

# Understanding Site Grading and Permitting

## The principles of site design in the Town of Portola Valley:

- preserve and enhance the natural features of the Town, including natural drainage swales and creeks
- have structures designed to integrate with the natural topography of the site
- minimize site disturbance and tree/vegetation removal, especially in areas where intact native habitat exists – earthwork and heavy equipment harms native plants and allows the introduction of non-native invasive weeds that reduce the overall habitat quality of the property.
- avoid severe cutting, filling, padding, or terracing of the landform
- limit grading to the minimum amount necessary to accommodate development
- have site grading blend into landforms

**What is grading?** Grading is the excavation (cut) or filling (fill) of dirt on a site. Some examples include the grading of a new driveway, the placement of fill to increase the height of a building pad, the filling of an uneven area to create a patio, or landscape mounding.

**When is a Site Development Permit required for grading?** A site development permit is required when the amount of cut and/or fill for a proposed project exceeds 50 cubic yards.

**How do I know how many cubic yards of grading will be involved in my project?** Grading plans for site development permits must be drawn by a registered Civil Engineer. Your engineer will be able to calculate how much cut and how much fill are involved in the project.

**What grading “counts” towards a site development permit?** Essentially, we are looking at grading that changes the contours, or landform. For example, if a house is sited on a slope, and the owner would like to level out an area to create some usable space, such as a patio or play area, then the earth brought in or removed to create the new, level area changes the existing landform. This cut and/or fill involved in creating the level area “counts” towards a site development permit.



The grading (cut) required to create this patio would count towards a site development permit.

**Are there any types of grading that are exempt from a Site Development Permit?** Yes. The following types of grading do not “count” towards a site development permit:

- The excavation (cut) below finished grade required for basements, foundations, building footings/piers, retaining walls, septic tanks and drainfields, and swimming pools.

For example, if you are constructing a new home with a basement, all of the earth that is dug out of the site to create the basement does NOT count towards a site development permit. However, if you take some of this dirt to use on site as fill material, then that fill will count towards a site development permit.

**Are there limits on the amount of grading I can propose?** No, but the Town’s grading guidelines and General Plan seek to keep site grading to a minimum in order to preserve the natural landforms and minimize disturbance to the natural terrain and vegetation.

**Who reviews and approves a site development permit?** The amount of proposed site grading will determine who must review and approve your site development permit as follows:

- Grading that is between 51 – 99 cubic yards requires review and approval by the Town staff.
- Grading that is between 100 – 1,000 cubic yards requires review and approval by the Architectural & Site Control Commission (ASCC).
- Grading that is over 1,000 cubic yards requires review and approval by the Planning Commission