

CITY OF TACOMA

DESIGN REVIEW ANALYSIS MANUAL

A guide to possibilities and direction for a future
design review program



October 2016

TACOMA DESIGN REVIEW PROJECT

ANALYSIS OF

DESIGN REVIEW

OPTIONS

INTRODUCTION

Design review with a set of design standards or guidelines has proven to be an effective community development tool. The City of Tacoma understands the role of design review in community building: throughout the One Tacoma Plan and Tacoma 2025, policy guidance in the guise of design review is highlighted as an opportunity to create unique places, promote innovation and quality, and imbue public space with features and amenities that promote the health and vitality of residents and visitors. Design review has been used by numerous communities throughout the nation to achieve local objectives such as: improving the architectural quality of new projects, enhancing the pedestrian environment, improving safety and security, preserving historic districts, improving compatibility between new and existing structures, involving community members in decisions about the built environment, and, in general, building more livable and economically viable communities.

There are different options for a design review process. Project proposals can be reviewed for consistency with design standards or guidelines through

administrative review by staff, by a design review board (DRB), or by a combination of both. Whether or not a design review board is involved, evaluation of project applications with respect to design provisions provides many advantages. Design review can:

- Provide much greater design flexibility to project proponents than can strict zoning standards in achieving both public and private objectives,
- Facilitate communication between reviewers and applicants,
- Respond to specific local contexts and unique site conditions,
- Allow some departures from strict zoning standards if the guidelines are met,
- Support development incentive programs, and
- Address objectives such as livability and compatibility that cannot be addressed through other regulatory tools.

Project review through a design review board can provide additional advantages, including:

- Providing a greater level of professional judgment and expertise by including design professionals on the DRB,
- Allowing for a greater level of public input through open DRB project review meetings,
- Providing a greater level of flexibility, and
- Allowing for a multi-step process to consider complex projects.

Tacoma is clearly at a crossroads in terms of design of private developments. The City has historically employed a relatively “hands-off” approach with regards to the design related standards for commercial and multi-family development. In the past ten years,

however, the City has updated its zoning and development regulations to address basic design related standards for citywide commercial, mixed-use, and multi-family zoning districts. These standards are very prescriptive and relatively modest compared to most other urbanized cities in the Puget Sound area. The City also adopted new design standards for its downtown districts and an administrative design review process. While there had been very little multi-story development in these commercial and multi-family districts over the past few decades, the City has seen a significant increase in mixed-use and multi-family development in Downtown and in some of the Mixed-Use Centers in the past five years. This new development has sparked a healthy debate about the design of private development – and ultimately whether the time has come for some form of citywide design review program in Tacoma.

As Tacoma continues to grow, an updated design review program could be a very important tool in enhancing the city's identity, livability, and economic prosperity. This paper examines a number of "design review" options that Tacoma could undertake – and points out the perceived pluses and minuses of each option with respect to Tacoma's situation. The analysis is based on our review of Tacoma's current regulatory framework, recent development trends, comments from stakeholders (including staff, public officials, architects and others from the development industry, and other community members), and a review of other communities' design review programs. Ultimately, this analysis is intended to help determine the type of design review program would be most appropriate for Tacoma. Additionally, updating the design standards used to review projects is

warranted as described below.

Document Organization

This document is organized into six sections to consider and discuss fundamental questions that must be considered in establishing a design review process:

1. Design guidelines content, organization and format.
2. Applicability: What projects must undergo design review.
3. Project review responsibilities: Who reviews what type of projects
4. Public involvement: Opportunities for citizen review and input.
5. Design Review Board (DRB) review process and procedures (if DRB is established)
6. Design review program costs

For most topics, the material includes a description of options that may be considered, along with a discussion of benefits, drawbacks and observations related to each option and some examples from design review programs in other municipalities.

NOTE: The terms standards and guidelines are both used in this document. Generally standards refer to specific, often quantitative requirements that can be reviewed with minimal design judgment. Typically, standards are not very flexible.

Guidelines, as used here is a more encompassing term that includes a broader range of regulatory measures. Design guidelines can be quite specific, as in a standard, or they can provide more flexibility,

allowing design options or opportunities for interpretation or other design proposals that accomplish the guidelines intent. Often design guidelines are used to complement or modify the rigid dimensional setback, height, bulk standards in a zoning code.

However, different municipalities and planning practitioners use the terms interchangeably so when reviewing other cities' regulatory programs, confusion can occur.



1. DESIGN GUIDELINES CONTENT AND ORGANIZATION

a. Code and standards update

Tacoma currently relies on the Land Use Regulatory Code to address issues related to site and building design. This approach typically allows for less flexibility in the application of standards and results in a more rigid regulatory review. Even if the City opts to utilize a separate design guideline document, the Land Use Regulatory Code will continue to play an important role in establishing the basic use and developments standards that new projects meet. While this report does not include a full code audit, there are some gaps or shortcomings in the current code that should be addressed, regardless of the ultimate landing spot for the design standards. These include:

- Current standards are focused on commercial, residential and mixed-use. Institutional, public and industrial uses both inside and outside of centers are not adequately addressed.
- Small non-residential uses in residential zoning districts should be addressed.
- Current building and site design standards are often based on the zone in which the project is located. The preference is to move towards more of a building type design approach.

- The building design standards for mixed commercial/residential buildings only apply in the X-Districts.
- The mixed-use center building design standards do not give much consideration to stand alone multi-family residential development.
- The code currently contains few standards for building and site design for commercial uses., nor do the standards adequately differentiate between different types of commercial areas.
- Intent statements are not adequately connected to the code requirements, or descriptive enough to provide for clear code interpretation.

b. Location of design guidelines in the Municipal Code

Currently, the design review regulatory measures exist as standards in the zoning code. In the longer term, design guidelines in a separate document that is incorporated into the zoning code by reference will likely be a more effect design review tool, particularly with a design review board (DRB). The recommendations at the end of this report include a proposal for an audit of current standards with an evaluation of their effectiveness and revisions to the current design standards.

c. Design guidelines

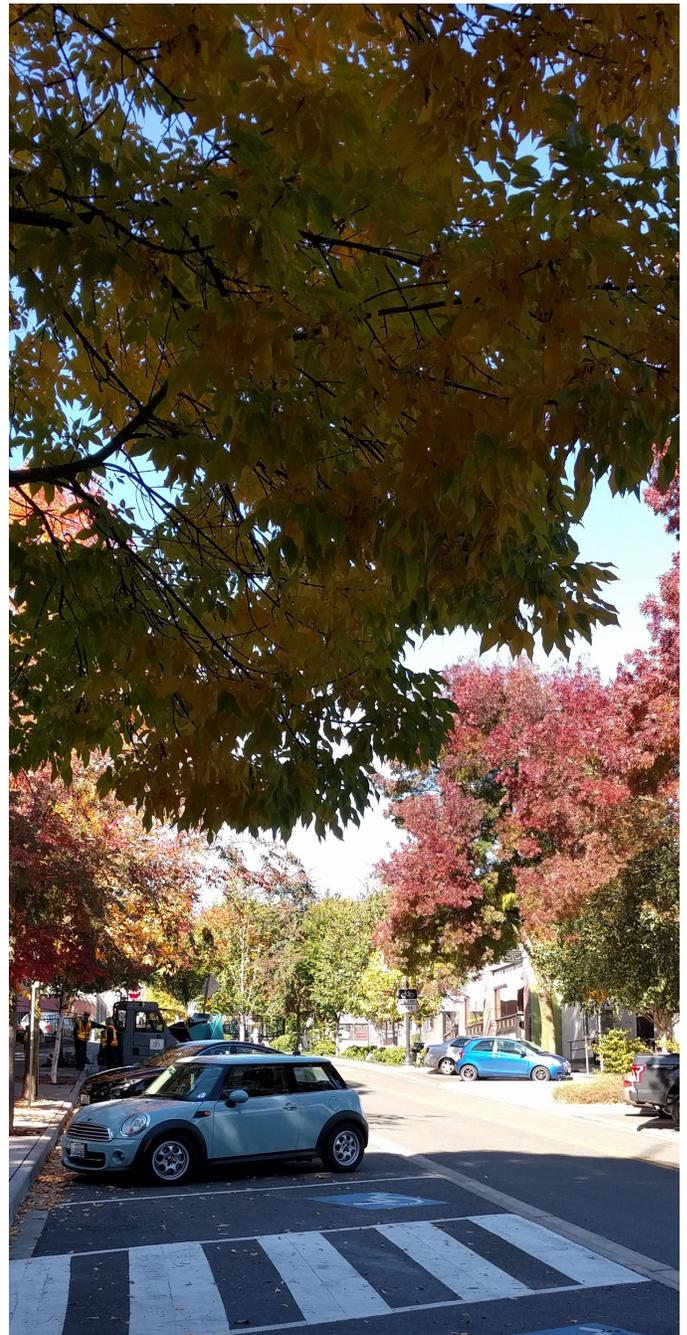
specificity and opportunities for flexibility

