

Design Review Process for Downtown Ann Arbor

Introduction

The design principles and objectives developed for downtown Ann Arbor are devised to be implemented in a combination of design standards and guidelines based on both prescriptive and qualitative measures. This paper describes the design review process for the guidelines component.

Design Standards

The prescriptive standards address basic dimensional requirements for building mass and are described in a separate paper. These will be adopted as part of the downtown zoning amendments. As with other zoning standards, they will be administered by city staff, and all relevant requirements must be met in order to obtain the permits needed for development.

Design Guidelines

The second component would be the application of design guidelines. These are drafted to address finer-grained design variables than those in the zoning code. They also are more flexible in the manner in which one may comply with them. They are therefore termed “discretionary.” The guidelines will be applied to all projects that require site plan or PUD approval.

The Design Review System

Administrative Review

City Planning staff shall conduct the task of design review, and as needed/requested be advised by the design panel. Staff will use a checklist that accompanies the design guidelines for use in evaluating proposals. This form of administrative review is recommended to maintain an efficient approvals schedule.

Timing of Design Review

Design review will occur concurrently with other site plan reviews. No additional time will be required, unless a proposal is referred to the proposed Design Advisory Resource Panel.

Design Advisory Resource Panel

A special panel will be established to provide advice to staff in making design review decisions. The majority of this group shall be design professionals, but it should also include some downtown property owners and community advocates. The panel will meet on an as-needed basis. Since their actions will only be advisory, no formal hearing will be required. All meetings will be open to the public and advance notice will be given in order to give the public an opportunity to attend their meetings. The panel will provide their advice to staff on the interpretation of the design guidelines as needed/requested.

Community Comments on Proposed Projects

The public will be given the opportunity to comment on a project’s adherence to the design guidelines. Staff will publish a notice that a project has been received for either preliminary review or approval, and that a review/decision is scheduled to be made on a specific date. The public will be able to come to the Planning Unit prior to that time and review the plans and provide written comments. Staff will take these comments into consideration in reviewing/making a decision on projects. (This is a form of Administrative Review.)

Preliminary Review

A preliminary design review of project massing conducted by staff will be required before a project may be submitted for site plan review. The preliminary review will be advertised and open to the public. The project’s developer/architect will be able to request the participation of the design panel. At the preliminary review staff (and the design panel) will give a set of recommendations for incorporating the design guidelines into the project which will then be used as a basis for further review on the project.

Appeals

An applicant is then able to appeal the decision made by staff. The first step of the appeal process is made to the Planning Commission, and then to the City Council. Standards will be developed to guide the appeal process.

Alternative Compliance

The design guidelines may also be used, in some limited circumstances, to provide added flexibility to the form-based standards that are proposed to be adopted as part of the zoning code. For example, one standard would require a setback in the building wall plane as it rises above the lower floors. (That standard is intended to maintain a moderate scale at the street edge, and provide for light and air.) There may be alternative designs, however, that achieve similar results, but with a combination of other design treatments, such as changing materials for upper levels and other architectural detailing, to maintain scale. Through the design review process, these alternatives could be considered. In this use of the guidelines, the applicant would seek the alternative compliance option. This flexibility would not be available for critical massing standards, including Floor Area Ratio.

The areas most appropriate for alternative compliance include:

- Adjusting the percentage of building wall that must be at the front setback
- Adjusting the minimum setback requirement for upper levels
- Adjusting the diagonal dimension limitation for upper levels

Annual Training

Staff and the Design Advisory Resource Panel will engage in an annual training session. At this session, they will review the principles of the guidelines, and practice applying them. They will also discuss how the committee works to assist staff in making design review decisions.

Review System Monitoring

The Planning Unit will evaluate the design review system annually. This will include a public workshop to receive comments on how the review process has been working, as well as to consider any refinements to the guidelines that may be needed. A report will then be prepared and delivered to the Planning Commission. In this way, the community has an opportunity to “review the reviewer.” This is an efficient method for monitoring the review process.

Relationship to Historic Resources

The Historic District Commission will continue to conduct design review in the historic districts and for any individually designated historic resources in the area. The Historic District Commission is currently updating its design guidelines, and as a part of that process, the downtown guidelines will be incorporated, to be applicable to new construction in the district.

Key Design Review Actions

1. Public notification is given of any planned reviews/decisions on proposed projects. Public comments are received.
2. Preliminary review of project’s proposed massing.
3. Administrative review and determination of compliance with design standards and guidelines.
4. A decision may be appealed first to the Planning Commission, and second to the City Council.
5. Annual monitoring of review system.
6. Annual design review training of Staff and Design Panel.