



City of Tacoma
Planning Commission

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October 18, 2023

The Honorable Mayor and City Council
City of Tacoma
747 Market Street, Suite 1200
Tacoma, WA 98402

RE: Urban Design Project Review

Honorable Mayor Woodards and Members of the City Council,

On behalf of the Tacoma Planning Commission, it is my honor to forward our recommendations on *Urban Design Project Review*. In directing us to work on this effort, the City Council tasked this Commission with a very important responsibility and opportunity to make a significant and lasting contribution to our City. We are grateful for this chance to do meaningful work on behalf of current and future Tacoma residents.

As the City Council has correctly defined, Tacoma values a livable, sustainable, and equitable built environment—in short, those qualities of a city with which good urban design is concerned. However, the City's existing tools are inadequate to ensure those public goods are supported and enhanced in its regulation of new development, especially as the city experiences the scale, complexity, and diversity of development activity in its designated growth centers. Missed opportunities will persist for decades, with long and lasting impacts on the fabric of the city, livability, and economic prosperity.

The goals of the *Urban Design Project Review* are to support good design outcomes for livability, resilience, and accessibility in the city's designated growth centers. Its scope and approach are to support the Comprehensive Plan's transit-oriented growth vision. Its focus is on more equitable results for residents, workers, and visitors alike—especially by emphasizing a pedestrian-oriented public realm, thoughtful consideration for supporting transit, non-motorized and other active transportation options, and providing an efficient, predictable process for innovative design solutions to address environmental challenges and respond to the climate crisis.

Yet if we do nothing, we know what to expect—inequitable outcomes and development that fails to support walkable places and a more fully functional city for all. Those outcomes would not be consistent with Tacoma's values. The *Urban Design Project Review* proposals are only one among a range of significant actions that the City can take to address our community's urban growth needs. In particular, it is discrete from the "gentle density" work on missing middle housing through Home in Tacoma.

With new State law guidance, and incorporating the best practices and lessons learned in other cities, Tacoma's *Urban Design Project Review* proposal is a careful response to address gaps in the City's current Land Use approval process and amongst certain Code provisions, while given the range of site-specific variables and contexts, creating opportunities to better meet the community's needs and hopes for the future.

We believe it is time for Tacoma to update a process that is no longer serving us well. The *Urban Design Project Review* recommendations would establish an Urban Design Project Review (UDPR) permit process consisting of administrative and Urban Design Board review paths. UDPR permits would be required for developments located within any designated Mixed-Use Center and that exceed certain development size thresholds. The program design is intended to "right-size" the level of review based on the significance of the project and its location, such that larger developments in key locations would be subject to the highest level of review while smaller projects would receive less significant review.

Through our engagement efforts, we have also heard that while there is a recognition of the need to support new development, there are also real concerns about how the City responds to growth and change.

Urban Design Project Review would not be an arbiter of architectural taste or style. It would be limited to clear, objective evaluation criteria, and strict limits on the scope and time to conduct its reviews whether through its administrative review process or, the more limited, Urban Design Board process.

We hope the Council would prioritize appointing individuals to the Urban Design Board who have an innate understanding (personal knowledge) of our centers, individuals by virtue of their professional and lived experience can provide important insights on context and how development might better integrate and improve our communities while meeting current needs and reflecting our shared vision for the future. Further, the proposals reflect the importance of considering equity in the composition of the Board, particularly inclusive of historically underrepresented communities and diverse perspectives.

We acknowledge that significant change always comes with controversy. The proposals have been crafted in collaboration with the community, and we have worked hard to consider and address the issues and questions. We believe wholeheartedly that the *Urban Design Project Review proposals* are well-balanced and incorporate a firm commitment to address community concerns moving forward.

Significant to the collective effort of crafting this proposal has been an ongoing commitment and participation of key development stakeholders through the Commission-chartered Project Advisory Group. Comprising representatives from the for-profit and non-profit affordable housing development community working at scale in Tacoma, along with leading design professionals, this group has brought deep expertise and provided critical input based on extensive professional experience. We acknowledge and deeply appreciate their contribution of dozens of valuable volunteer hours, having met over twenty times.

In conclusion, *Urban Design Project Review* is a carefully crafted and well-balanced product that reflects the community's desires and concerns while not creating a regulatory burden. Good urban design matters deeply to our well-being, health, and prosperity. The Planning Commission believes that the recommended package, as part of the City's ongoing policy efforts, will help achieve the City's strategic goals for a safe, welcoming, and attractive city; a well-maintained natural and built environment; a diverse, productive, and sustainable economy; and an equitable and accessible community for all.

Enclosed please find the "*Planning Commission's Findings of Fact and Recommendations Report for the Urban Design Project Review, October 18, 2023*," which summarizes the proposed amendments, the public review and community engagement process, and the Planning Commission's deliberations and decision-making.

We want to share our thanks to the Tacoma residents and stakeholders who have been actively engaged in the process and provided invaluable feedback and advice.

We respectfully request that the City Council accept our recommendations and adopt the *Urban Design Project Review package* as presented.

Sincerely,



Christopher Karnes, Chair
Tacoma Planning Commission

Enclosure