Design guidelines can be written either very “tightly” as design standards, “loosely” as general principles that require interpretation (generally by a design review body), or they can be written in a way that establishes a minimum standard but allows flexibility in certain conditions.

Emerging design review practice is to prepare guidelines that establish a minimum predictable standard but allows options for fulfilling that standard and/or opportunities to satisfy the guidelines’ objectives. This can be done by including in each guideline:

- An intent statement that clearly identifies the guideline’s objective.
- A requirement that clearly states a minimum level of performance that can be objectively evaluated. In some cases this may be a numerical standard.
- Provisions that allow for alternate solutions that achieve the guideline’s intent. Determine if this provision applies generally to all standards or if alternative solutions are allowed only where specifically indicated.
- Photos and other graphic examples that illustrate acceptable and unacceptable examples can be particularly helpful in clarifying the guideline text. In some cases, it’s useful to provide a multiple acceptable examples with varying

characteristics, to illustrate that there are often multiple ways to meet the guidelines (and their intent).



2. APPLICABILITY: WHAT PROJECTS MUST UNDERGO DESIGN REVIEW

A first task is to determine what types of projects should undergo design review by a design review board. There are many options for project applicability criteria. The most appropriate program thresholds for Tacoma will depend on the following factors/goals:

- **Are the staffing resources available to implement the review process?** For example, if a greater number of projects require design review, the greater number of hours will be required of staff to plan and attend meetings, coordinate with design review participants, document meeting results, and possible involvement in review board training (and to be trained for managing role in meetings).
- **Does the staff and review board have the resources and expertise to provide timely, fair and helpful review?** Whether there is only one review board or several for different areas of the City, there will be limitations on the number of projects that they can review on a month to month basis. Generally, the more frequently the board meets, the greater the number of projects that can go through the system. If more than one review board is considered, are there enough qualified, interested, and available individuals to serve on the board? The availability of meeting facilities is another consideration.

Can the program be implemented in an efficient manner that does not unnecessarily slow the development process. While achieving good quality design throughout the city should be a high priority, balancing that objective with the desire to promote development through expedient permit review is important.

The following is a description of some optional criteria for establishing applicability of the design review program.

a. Design review for all commercial and multifamily development

Description

Of all the options, this provides the most extensive level of staffing and/or design review board resources.

Benefits: Greater number of projects go through design review, which better ensures compatibility with surrounding context; Provides community with greater opportunity to be involved in the design process.

Drawbacks: Greatest level of resources needed in terms of staffing, training, and consequently funding. Program also would likely increase review timeline and costs for developers.

Observations:

- This option could present a sizable

challenge in terms of the number of projects that would need to go through design review. As a starting point, design review utilizing one or more of the other options listed above in conjunction with updated design standards would appear to be a more viable option.

Examples (other jurisdictions)

- Woodinville
- Sumner
- Gig Harbor
- Redmond

Each of these cities above are much smaller than Tacoma and have one design review board that can handle the limited number projects that go through the system.

b. Design review for departures from the zoning code standards

Zoning codes and some design standards include specific numerical requirements that are appropriate in most, but not all situations. Sometimes it is beneficial both in terms of public and private interests to afford some means of providing flexibility from these strict standards. For example, the objectives behind a specific setback requirement might be met through a design solution such as landscaping. In these cases some ability to allow a “departure” from a given standard is useful.

Examples could include departures from setback requirements, open space requirements, or building modulation standards.

Benefits: Allows flexibility to prescriptive standards and site design/architectural variety. This is particularly important to allow for creative design responses to unique sites.

Drawbacks: See observations below.

Observations:

- If standards are too difficult to meet, then a large number of projects will choose to go through design review.
- It is important to monitor the types of departures requested to determine whether a modification to the applicable development/design standards is needed.
- It is critical to have clear criteria for the approval of departures for applicants and for the staff or commission reviewing the request. This includes clear goals, objectives, and to the extent practical, examples – both acceptable and unacceptable.
- Methods and opportunities for community involvement in the review of a project application should be included.
- The departure concept was popular with many of the architects involved in stakeholder discussions and has been a desirable mechanism in other similar communities.

Extent of Application (approximate

number of meetings required):

- Highly variable – depends on the amount/type of departures that are chosen and the difficulty of achieving code standards.

Examples (other jurisdictions)

- City of Seattle. While all projects exceeding certain size thresholds go through design review, projects under the threshold will go through design review only when they are requesting departures. The City recently updated its commercial multifamily design standards, in part, based on several years of monitoring the types of departures requested. However, the whole design review program has generated a lot of controversy in recent years. Seattle’s program is not one to emulate.
- City of Redmond. While generally all commercial and multifamily projects are reviewed by their design review board, applicants can depart from any of the design review standards via an Administrative Design Flexibility provision. The criteria for approval is superiority in achieving the Comprehensive Plan neighborhood goals and policies, superior design in terms of architecture, building materials, site design, landscaping, and open space. The applicants must prove conformance with the criteria via measurable improvements, objective improvements, and/or via illustrations. Though the provision is not without challenges,

it has proved to be a good negotiation tool to improve the design of projects, per a discussion with staff. In Redmond’s current update to their design standards, this flexibility provision has been retained.

- City of Tumwater. The recently updated design standards for Tumwater include intent statements, standards, and exceptions which provide opportunities to depart from the standards where the intent is met. Tumwater’s program, however, does not utilize a separate design review board (all projects are reviewed administratively).

c. Design review for height and/or density bonuses

Description

Requests for additional height and/or development capacity are relatively common and require a higher level of review and design quality or special features such as additional open space. Conversely, a variation of this concept would require design review for projects exceeding a certain height and/or density (similar in manner to Downtown’s tiered height and density system). The thresholds could be developed specific to particular zones and/or areas

Benefits: Allows flexibility to prescriptive standards. Serves as a tool to (I prefer the more specific examples, rather than generic “enhance design.”)promote

compatibility with adjacent uses, mitigate off-site impacts and provide desired amenities. Increased process is directly tied to increased development potential.

Drawbacks: May not be effective in areas where current zoning allows for “generous” height and density. This may be the case in Tacoma, where many applicable zones do not contain density limits and allow for relatively tall building heights comparative to market conditions.

