

MEMORANDUM

TO: Mayor and City Council

FROM: Design Review Board

SUBJECT: **Report on Design Review Process**

DATE: December 11, 2012

A report on the effectiveness of the Design Review Process and any changes to the Downtown Design Guidelines was requested by City Council when the process was established and the Guidelines were adopted on February 7, 2011 (R-11-025). Please find the requested report below.

Report on Design Review Program

The Downtown Design Guidelines, originally conceived as part of the A2D2 Ann Arbor Discovering Downtown project begun in 2006, were adopted on February 7, 2011. On that date, City Council also established a Design Review Board and appointed seven citizen representatives to serve. Proposed projects that are (a) in the D1 or D2 zoning districts or within the DDA boundary already zoned or proposed to be zoned PUD, and (b) not in a historic district, and (c) propose an increase in floor area, and (d) require any type of site plan approval, whether administrative, by Planning Commission or City Council, are required to be reviewed by the Design Review Board. The Design Review Board engages in a dialog with the developer and project designers, discussing consistency with the Downtown Design Guidelines. The Design Review Board seeks to help projects interpret the Downtown Design Guidelines and achieve the overarching goal – excellence in the design of the built environment of downtown Ann Arbor.

To date, five projects have been reviewed by the Design Review Board, one of which is currently under construction:

- The Varsity Ann Arbor, 425 East Washington Street – a high-rise student-oriented residential development, reviewed in July 2011.
- 618 South Main Street – a mid-rise young professional-oriented residential development, reviewed in November 2011.
- New Blake Transit Center, 331 South Fourth Avenue – a new two-story transit center, reviewed April 2012.
- 413 East Huron Street – a high-rise student-oriented residential development, reviewed October 2012.
- 624 Church Street – a high-rise student-oriented residential development, reviewed October 2012.

The Design Review Board, at their meetings of July 18, September 19, and November 28, 2012, reviewed and discussed their procedures and the Downtown Design Guidelines in order to provide the requested follow-up report to City Council. They offered several suggestions, some of which are procedures they intend to implement at their next review meeting, for increasing the effectiveness of the Downtown Design Guidelines. The Design Review Board's recommended changes to the Downtown Design Guidelines are provided below.

Recommended Changes to the Downtown Design Guidelines

1. Switch *Chapter 1: General Design Guidelines* and *Chapter 2: Design Guidelines for Character Districts*. This will offer a more natural reading, starting from the largest scale (the character districts), to site context (typically one or a few downtown blocks), to the building, and finally to a building's elements.
2. Describe and define context. More explanation and description is needed within the Downtown Design Guidelines of context, including how it is defined, how it is interpreted and how it should be applied to proposed projects.
3. Re-evaluate the character district boundaries and descriptions to determine if districts, and which ones, can be combined. The Downtown Design Guidelines (as well as the Zoning Ordinance) describe eight different character districts within the downtown and offers a description of their existing features. The Design Review Board feels there may actually be far fewer truly distinct areas within the downtown. Applying the Downtown Design Guidelines to three projects in three different character districts has shown that there is more similarity than differences in the three character district reviewed thus far, and based on this experience, all nine character districts should be re-evaluated. Fewer, but more distinct, character districts may do more to preserve the existing features while generating higher quality, complimentary new designs than retaining all eight current districts.
4. Expand on the descriptions of the character districts. The Design Review Board suggests developing expanded, more detailed, and more specific descriptions for each character district in the Downtown Design Guidelines document. Each description should include language regarding the predominant architectural style, design eras, and specific architectural elements currently found as well as recommended within the character area. This will help both designers and the Design Review Board determine if a proposed design is in keeping with a character area and furthers the overarching goal of the guidelines.

Recommended Changes to the Design Review Board Procedures

1. Provide direct mail notice to all residents and property owners within 500 feet of a project site rather than 1000 feet. The "capture rate" for mailed notices is about 1% - about 1% of the residents and property owners who receive a direct mail notice attend the Design Review Board meeting. Reducing the notification radius will reduce the administration costs for each application but will not reduce the effectiveness of the notice.

2. Revise application form to standardize how applicants demonstrate context (based on how context is defined in the revised Downtown Design Guidelines). Require cross sections of the site and beyond, including the opposite side of the street.
3. All Board meetings should be held on the subject site whenever possible.
4. Visit each site prior to a meeting. Possibilities include two or three-person subcommittees visiting the site a few days before a meeting and reporting back to the Board to full Board site visit immediately prior to a meeting.
5. Spend a few minutes at the end of each meeting summarizing and prioritizing member comments.
6. Offer as a complimentary and voluntary service to design teams a review of their site analysis, helping confirm an accurate identification of the site context, by a subcommittee of the Design Review Board.
7. Identify a liaison to represent the Design Review Board at Planning Commission and Council meetings if necessary.

Recommended by: Tamara Burns, Chair
Paul Fontaine
Chester B. Hill
Mary Jukuri
William Kinley
Richard Mitchell
Geoffrey M. Perkins

Prepared by: Alexis DiLeo, City Planner

Attachment: 11/20/12 Memo regarding Design Review Board Administration

MEMORANDUM

TO: Design Review Board

FROM: Wendy L. Rampson, Planning Manager

SUBJECT: Design Review Board Administration

DATE: November 20, 2012

As part of your report to City Council on Design Review Board (DRB) activities, I would like to provide information about the support activities provided by Planning Services to the Board. This information can be incorporated into your report or provided as a companion report from staff, according to your preference.

Since the ordinance establishing the Design Review Board went into effect in June 2011, the Board has met five times. Planning staff has provided Board support by setting up the application in the permit tracking system, sending out public notice, staffing the DRB meeting, and drafting the final report. The staff time spent on each DRB application averages 10 hours.

Printing and postage costs for mailing the 1000 foot radius postcard vary with the location of the project:

- The Varsity (425 E. Washington) – 400 postcards = \$172 in printing and postage
- 618 South Main - 511 postcards = \$220 in printing and postage
- Blake Transit Center – 1,156 postcards = \$554 in printing and postage
- 413 E. Huron St. – 1,624 postcards = \$779 in printing and postage
- 624 Church St. – 1,105 postcards = \$530 in printing and postage

Currently, the fee for a DRB application is \$500. Based on the public notice costs identified above, this fee does not typically cover the full cost of the notice mailing, and covers none of the staff time. One approach to address this is to reduce the notice radius from 1000 feet to 500 feet. Experience has been that at least 10% of the postcards mailed have been returned, and most of those in attendance have learned about the meeting through the Downtown Citizens Council or other means.

c: Alexis DiLeo