MEETING: Project Advisory Group
PRESENTERS: Mesa Sherriff, Senior Planner, Planning and Development Services
Keith Walzak, VIA Architecture
Lee Einsweiler, Code Studio
SUBJECT: Urban Design Studio
DATE: June 12, 2019

PRESENTATION TYPE:
Informational presentations followed by group discussions

SUMMARY:
At the meeting on June 12, 2019, the Project Advisory Group (PAG) reviewed and provided feedback on the Urban Design Studio and the draft code audit. The group was given an overview of the proposed project focus areas and the draft communications plan. The TAC was encouraged to provide input on selecting criteria by which to narrow down the focus area for this phase of work. In addition, the committee received a presentation on preliminary findings from the code audit.

DISCUSSION:
The following topics were presented to the TAC for review

Stated goals for Design Review (2016):
• Improve upon the City’s existing design review process
• Support quality, sustainable, compatible development
• Support equitable growth and development
• Provide education and a resource to the community
• Are administratively practical
• Are user-friendly and understandable
• Are flexible and promote innovation
• Are predictable
• Encourage public involvement
• Are integrated with other City processes

Proposed focus areas
• Public Projects
• Projects in Neighborhood Mixed-Use Centers
• Projects on Pedestrian Corridors
• Projects in zone transitions (MUC to Residential, etc)
• Projects in Mixed Use Centers

Draft Communications Plan

Summary input from
• Planning Commission
• Infrastructure, Planning, and Sustainability Committee
NOTES:
Focus area for design review discussion
- General preference toward neighborhood mixed-use centers w/transitions
  i. Proctor
  ii. Stadium
  iii. Lincoln
- General preference toward Mixed-use Center / Downtown /Tacoma Mall. McKinley Neighborhood is a good example
  i. Where people interact w/buildings on a regular basis Manageable scale
  ii. Testing at early stage in process w/neighborhoods is important
- Focus on areas that are going through change
  i. Stadium
- A strategy may be to get out ahead of where developing vs. reacting to where it is now
  i. Along light rail corridor
- Identify areas w/less friction / opposition (Nimby-ism)

General Discussion
- Acknowledged the need to test the educational aspects of the Urban Design Program
- Project needs early wins
- Test design standards / policy w/ informed stakeholders, developers and designers
- Downtown has longer blocks – need to focus on streets, street frontages
- Exterior materials – developers are generally looking for inexpensive
- First 20 feet vertical and entrances – require higher quality material.
- Tacoma can’t afford higher standards that result in increased costs. Won’t pencil for local developers.
  i. Difficult to get projects to pencil without going to a “whole block” scale
  ii. Cost: >$10,000 in design services
- Tacoma topography and longer blocks result in buildings that are out-of-scale at the end facades at the ground level. The longer the building the more trouble.
- Mid- block activation - considering Tacoma’s long blocks and creating the 3rd places and public realm opportunities, how to incentivize this.
- Sustainability – focus on water resources/storm water management
- Cost of sustainability measures should not be a factor. Tacoma needs to reach a point where this is not an issue.
- TDR’s -need to look at this to understand the underpinnings and impacts on quality development.
- Avoid too much prescriptive language
- Balance massing, scale, modulation as a technic for success.
- Performance measures (incentives) may be a way to do this in Tacoma
- Flood of 5 over 2’s are coming in next year or two – how to respond
- What focus areas will bring the greatest impact and best UD outcome for the City and livability?
- What value is Design Review bringing? Can impact project quality both ways
- Can be conducted as Partial or Full Design Review
- Board needs authority to reject projects that don’t make the city better for everyone, public amenities/pedestrian scale/etc
Code Discussion

- Proctor example – sensitivity surrounding street edges and adjacent neighbors needed in planning/review.
- City used to apply “Transitional Zones” to property. Review these?
- Latest changes to pre-application process make it both very rigorous, and very useful. Can submit 15% plan and get comments from all departments. Not mandatory.
- Facades and materials are likely the biggest concerns.
- Consider using “first 20 feet up” rule for high quality materials?
- St Helens and Stadium are zoned the same way, yet have gotten substantially different outcomes.
- Measurement of “Average Grade” bonusing downtown projects, penalizing uphill as to total building height.
- Exacerbated by Fire Dept. determination that “Courts” downtown are considered streets, and therefore the lowest control point for “high-rise” construction kicking in, even though fires would not be fought from there.
- Think about better integration of new storm water ideas – very current issue in Tacoma.
- Thinking about MF equity issues – 10% affordable may be too high.
- Consider a true calibrated bonus for affordable housing instead?
- Current design standards bonus is too easy to achieve.
- TDR remains an inexpensive option for additional FAR.
- Need clarity, an accessible code and guidelines, graphics. Bellevue guidelines cited as an example.
- “Significant scale projects” should have sustainability and affordability requirements. Larger projects have more flexibility to implement these ideas.
- Many “standards” (such as articulation width) as just numbers plucked out of the air.
- Consider option for subjective review as an alternative to prescriptive standards. Ideas like performance standard that is also translated into a real example that can be approved easily would be helpful.
- South Sound 911 building a good example of process. Included the neighborhood early. Met their early commitments during the process.
- Alternative Compliance strategies as a proactive tool instead of variance