Observations:

- This configuration is most likely to be used where market conditions are strong and zoning is restrictive. Examples may include healthy and attractive neighborhood centers where development interest is strong but zoning limits building heights.
- Option could be applied only to specific areas. For example – in Mixed-Use Centers that currently utilize a height bonus program.
- Good bonus criteria for the approval is needed to provide direction to all participants. This includes clear goals, objectives, and to the extent practical, examples – both good and bad.
- Methods and opportunities for community involvement in review of the project are critical (since they are requesting a “departure”).

Extent of Application:

- Variable – depends on the amount/type of bonus and whether it’s achievable under current market conditions. It also depends on how much demand there is to exceed the current height/density standards.

Examples (Tacoma and other jurisdictions)

- Tacoma’s Downtown Zoning. The tiered height/FAR system for downtown provides a modified example. Whereas most/all projects go through an administrative form of design review, the tiered system requires a greater number of amenities/benefit features for a greater height/intensity of development.
- Bellevue features administrative design review for projects seeking floor area bonuses in downtown. The City is now in the process of updating density bonus provisions and design standards as both provisions aren’t achieving goals and objectives, per discussion with staff, public officials, and stakeholders.

d. Design review for specific areas/zones

Description/Options

This is where communities can define specific areas that warrant design review. These are typically high visibility areas and/or building types or they may be developments in transitional areas, such as adjacent to single family areas. Specific options that could be considered for Tacoma include:

- All developments on Pedestrian designated streets
- All commercial and multifamily development in all Mixed-Use Centers
- All commercial and multifamily development in Neighborhood Mixed-Use Centers

- All projects along arterials.
- All projects along primary transit corridors.
- All projects on the edges of Mixed-Use Centers.
- Any combination or variation of the above. For example, the City could choose design review for some, but not all neighborhood centers.

Benefits: This option focuses design review in the most critical areas where higher quality design is desired. The limited application reduces the number of projects that would need to go through design review.

Drawbacks: See observations below.

Observations:

- Determine the most critical areas that warrant a higher level of review.
- Choose the area(s) that can be accommodated by the available staffing and design review board resources.
- Like all options, clear intent statements and objectives are critical to all parties. Good and bad design examples are useful.

Examples

- City of Puyallup (design review for certain categories of development in downtown zones).
- City of Edmonds (design review for its downtown and general commercial zones along the Highway 99 corridor).
- City of Seattle's (design review via

citywide design guidelines and supplemented by neighborhood specific design guidelines/review boards).

- City of Tumwater (administrative design review for the Brewery District and the Capitol Boulevard corridor).
- City of Redmond (design review for most commercial and multifamily development citywide and separate standards for its Downtown and Overlake Urban Centers).
- City of Sammamish (administrative design review for new development in their Town Center).

e. Design review for certain types or sizes of development

Description/Options

Perhaps only projects that exceed certain size thresholds or contain particular uses will warrant a higher level of design and review. Some options:

- Large scale retail stores (stores exceeding 50,000 square feet).
- Large scale commercial, mixed-use, or multifamily developments (retail developments exceeding 75,000 square feet and multifamily developments exceeding 50 units)
- Developments exceeding certain height or density levels. Both could be configured in a tiered format specific to districts, similar to Downtown zoning – where more intensive developments require a

greater number of amenities.

- All commercial and multifamily development on sites adjacent to single family zones
- All institutions over a certain size.

Benefits: Provides the ability to have a higher level of design and review for those projects that are more visible and thus will have a greater impact on surrounding properties.

Drawbacks: See observations below

Observations:

- Most of Tacoma’s preliminary thresholds are very high (for example, the Best Buy in Tacoma is less than 50,000 square feet and there aren’t many 50+ unit multi-family projects).
- Threshold levels should be appropriate to the available staffing and design review board resources.
- Threshold levels should be carefully determined based on the community’s design related goals, concerns.
- Thresholds should be designed in a way that doesn’t discourage desired forms of development. For example, if design review is required for mixed-use or more intensive forms of development that require structured parking, will such provisions encourage single use development types served by surface parking?
- Can goals/concerns be addressed through prescriptive standards?

Examples (other jurisdictions)

- All cities have some thresholds for when administrative design review is required. These are typically crafted to allow minor remodels without a cumbersome and costly review process, yet strategic to prevent more visible design changes that allow developments to bypass key design standards.
- City of Tumwater’s design guidelines (administrative review) are organized into chapters dealing with commercial, industrial, institutional and cottage housing.
- City of Kent has guidelines (administrative review) specific to multi-family and mixed-use development. They are in the process of updating them now and are incorporating a “guidard” approach which sets clear minimum standards while offering departure options that allow generous flexibility provided projects meet the intent and any special design criteria.

f. Design review for additions and remodels

Description

The extent to which additions and remodels are subject to design review is a consideration that should be addressed in any program. There are several methods to handle this. A permit application might require design review if, for example:

- It is over a certain size
- It is visible from a public ROW or

park

- Is in a special district, or
- Under any condition

Usually the applicant is not required to bring the whole property up to design guidelines provisions but the new portion of the building must adhere to them.

Examples (other jurisdictions)

- City of Tumwater applies administrative design guidelines to additions to buildings that increase the gross floor area by 1,000 square feet and areas of the site that must be modified as the result of expansions. City of Everett (administrative design review) applies three different thresholds for additions/remodels based on the value of the addition/remodel versus the value of the existing improvements. For remodels/additions that exceed 50% of the value of existing improvements (over a three year period), all standards that do not involve repositioning the building or reconfiguring site development, as determined by the city, shall apply. City of Boise also includes three different thresholds for additions and remodels for their Citywide and Downtown Design Standards and Guidelines. But rather than using the valuation of improvements, Boise's thresholds are based on the increase of the building's gross floor area. For example, where improvements within a three year period more than double the gross square feet of a building, then

conformance with all applicable standards are required.



3. DESIGN REVIEW PROCESS: WHO REVIEWS & APPROVES PROJECTS?

There are generally four basic review options for how a design review program can be set up for Tacoma (with minor variations within each option):

1. Administrative design review (much like Downtown’s current set up);
2. One citywide design review board
3. District/area design review board, such as a historic district review board; or
4. A combination where staff reviews some projects and the DRB reviews projects meeting certain criteria.

The advantages of each are described below.

a. Administrative design review

Description

Administrative design review, as the name indicates is accomplished by governmental staff responsible for administering the guidelines. Generally, the initial evaluation is made by review staff and a final decision rendered by the department head or their designee. Appeals can be to a hearing examiner, to the courts or to the City Council. Appeals to Council are not generally recommended as they can lead to politicizing what is essentially an administrative process. Generally,

there is no specific opportunity for interested parties to comment at a public hearing or event, except insofar as the permit process requires.

Usually, administrative design review requires that the design guidelines/ standards are written so that they can be easily interpreted by staff and applicants. In these cases, it is particularly important that the design standards have clear minimum requirements. Sometimes this means that the standards include quantitative requirements such as width of buffer or minimum area of “usable open space” for multifamily residences. Intent statements, approval criteria, and illustrations thus become critical in the effectiveness in the success of an administrative design review program. Flexibility can be added via design options and departures as described in Section 1.c above.

Benefits:

- Administrative design review has the advantage that no review body or board is needed, which can reduce staffing costs and the amount of time and shorten the design review process for applicants.
- Administrative design review typically (but certainly not always) provides greater consistency in the administration of standards and guidelines – and thus provides more predictability to applicants.

