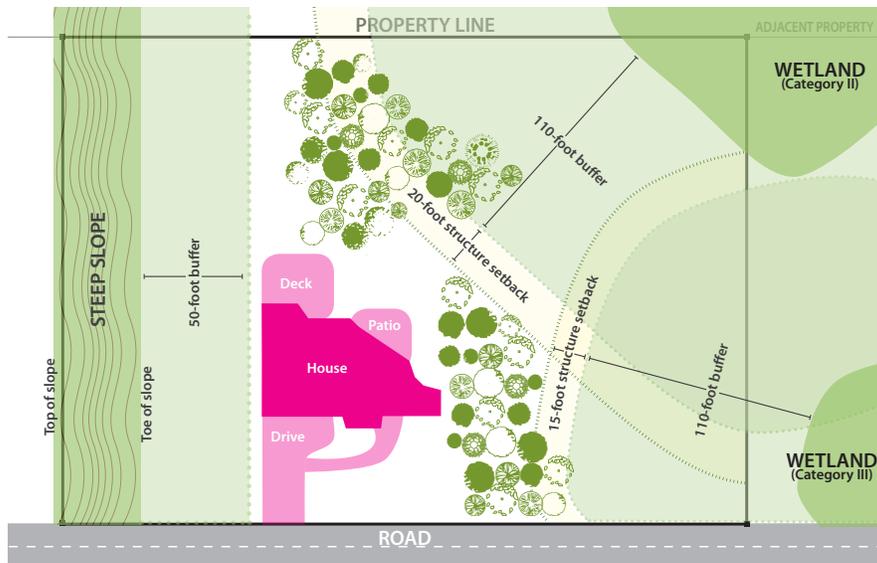
## No critical areas?

Be sure that you looked at adjacent properties. Remember that critical area buffers and setbacks cross property lines. The city may request additional information or professional review, or they may conduct a site visit to verify a “no critical areas” conclusion.

## Got critical areas?

The city requires that impacts on critical areas be avoided. The only exception to this is for “allowed uses,” discussed below. Even in these instances, the Critical Areas Ordinance requires that you demonstrate, as part of your application, how impacts were avoided, then minimized, and finally mitigated.

**Avoidance.** Avoiding all impacts on critical areas will put you on the quickest, easiest, and usually cheapest permitting pathway. If you can design your project to completely avoid impacts on critical areas, no Critical Areas Land Use Permit or special applications are required beyond development permits.



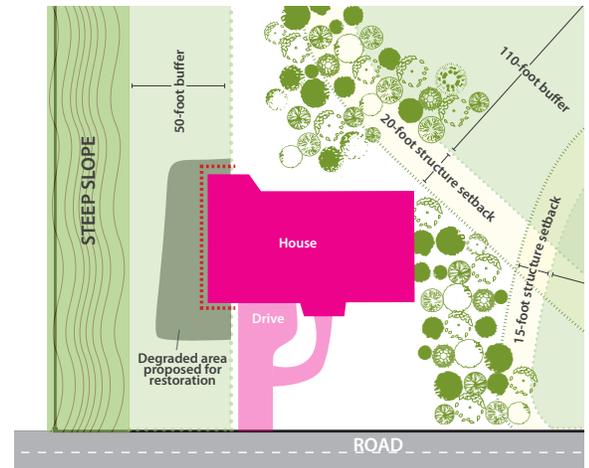
**Allowed Use.** Certain uses, specified in the code (LUC 20.25H.055), can occur within critical areas if you demonstrate that no technically feasible alternative would have less impact on critical areas. “Allowed uses” include actions such as repair or maintenance of existing facilities (LUC 20.25H.055.C.1) and construction of new or expanded facilities (LUC 20.25H.055.C.2).

The code also lists specific requirements and performance standards to protect each type of critical area. You need to demonstrate how your proposal meets these requirements and performance standards. You must also include a detailed mitigation plan to compensate for any impacts on critical areas. → See *Handout CA-5, Mitigation Plan Essentials*. A Critical Areas Land Use Permit is required.

Even if your project is an “allowed use” and is designed to meet all criteria

identified in the code, this pathway will take longer, be more difficult, and likely cost more than simply avoiding impacts on critical areas. Moreover, avoiding impacts on critical areas will more likely protect the critical area functions that we all benefit from.

**Improvement.** Sometimes critical areas and/or buffers have been degraded and are not functioning well. If your project proposes better protection of these critical areas than would be achieved through the application of standard requirements, the city may modify the standard requirements for your project (LUC 20.25H.230).



You will need to submit a Critical Areas Report (LUC 20.25H.235), prepared by a qualified environmental professional, in your application for a Critical Areas Land Use Permit. → See *Handout CA-6, The Critical Areas Report Process*.

This is a longer, more complex, and less predictable permitting process than avoiding critical areas, but it is an option if you are committed to restoring degraded critical areas as part of your project.



**If you have questions or need additional information, please contact the Land Use Desk in the Development Services Center at 425-452-4188 or [landusereview@bellevuewa.gov](mailto:landusereview@bellevuewa.gov).**