Below are long form additional responses provided after the PAG meeting

What works or doesn’t (for this I am just referencing the current design standards under 13.06.501).

- There is no obvious review process for these design standards. Having a checklist as some jurisdictions do would be very helpful. This could be submitted with your application package as a required component. I would expand the checklist to include a comment section. This would be where the applicant can explain how they believe they meet the requirement, or if they are close to meeting the requirement but aren’t right on the number, they could explain why and then the reviewer can decide whether it is acceptable or whether it should be taken a step further. This is where some flexibility could play a part. If the project is close to the prescriptive number but is off by 5 or 10% could that be approvable by staff as meeting the intent? See my further comments under flexibility 2a.
• Get rid of the multiple colors/materials (exclusive of glass) requirement. 13.06.501B.5.b. (This contributes to the cookie cutter effect.) Or at least change it to an option. Some of the nicest and unique buildings in the city are only one or two colors or materials: History Museum; Glass Museum. Another example: It’s kind of nice that the 1515 Dock Street multi-family on the Thea Foss is not multi-colored like Thea’s Landing to the south of it.
• I agree with the cookie cutter comments. Too much prescriptive by the numbers design leads to everything looking the same.

What needs to be more flexible
• I have a problem with numbers that have no relation to project proportion, scale, or function, but I understand the reason for having them. Understanding and accommodating different building uses/types having different scales is a place where flexibility is relevant. A fast food restaurant is very different from a multi-family apartment building which is very different from a YMCA. In the case of the YMCA the pool element is longer than the 100 feet that requires roof and wall modulation, yet it can be a very unique design without the forced/fake modulation. An apartment building has natural modulation components in each of its different unit types and widths, and often has balconies. It’s relatively straightforward to jog a whole unit or even half of a larger unit. Let the units be the modulating component with their design rather than being forced into a dimension that messes with the unit plans. If there was this flexibility, this could be reviewable by staff and really shouldn’t need higher level approval.
• Where a building use/type is permitted in a zone, there has to be a legitimate attempt to actually allow the reasonable use. I understand the anti-big box sentiment, but if you are going to allow them to be somewhere in the city, then those retailers need to be able to design their business in a way that functions for their operations. For years now, design standards everywhere have been trying to make every business pretend they function like Small Town USA with people strolling along the street and stopping in to buy one or two items. Shoppers at large retail stores are buying in quantity and need to be able to get their purchases safely in a shopping cart from the store to their car and then home. I’m not saying to give them carte blanche. But it’s far better to plan for appropriate big box development in specific limited locations, with as much high quality site and building design as possible, but that are designed with their operational requirements in mind, rather than try to force it to be something it’s not.
• If you have a unique building such as the History Museum, let it be outstanding. Yes, it’s on a pedestrian street and has virtually no glass. And please don’t tack on display windows – that would ruin it. Yes, it has large blank walls. But it’s a wonderful piece of architecture. So, find a way to allow great design without regulating it into conformity. There could be flexibility to add some pedestrian elements within the sidewalk area to compensate for the lack of building pedestrian features.

Review process
• At our meeting there was discussion about Seattle’s design review process. I agree that it is a continuing to evolve. Our experience has been that creating the required design review package and the lengthy process of back and forth with the review board is very costly, both in professional service fees to develop and redevelop schemes and drawings multiple times, and also the amount of time the project sits in DRB limbo. We even have
a planner in our office that had the approval status to file things and get them reviewed quickly and it still can be onerous. Tacoma developers can’t build a project that can afford that sort of process.

- My suggestions: Prescriptive – check all the boxes and you are good to go on to building permit. Performance based – substitutions that can be allowed on a case by case basis with review by staff. Some of those may end up being recommended for further review by committee. Design Review by committee – for those projects that are unique and don’t fall into the typical prescriptive format.