Drawbacks: Despite the procedural

simplicity of administrative review, this type of review process has several drawbacks, including:

- Staff review requires a staff member versed in design. Generally, the review should be done by a staff member with design or urban design background who can accurately interpret the submittal's design implications and apply the guidelines in a way that improves the project. In practice, review for design quality often requires some back and forth with the applicant and someone versed in design techniques and site planning is much better able to accomplish effective review.
- Usually, there is less room for judgment where an application is viewed by staff.
- Staff interpretations are sometimes challenged, leading to the fact that staff decisions can be (but not always) more accommodating to applicants' arguments.
- Design professionals serving on the design review board sometimes have a greater understanding of the cost of recommended and required design elements and a better awareness of development industry practices – and this makes an argument that a review board can provide a better overall review of projects than staff.
- There is not much opportunity for public comment.
- A deliberative body such as a review board can often provide a wider perspective and sensitivity to

a wider range of considerations.

Observations:

- A highly trained staff is critical.
- Method will require more prescriptive approach with design standards/guidelines than with design review board.

Examples from other jurisdictions

- City of Everett – includes administrative design review for downtown, the Evergreen Way corridor, and core residential areas. These provisions are all integrated into Everett's zoning code (Title 19).
- City of Tumwater – includes administrative design review for most development in the Brewery District, Capitol Boulevard corridor, and in their town center. The adopted design guidelines are within a free-standing document adopted by reference. During the update of city wide design guidelines, the staff reviewer had many comments regarding how to make design review more predictable. The lesson from this is to make sure that the review staff is involved in the development of design guidelines
- City of Renton – includes administrative design review for most commercial and multifamily development citywide. These standards are integrated into the city's development regulations (Chapter 3 of Title IV). In the past, Renton's design guidelines were administered by a different

department from the department that formulated the design guidelines. This led to some guidelines being misinterpreted and not enforced.

- City of Tacoma – includes administrative design review for Downtown.

b. Citywide design review board (DRB)

Description

Most cities with design review board (DRB) programs feature one citywide design review board. The board typically features a group of citizens (often five to seven individuals) active in a development-related profession, and often with interested citizens such as community leaders. A typical review board might include two architects. Other members often include landscape architects, contractors, engineers, planners, lenders, and developers. Because these citizens live in the community, they usually have good awareness of the history of the community and context of sites where developments are proposed. Most design review boards only make recommendations to the reviewing department – but there are exceptions.

Benefits:

- A design review board often provides a greater level of expertise in the review of projects – potentially providing a greater opportunity to enhance the design of projects.

- The greater number of people reviewing the projects increases the likelihood that any “errors” or poorly designed elements might be caught in the review of projects.
- Program usually offers developers greater flexibility in how they comply with guidelines than with administrative design review (but not always).
- A design review board usually provides a greater opportunity for dialogue on the design of a project.
- A design review board usually provides a greater opportunity for public comment as review board meetings are usually open to the public.

Drawbacks:

A design review board usually:

- Requires greater administration and staff time than administrative review.
- Requires a longer development review process than administrative design review program.
- Requires frequent board training.
- Requires frequent and effective staff oversight to help ensure that the board acts within their authorized roles and maintains consistency with the provisions of the design guidelines.
- Typically equates to less predictability to developers in terms of how projects are evaluated/ approved.

Observations:

- Finding qualified and interested board members can be a challenge

in smaller communities, but shouldn't be a problem in Tacoma.

- Provide for a range of applicable design professionals (not all architects for instance). Board members should be active in the development industry.
- Clear meeting and decision making procedures are needed.
- Importance of trained staff is critical to the success of program – as they are needed to provide direction to the board and to make sure meetings run smoothly.
- One citywide review board requires substantially less resources than a program with multiple design review boards. One board also typically means greater consistency in how projects are evaluated against the guidelines than with multiple design review boards.
- Most jurisdictions give the final approval authority to the Planning Director. In Tacoma, most decision-making authority have been designated to Peter Huffman, Planning and Development Services Director.

Examples

- City of Bainbridge Island - has maintained a citywide design review board for over ten years, but is currently considering changes to the review process and their design guidelines, which they consider outdated. While the program has helped to foster a relatively high quality of design, staff has admitted two notable challenges: (1) the lack of consistent and ongoing

training of board members has increased some of the challenges and inconsistencies in how the guidelines are administered; and (2) behavior and relationship challenges between board members, applicants and staff.

- City of Sumner – has maintained a design review board and program for over twenty years. While the board reviews all commercial and multifamily projects citywide, the city's modest size generally keeps the number of projects to review at a manageable level. Sumner features separate design and development guidelines for their downtown, commercial development, multifamily development, single family and duplex development, and industrial development (adopted in 2007). The documents distinguish required design elements and provisions that offer more flexibility. See Section 6 for more information (lessons learned).
- City of Gig Harbor – also features a well-established design review program (latest version of City Design Manual adopted in 2004). See Section 6 for more information (lessons learned).
- City of Woodinville – Design Review Board reviews all non-single family development projects citywide. Similar to other cities above, Woodinville's modest size and growth has kept the number of projects reviewed by the board at a manageable level. Woodinville has updated their design provisions

several times since their initial 1995 adoption.

- Redmond – also has a review board that reviews most citywide commercial and multifamily development. Redmond features different standards for developments within and outside of their designated Urban Centers. The City is now in the process of updating their design standards after an extensive audit. See Section 6 for more information (lessons learned)
- Edmonds – design review program, until recently, focused mostly on downtown development. In recent years, the program expanded to include developments within the Highway 99 corridor. The city is now crafting design standards for multifamily development (in select zones), but opting to keep the review of these projects administrative.

c. Multiple district/area design review boards

Description

Larger cities like Seattle often have multiple design review boards where each individual board reviews development projects occurring in a particular sector or area of the city. The district or area focus ensures that the board is familiar with the context of the area. Tacoma currently contains two specialized design review boards:

- Landmarks Preservation Commission

– Oversees the establishment and regulation of landmarks, local historic districts, proposed name changes for public facilities, and certain property tax incentives. Contains 11 members, including three architects, four individuals with professional expertise in preservation-related fields, one representative from the Tacoma Arts Commission, and three interested citizens.

- Foss Waterway Urban Design Review Committee – Reviews redevelopment proposals on public property within and along the Thea Foss Waterway. Contains seven members – which include civic or business leaders with experience in such fields as finance, real estate development, law and construction management.

Benefits:

- The board members have greater familiarity of the district or area.
- The focus on districts or neighborhoods allows the guidelines/program to be specifically tailored to fit the district/area. This is especially useful when the district has a distinct character as in a historic or waterfront district.
- Often there is greater neighborhood/public involvement.
- Otherwise, district specific review board programs have the same benefits as citywide design review board program.

Drawbacks:

- Requires the greatest amount of staff resources and expertise to administer the program.
- More difficult to find qualified and interested board members.
- Multiple design review boards often leads to inconsistent board approaches to project review and

approval – as each board has different individuals with different expertise and approaches.

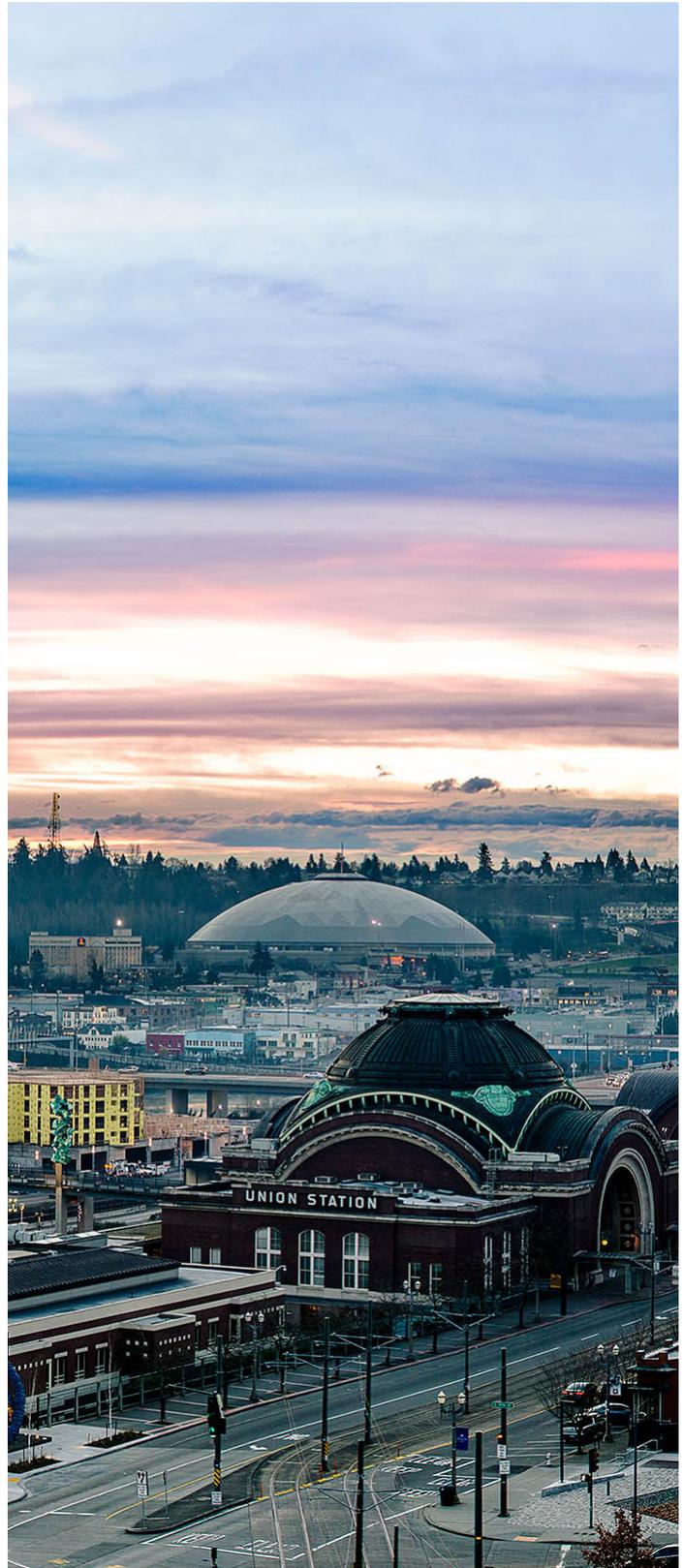
- Otherwise, same drawbacks as citywide design review board.

Observations:

- With more than one board, the program becomes much more difficult to administer and maintain an appropriate level of consistency/ predictability for all parties involved.
- If desired, this would probably be more appropriate for Tacoma in the future, if additional design work is done to differentiate the individual desires of the various neighborhoods/districts and only after a single, city-wide process has been tested and perfected.

Examples (other jurisdictions)

- The City of Seattle administers a very interesting process in which local design review boards review project both with respect to city-wide and neighborhood specific design guidelines. There is ample opportunity for public input at the review board meetings. Initially the process worked very well in terms of improving the quality of projects, but with recent changes the value of the process has been called into question.



4. PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

Public involvement is a critical element of design review programs. While there are obvious benefits to public involvement in design review programs, there are some notable challenges as well:

Benefits:

- Public input in the design process can provide community members with a voice in how the area evolves over time.
- Local public input can help identify critical design issues associated with particular sites or related to local community based objectives and concerns.
- Community input can help to make developments better fit into the community's context and ultimately improve the quality of design.
- Community participation gives the community a greater sense of ownership and pride in the community and increases confidence in the review process.
- If properly managed, public input can foster a "principled negotiation" process in which project proponents and interested parties work together to solve design problems and address all parties' objectives related to community impacts, design quality, and project feasibility.

Challenges:

- Community input can often conflict with the parameters of the site's zoning and design standards/guidelines. For example, community members

may comment in opposition to the height or density of a proposed development even though the current zoning regulations may provide for it. Planners and design review board members are often on very shaky legal ground depending on the specific nature of design guideline language in demanding architectural changes that reduce the overall height or density of projects unless this direction is provided for in the City's regulations. Staff and board member confidence and experience is critical in helping to keeping meetings on track, staying focused on relevant design issues, and staying within legal bounds. Design review board procedures, role and responsibilities must be clear on this matter.

- For controversial projects, community involvement provides meeting administration challenges for design review boards and planners. For instance, at 90 minute meetings, citizens are usually forced to limit the time of their comments – and extended periods of public comment at the meeting reduce the amount of dialogue between a design review board and the applicant – often necessitating additional meetings and extending the time table for projects.

The more successful design review programs are structured to address these challenges in the way projects are noticed, public comments are handled, and meetings are organized and managed (see Section 5).

5. DESIGN REVIEW BOARD MEETINGS AND FOLLOW UP

The success of a design review board process depends on consistent and predictable meeting procedures. Below is a discussion of key design review meeting issues:

Meeting Scheduling

All programs should strive for consistent and predictable scheduling. This includes a consistent day of the week and intervals between meetings (weekly, bi-weekly, or a certain day of the month (e.g.: first Tuesday of the month)). The scheduling program must be based on the number of projects anticipated to go through the design review process and shall include enough “slack space” or availability to keep projects on track/ minimize review process delay. For example, if the board meets only once a month and meetings are booked up months in advance, then the delay will hold up applicants longer. In setting design review board procedures, the City should estimate the number of projects that might be processed in a year based on past experience and schedule DRB meetings to accommodate that load.

Public Notice

Public notice for design reviews can be provided in a number of ways. Cities engaged in design review usually require signs to be posted at the development site notifying people of upcoming meetings. Most cities also post upcoming design review agendas and past minutes

on city websites. The City of Seattle’s website also provides opportunities to download the applicant’s proposal. E-mail is another way of reaching citizens. The City of Seattle includes notice of upcoming design reviews in their Land Use Information Bulletin, which is e-mailed to interested citizens. Notice can also be given on public access television or in the local newspaper. The City can maintain a number of e-mail lists of citizens/groups interested in design review to be notified of projects that are submitted in particular areas.

Meeting Locations

Design review meetings should be held in accessible, centralized facilities with the capability to allow for presentations and to allow for variable crowd sizes. Most small cities hold their meetings in council chambers, whereas larger cities such as Seattle with multiple design review boards hold their meetings in a variety of public facilities (including schools, libraries, and community centers).

Meeting Preparation

Most design review programs include a meeting between the applicant and staff to prepare for the DRB meeting. This can vary from one of more informal discussions in which the staff member describes the application requirements and procedures and later ensures that the application is complete, to a more formal step in which the staff member reviews the application and prepares a staff report identifying design issues relative to the proposed project.

Meeting Time and Length

Most design review programs hold their meetings in the evenings to allow for residents and board members to more easily attend/participate. Seattle uses 1-1/2 hours for all meetings.

Agendas

Agendas should be consistent and limited in time to keep participants focused on issues. Agendas should allow for project introductions and presentations, public comment, review board question and answer and deliberation.