- Touching on the substitution comment. What is determined as “good” design is very subjective and wholly a matter of personal opinion. Requiring a substitution that is “better” than the requirement is a slippery slope.

- NE Tacoma – is there anything to consider in that area? I’m a little hazy on the exact locations of the city limits over there, but it seems like there are some locations that could fall into some type of mixed use or zone transition considerations.

- Who is the intended audience for the final document – building industry people working in commercial and large scale residential projects, private citizens working on their own homes or small scale residential properties, or both? I may have missed an email explaining this part; if I did, I’m sorry about my own confusion. If it’s both, what sort of consideration will we make for jargon used in the final document (articulation, fenestration, FAR, 5 over 2, etc.) so that it is accessible to people outside the building industry?

- Someone made a comment about defining Tacoma neighborhood values as it relates to building design and planning decisions. Do you have information from neighborhoods on what those values are or will there be a plan to make sure that the guidelines are in line with what folks in neighborhoods want their neighborhood to look and feel like?

- In addition to ensuring that neighborhoods feel represented in what the final guidelines will create in Tacoma, it seems like it would be a good idea to run them by some others as well. I noticed on Wednesday that the PAG is a fairly homogenous group – there were 4 women in attendance, only 1 person of color, and mostly architects/designers. I know that diversity, equity, and inclusion are a high priority for the City. If there isn’t a way to add a more diverse group of people (gender, race, job) to the PAG, could we share a draft of the document with folks within the Urban League, Hilltop Business Owners Association, or other groups that would be more representative of the city than the folks in the PAG?

ZONING HEIGHT ISSUES – DR Zone

- The zoning for our project is the same as the Stadium neighborhood. The 90-ft height limit is achievable on the relatively flat areas of Stadium but they are impossible on the sloped areas of St Helens. This appears to be an error, why make a 90-ft height limit when it can only be achieved through high-rise construction? Sketch SK-3 on page 3 of the attachment shows how the 90-ft zoning is achievable on flat sites but not possible when there is a steep downhill slope below the primary frontage.

- SK-5 on page 5 shows how the same zoning limits are not achievable on either the uphill and downhill of primary frontage in sloped neighborhoods. There are multiple issues, one is
determination of average grade… the average grade for the uphill site is +/- 15-ft higher than the road so the 90-ft limit is actually 105-ft and cannot be reached. The average grade for the downhill site is +/- lower than the road so the 90-limit is actually 85-ft yet is still cannot be reached.

FIRE-DEPARTMENT ACCESS LOCATION ISSUES – Citywide

• For our project the city required us to utilize Court C as the lowest level of fire department access. In our judgement, Court C is an alley, but PDS staff defines it as a Street. I searched the entire TMC and I could not find a definition for a “court”. There are clear descriptions for driveways and access that is allowable on streets and alleys, but nothing for ‘courts’. This determination by PDS blew up our project. We were forced to go for high rise construction as a result, costing the project at least $10M and an extra year of design delay.

• SK-5 on page 5 shows how this impacted us. If the lowest point on the alley becomes our fire department access our building requires high-rise construction when the highest floor is 55-ft above the lowest point of St Helens instead of 75-feet. We lose two full floors and 60,000 sf of rentable area. Our project has 325-ft of frontage that rises another 16-feet, so the top floor level would have been 39-ft above St Helens.

• To challenge the logic of treating ‘courts’ as streets and not alleys, consider these variants of the same condition. All examples use the downhill parcel from SK-5. Assume Court-C is 20-feet lower than St Helens.

• FULL STREETS ON BOTH SIDES OF BUILDING (Court C is a Street)
  • Fire department access from either St Helens or Court C
  • Highest floor is 55-ft above lowest point along St Helens
  • Project loses 20-feet of building height and the 90-ft zoning height limit is not possible

• COURT C IS AN ALLEY
  • Fire department access from St Helens only
  • Highest floor is 75-ft above the lowest point along St Helens
  • Project can realize full building height allowable

• COURT C IS A CLIFF (no potential for access from downhill at all)
  • Fire department access from St Helens only
  • Highest floor is 75-ft above the lowest point along St Helens
  • Project can realize full building height allowable

• Option 1 has the best access of the three options yet is only allowed 20-ft less than the other two options. This defies logic and is unreasonable.

CONCLUSION
Both of these issues affect properties with slopes from Stadium through the Brewery District. They seem like easy issues to resolve, fixing both of them do not put people at risk and increase density. It is a win-win.