Public Comment Period and Rules

The public typically has an opportunity to comment on a project during design review meetings. Written comments are also often accepted up until a specified date in the process. Cities usually have meeting procedures on public comment. The City of Seattle structures meetings to give equal time for the citizens of Seattle, the project applicant, and the City. The public provides comments to the Design Review Board and then the Design Review Board discusses issues. The applicant is not always required to respond to the public's comments. The City of Edmonds provides an opportunity for the applicant to respond to the public's comments. One challenge often faced during the public comment time is to ensure that citizens provide comments related to the design of the project. Citizens often comment on other concerns, such as traffic, parking, or density.

Dialogue

Dialogue between participants is an essential component of the design review process. However, the extent and nature of dialogue often requires limitations due to time and meeting constraints. Meetings with limited public can allow for more informal interaction as time permits. Controversial projects with a high number of participants reduce the opportunity for meaningful dialogue. Meeting agendas should allow flexibility to accommodate dialogue to the extent practical.

The training, behavior, and meeting facilitation skills of the design review board chair is particularly critical in keeping meeting agendas on track and keeping other members of the board and public on track. Likewise, clearly defined roles between the chair and staff are important to create smooth meetings, foster a good relationship, and provide a higher level of predictability for all participants.

Review Board Deliberation

A reasonable amount of time is needed for the board to deliberate their comments on the proposal and formulate a recommendation or decision. The deliberation should occur in a setting where the applicant and public can observe.

Number of Meetings

This is a critical issue and a challenge to any design review program. Most programs strive for a two meeting format:

- An initial pre-application meeting to review conceptual bulk/site design options and obtain early community feedback. This early meeting provides the best opportunity for meaningful public input given the opportunity to help shape the project and identify critical contextual issues. Controversial or “challenging” projects can often require additional pre-application meetings to address the conceptual bulk/site design elements.
- A second meeting to review the detailed design proposal. Hopefully by this time, the major issues have been worked out during the pre-application meeting. The outcome of such a meeting can either be approval or recommended approval as designed, conditional approval or recommended approval (provided a number of items are addressed), or if major changes are recommended or required – an additional meeting can be scheduled to review any changes.
- Providing project information on the City’s website at the earliest possible time provides the community a way to comment on the project even if they are unable to attend design review meetings.
- Thorough staff reports on the projects are critical and help keep the board focused on the issues at hand.
- Allow staff to conduct follow up review – particularly after the second meeting when the review is into the smaller details. This often reduces the need for additional meetings.
- Limit third meetings to unique circumstances or applicant request.
- When additional meetings are required – put top priority on follow up meeting scheduling.

As all meetings come with costs to the City and applicant in terms of staffing hours, design work and administration, and in the case of developers, overall project feasibility, there is a strong desire on all parts to limit the overall number of meetings. The additional meetings can also lead to meeting constraints and further delays depending on the structure of the program.

Related observations and suggestions to limit the number of meetings based on review of other design review programs:

Implementation

The implementation of design review measures is often a challenge for a number of reasons:

- There is often a lack of communication with building officials with regards to the final inspection and certificates of occupancy. Ideally, the planner should be called for an inspection prior to any certificate of occupancy.
- There can be a lack of funding for planning staff involvement in follow through. This should be a consideration in the funding of the program and in setting the fees for

design review.

- Frequent project change orders after design review. Such change orders should be subject to planner review/approval. Where the change orders are substantial enough, an additional design review board meeting should be required.



6. PROGRAM COSTS

Costs of any design review program are a critical factor in determining the most appropriate program. There are costs to both establishing a design review program, i.e. to conduct the public process, develop the guidelines, create illustrations and supporting materials, as well as the ongoing administrative costs of design review. Below is a summary of our estimate for both the program development costs as well as options for paying for the administration of a design review program. .

Program Development Costs

Makers has extensive experience helping jurisdictions set up and administer design review programs. We have previously contracted with the City to evaluate the efficacy of a design review program in the City of Tacoma. There are two types of program development costs that we expect: 1. Consultant services, and 2. Staff resources.

The following table structures the program development into three phases and includes an associated cost estimate for consultant services needs for each phase. Based on this estimate the total program development cost would come

to \$110,500.

This base budget anticipates primarily the use of photographs, available graphics, and simple original graphics to illustrate the document. This approach is relatively common for such projects and helps to limit expenses. However, a line item for illustrative graphic design could be included as an optional add-on, depending on the goals and objectives of the City. Budgets for such illustrations can be highly variable depending on the media, scope, and level of detail. Such illustrations can be very effective tools (such as the 3D modeling efforts conducted in 2007-2008 in the Martin Luther King corridor and Proctor district associated with the proposed code and design standard updates), but should be addressed strategically to meet objectives while maximizing project resources.

We expect that public outreach will be a primary component of the program development process, as well as the legislative process. The budget above includes an estimated \$27,000 for community engagement spread across all three phases.

Phases

1.	Project start-up & public review of design review options	\$16,500
2.	Draft design review process code amendment text and craft new design guidelines	\$73,000
3.	Refine design guidelines and code amendments through the legislative process	\$21,000
TOTAL BUDGET		\$110,500

In addition to consultant services costs, we anticipate a minimum .5 FTE for staffing to manage the contracts, public outreach, and to coordinate the review and adoption process. If the staff person has architectural or urban design expertise, and depending on the ultimate scope of work, additional staff resources could be invested in augmenting and creating original illustrations and graphics for use in the guidelines.

Application Costs

While Tacoma does not have an adopted policy related to permit cost recovery, the City's administration is moving in the direction of setting fees in a way that closely relates to the costs incurred by staff in reviewing projects. Current fees do not effectively cover the administrative costs related to reviewing permit applications. Most current land use fees feature flat rates based on the type of permit and size of project. Permits requiring environmental impact statements also include rate structures based on the amount of staff time spent on the project.

Cost Approaches

Below are some different approaches to setting design review permit fees and a discussion of the pluses and minuses associated with each option. All options warrant continuous review and evaluation to ensure that the cost structure is meeting objectives.

Fixed Application Costs (based on project type or sizes)

This is basically Tacoma's current fee

approach. The fixed nature provides a level of predictability that is desired by applicants. Ideally, the fees are set based on recent history of similar projects and tiered in a way that smaller projects have smaller fees and larger projects have larger fees. Example:

- City of Redmond uses a fixed fee approach that is split into small and large projects (6,000 square feet threshold). The rates were originally based on an estimated number of staffing hours spent on projects of various sizes and the rates are updated annually for inflation and salary increase. While this two tier approach is very simple, the low threshold for large projects means that some relatively small projects pay the same fees as much larger projects.

Costs Based on Hours Spent

For cities aiming to recover close to 100% of staff costs associated with private development permits, the common approach is to charge applicants by the hours staff spends on the project. While the fees are ultimately commensurate with costs incurred, this structure provides a level of unpredictability to the applicant and can be a challenge in ultimately determining the economic feasibility of projects, particularly for inexperienced developers. Example:

- City of Seattle includes a fixed base fee, but once projects exceed a certain threshold, they are based on the number of hours spent, among other costs.

Shared Costs

Cities could make a policy decision on

their approach to design review fees to share some of the costs. Seattle's current approach emphasizes that private development permitting should pay for 100% of the associated permit costs incurred by staff; however, many argue that cities should subsidize at least a portion of the design review costs. The reasoning is that design review is a program that benefits the community – particularly the neighborhoods, and that ultimately the cost should be shared by applicants and taxpayers alike. Example:

- City of Sumner does not charge extra for design review costs. The cost of administering a design review board in a smaller city with a limited number of projects has proven to be small enough that the approach is easily maintained by the city. It is important to note that projects are still subject to land use review fees – which are set up into three tiers based on the estimated cost of construction (permit fees from \$30 to \$250).

Cost Conclusion

Ultimately, a great number of factors need to be considered in determining the best fee approach for design review applications. Tacoma will need to ensure that there is sufficient overall funding for the roles that staff is expected to perform. The program also needs to be able to handle the ups and downs of the development cycles. Cities which emphasize that new development pay the full cost of permit review staff are more prone to large fluctuations in staffing as a result of those development

cycles. This can be a strain on planning staff and the design review program as it means that there will often be less experienced planners reviewing projects. Another approach would be to contract with private consultants or other jurisdictions to handle high level of applications. This approach is less effective with a design review board process.



7. LESSONS LEARNED FROM OTHER CITIES

Below are some useful observations of other cities' design review experiences that are instructive for Tacoma.

Seattle experience

Program description: One citywide review board reviews commercial and multi-family projects in special districts. Smaller projects in special districts can choose between design review and administrative design standards.

Observations: Comments below are from the City's recent independent audit of their design review program and from MAKERS' discussions with staff, design review board members, and applicants about their process.

- Planners play a critical role in determining effectiveness of process. Consistency is needed in how planners manage meetings, extent to which they guide and direct the board, and degree of support they provide the applicants. Planners need more time to fully support board, applicant, and city.
- Problem – current program lacks a system for follow up on design changes that occur after a master use permit has been issued. Needs to be a system in place to ensure that design review planner is involved in post building permit changes – prior to occupancy permit.
- Design review has clearly improved the design of some buildings; although few agree that it produces or ensures excellent design. The real question asked by staff is what would we get without design review?
- Project assignments need to take into account need for continuity in the design review process.
- There is a need for adequate meeting space and equipment.
- Enhanced training for Board members is needed – such as retreats once or twice a year.
- There is a desire to provide for more administrative review (rather than design review) and reduce the total number of design review boards citywide.
- City currently passes all review costs onto the developer. However, with market changes and construction booms/downturns, it is difficult to retain the appropriate staffing levels. Also, some staff argue that design review is a service to the community, and thus should require some general funding to most effectively sustain it.
- With multiple design review boards, each board tends to develop unique approaches in how projects are reviewed. While individual boards may be consistent in their approach, applicants with projects in different review districts can be challenged by these different approaches.
- The City has updated its commercial design standards and is in the process of updating its multi-family design standards based in part on its design review experience. Examples include:
 - Consolidate redundant zoning districts where there is too much overlap.
 - Allow alternatives to overly prescriptive development standards by applying a “flexibility within limits” strategy.
 - Apply greater setbacks on multi-

family lots adjacent to single family districts.

- Enhance the appearance and function of townhouses.
- Update and simplify standards so they are easier to understand and use.

Portland Experience

Program description: One citywide review board reviews commercial and multi-family projects in special districts. Smaller projects in special districts can choose between design review and administrative design standards.

Observations: Comments below are from MAKERS' review of Portland's design review policies and guidelines, author John Punter's analysis of Portland's program in his book "Design Guidelines in American Cities", and from the City of Seattle's review of Portland's design review program.

- "The city possesses some of the simplest, clearest, best thought-out and without doubt best presented design policies of any American city." (John Punter from "Design Guidelines in American Cities")
- Other reasons for Portland's high quality of design per John Punter's book that are worth noting:
 - A highly participative planning process with strong neighborhood and business participation.
 - A design-aware community committed to retaining a sense of place.
 - A corporate commitment to environmental quality, transportation issues, sustainable development, cultural investment, open space, and urban design.
 - A pro-active approach to investment in public space.
- A long-standing commitment to quality architecture, public art and quality landscaping and wide use of competitions.
- A tradition of public-private partnerships in all aspects of urban design.
- A high level of architectural skill and design imagination in planning and other services.
- Design goals are clearly stated and provide sufficient criteria with which applications can be evaluated.
- Portland has been successful in communicating its design goals to community members and the development community via policies, guidelines, plans, posters, and its "Developers Handbook".
- As with other design review programs, the planner's role is critical to efficiency and effectiveness of the review process. (Seattle research)
- The environment, structure, and format of meetings helps to establish credibility. (Seattle research)
- Optional early design feedback from the board helps applicants respond to salient issues early in process. (Seattle research)
- One board and less public participation results in more consistent design expectations – but this is at expense of broader range of opinions. (Seattle research)
- Discretionary design review process may be preferable to prescriptive process – but poses challenges to applicants. (Seattle research)
- Portland has been pro-active in designing a range of model infill

developments that developers can buy and guarantee automatic approval.

Sumner Experience

Program description: One citywide review board reviews commercial and multi-family projects citywide.

Observations: Comments below are based on MAKERS' work with staff and the city's design review board in updating their design standards and guidelines.

- The program works reasonably well due in part to the quality of their planning staff.
- While a number of the current standards are not working well (open space standards are too strict and have not resulted in desirable spaces) or are difficult to interpret (it's often hard to tell what's required versus encouraged), the current program has enhanced the overall character of the city and has increased the awareness of design in the community.
- The program has been around long enough that it is beginning to build on its success and recognize problems that need correcting.
- The draft update of the standards and guidelines now before the City's Planning Commission was prepared with extensive input from the design review board. The document features a combination of prescriptive standards that utilize a toolbox approach where there are a number of ways to meet a standard. Many such standards include departure opportunities with clear criteria and illustrations on how departures can be evaluated.

Gig Harbor Experience

Program description: One citywide review board reviews commercial and multi-family projects. Applicants have the option to use (very) prescriptive standards or the design review process.

Observations: Comments below are based on MAKERS' work with former staff and review of the city's design review documents and discussion with local architects who've taken projects through the program.

- While there have been a number of complaints about Gig Harbor's design review program, most individuals we've talked with agree that the program has successfully reinforced the desired character of the city.
- The make-up of individuals on the design review board has included individuals who are not active in the development profession.
- Individuals have noted that it is difficult to prove that alternative design treatments are "better" than the prescriptive standards (as is required for departures).
- Many individuals noted that Gig Harbor's process is substantially increasing the cost of development in the city.

Redmond Experience

Program description: One citywide review board reviews most commercial and multi-family projects (makes recommendations to the Director). Redmond has a unique administrative design flexibility provision, whereby applicants can depart from any design standard provided they demonstrate that they can achieve superior design. Redmond is now in the process of updating their design standards.

Observations: MAKERS conducted an extensive audit of their current design standards plus comparable cities research between 2014–2015 and is now helping the City update their design standards. Some notable principles being employed in the updated draft standards:

- Clarify the standards language. The new standards eliminated vague and subjective language that often characterized the existing design standards in favor of clear minimum standards.
- Provide better graphics and photo examples. The draft utilizes updated graphics that clarify acceptable and unacceptable design examples. Photographs play a prominent role in identifying real examples of design treatments that meet (or don't meet) the standards. In some cases, multiple examples are provided where it is important to emphasize that there are multiple ways of meeting the standard.
- Provides both certainty AND flexibility. The emphasis on clear minimum standards in the updated document offers much greater level of predictability than under existing provisions. Many standards provide emphasize a toolbox approach where there are multiple ways to comply with the standards. Second, the updated standards retain the current option for Administrative Design Flexibility (ADF) that provides an avenue to depart from any of the standards, provided they meet the ADF criteria. Plus, the new standards often provide guidance on how the ADF can be applied in strategic instances.
- Clarify the relationship with other related code standards. The issues addressed in the design standards

frequently overlap with code provisions that are addressed in other parts of the Redmond Zoning Code. The updated draft provides cross-references to related provisions and clarifies the relationship between the provisions in a supportive manner.

Bainbridge Island Experience

Program description: One citywide review board reviews most commercial and multi-family projects (makes recommendations to the Director). The board meets bi-monthly on an as-needed basis.

Observations: While the program has helped foster a relatively high quality in architectural design, the program is not without challenges. Findings below are based on a discussion with the current and recent interim Planning Director.

- Current design guidelines are out-dated in terms of architectural design, graphic quality, and general usability. The City is looking to update the document next year.
- A lack in consistent board training has led to inconsistencies in how the guidelines are administered. For example, while the board's role deals only with architectural design issues, board members often comment on landscaping and other site design issues. Also, board members sometimes comment on architectural design issues that go above and beyond the design guidelines.
- The program has experienced some behavior and relationship challenges between board members, applicants and staff.

8. SUMMARY OF STAKEHOLDER/COMMUNITY INPUT

Between 2007–2009, the City held three community workshops and four stakeholder meetings (Master Builders Association, Chamber of Commerce, American Institute of Architects, and the Affordable Housing Consortium).

The community workshops largely focused on design issues while the more targeted stakeholder meetings included discussions on design issues and development review processes.

Key points that have been consistently repeated include:

- The City is lacking a comprehensive and clear vision statement of what it wants to be.
- Most participants seem to agree that the time is right for some form of design review in Tacoma.
- Clear intent statements and objectives are critical to successful design guidelines.
- Design standards/guidelines must be written to focus on critical design issues.
- Design standards/guidelines should address contextual issues related to sites.
- Design standards/guidelines should provide for multiple ways of meeting standards.
- Design review programs should be workable and predictable.
- Overly prescriptive standards should be avoided. However, regulations

with too much flexibility can also be a problem.

9. CONCLUSIONS

While there are numerous options for developing a design review program, based on the alternatives presented herein, review of City regulations and policies, and in consultation with staff, we suggest the following parameters as a starting point for discussions with community groups and other stakeholders:

- **Administrative Design Review:** Given existing site and building design standards, additional flexibility and more extensive applicability for administrative design review would be worthwhile. Staff is already reviewing and applying design standards; to improve outcomes, PDS will need to modify code and provide additional staff training and expertise.
- **The development of a Design Review Board:** Based on the community's desire to be involved in how this board operates, the composition, scope, and applicability will be determined after public outreach efforts. However, the following are two suggestions for an initial focus for a Design Review Board, comprised of a mix of neighborhood and subject matter experts. Furthermore, at this time staff recommends developing a single city-wide design board, rather than multiple, neighborhood based boards.
 - In the early rollout of the program, geographic areas will help to provide focus: mixed use centers and/or core pedestrian streets may be a sensible way to break down applicability into a manageable size. Specific areas will be determined after public outreach efforts.
 - In the early rollout of the program,

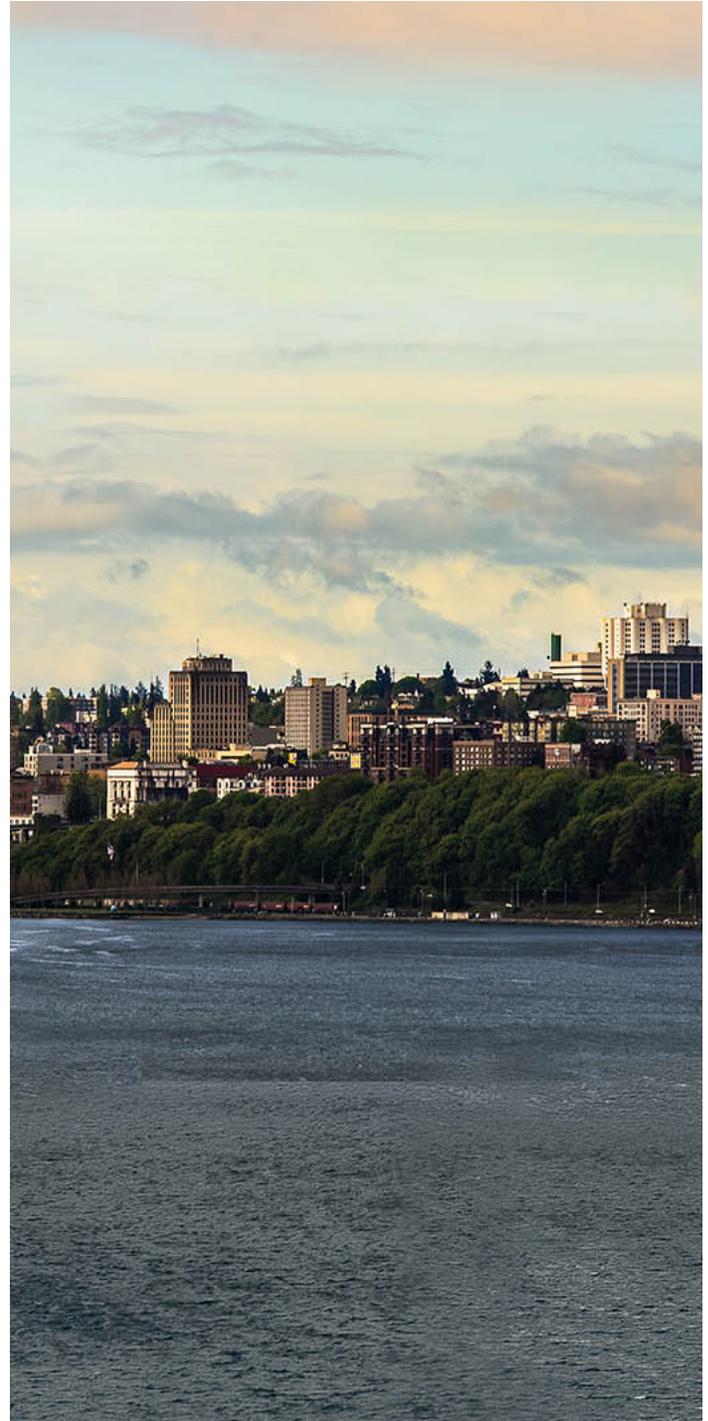
specific types of projects, such as public facilities of a certain size or type may be a sensible way to break down applicability into a manageable size. Specific types will be determined after public outreach efforts.

- Guidelines Document and Organization: At this time, staff recommends creating a single Design Guidelines document based predominantly around building type, rather than developing multiple guidelines documents based on geographic areas within the City. This approach will minimize some of the initial start-up costs and complexity of administering the program.

10. KEY NEXT STEPS

1. Budget request determination – status of request and potential level of funding to help determine capacity
2. Public outreach to stakeholder groups – engagement with existing and new associations, community groups, and individual residents regarding how design review would be structured, how it would be focused, and how public participation would be integrated into processes
3. Code Audit – in-depth review of existing code for potential errors and conflicts; further review for necessary changes and opportunities to reinforce regulatory pieces of more robust design review mechanisms
4. Scoping – applicability of geographic areas, types of projects, and reviewing entity will be shaped based on community feedback, in conjunction with Long Range Planning, Current Planning, and Economic Development
5. Feasibility – Internal resources and capacity will be studied
6. Guidelines and code development – development of code based on findings of the code audit and the creation of design

guidelines (may be stand-alone) to assist developers, property owners, and citizens in how to follow guidelines and processes associated with the program(s)





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