



City of Ann Arbor

301 E. Huron St.
Ann Arbor, MI 48104
<http://a2gov.legistar.com/Calendar.aspx>

Meeting Minutes Design Review Board

Wednesday, November 20, 2013

3:00 PM

Guy C. Larcom, Jr. Municipal Building,
301 E. Huron St., Basement Conference Rooms

A CALL TO ORDER

Chair Burns called the meeting to order at 3:05 pm.

B ROLL CALL

Present 6 - Chet Hill, Richard (Dick) Mitchell, Tamara Burns, Paul Fontaine, William Kinley, and Geoffrey M. Perkins

Absent 1 - Mary Jukuri

C APPROVAL OF AGENDA

Approved by the Board.

D APPROVAL OF MINUTES

[13-1446](#)

Design Review Board Meeting Minutes of September 18, 2013

Moved by Kinley, seconded by Perkins, that the minutes be approved as presented. On a voice vote, the Chair declared the motion carried.

E UNFINISHED BUSINESS

Burns noted that the reconstituted Downtown Design Guidelines task force that Council appointed last spring met once, but had no further meetings. She asked if there was a way to get this effort back going and indicated that the review of the design guidelines could be done by the Design Review Board. Rampson said she would check with the City Administrator and Sabra Briere as the Council representative to the Planning Commission to see if the Council resolution could be amended. The group agreed it would be good to coordinate this effort with the downtown zoning evaluation.

F NEW BUSINESS

[13-1447](#)

Discussion on the Downtown Zoning Evaluation Recommendations - The Planning Commission has conducted an evaluation of the downtown zoning changes that were adopted in 2009 and will consider a set of recommendations for changes to the zoning ordinance. These recommendations will be forwarded to the City Council for its action. Background information on the evaluation project may be found at www.a2gov.org/downtownzoning

<<http://www.a2gov.org/downtownzoning>>.

Rampson noted that the Planning Commission is close to completing its recommendations for changes to the downtown zoning, with final action expected at the December 3, 2013 Commission meeting. She noted that if the DRB has recommendations, these can be forwarded to the Planning Commission and City Council for consideration.

The Board discussed the draft Planning Commission recommendation to require DRB approval for the use of floor area premiums. It was noted that the original concept for DRB review was an informal working session to meet with the design team and offer advice about the project before it was submitted. The design review process was envisioned to be similar to the historic review process, with qualitative guidelines, rather than quantitative requirements. It was noted that if the DRB is to have a more formal role in the project approval process, the Board will need to be more strategic in its decisions, for instance by limiting its comments to major elements. It was also noted that this change would likely require a petitioner to attend more than one DRB meeting, which adds time to the process.

Board members wondered if the interest in adding more teeth to the design review process is a D1 massing problem. They noted that earlier projects considered by the DRB have been considered acceptable and wondered if a tower diagonal limitation had been in place, whether the concerns about the 413 E. Huron project would have been have addressed. When they reviewed the design review process earlier in the year, the Board indicated to Council that the approach is sound and having a good impact. Board members felt that they are getting better at honing in on issues.

It was noted that, while things are going well, there are projects that technically meet the guidelines, but they have not been overwhelmed by the results. They felt this speaks to the need to improve the guidelines. For instance, there may be a need to be more specific about expectations for the role of context in the design. This may require the design team to do more preliminary work before they come to the DRB. A helpful tool would be a downtown Sketchup base model that a designer could use to drop in their project. This would help with consistent presentations. It was noted that the design guidelines were developed based on fitting new buildings into the historic context, but this does not leave much room for a contemporary design.

Board members expressed concern about having the DRB be the sole gatekeeper for premiums, because the qualitative nature of the design guidelines would make this decision too arbitrary. There was general agreement that the DRB could be responsible for some portion of the decision to allow premiums and felt it is important for the Board to push good design, however this could not replace zoning review. It was noted there is a big gap between 400-700% FAR, and the bonus system may need to be revisited. It was suggested that perhaps a point system could be used to gain additional floor area. Another suggestion was that if the Planning Commission wanted to negotiate some aspect of the design, it could call upon the DRB to advise them. Another possibility would be for the DRB to send a recommendation to the Planning Commission or City Council, who would then have discretion about whether to grant premiums.

The Board discussed that there are pieces of the design guidelines that could be taken out and converted to ordinance. It was noted that an area of concern is the shading caused by tall buildings and the best way to shape buildings to deal with sun impacts. In the case of a solar access requirement, it may be hard to come up with numerical a formula, and if they did, the they may not like the results

The Board identified other approaches to improve the design of new buildings,

including educating developers and the public about the DRB by providing a formal written statement in advance of an application about the purpose and goals of the DRB and what they trying to accomplish. They discussed whether including a member of the Historic District Commission would be helpful, but agreed this was not necessary and blurred the roles of the two boards. They discussed the possibility of having a liaison from Planning Commission, or having a DRB member assigned to follow a project and attend the Planning Commission to communicate about the design issues. The Board suggested that it would be valuable to have a joint meeting between the DRB and the Planning Commsision in January as Council takes up discussion of the proposed ordinance changes.

The Board agreed that a next step would be do benchmarking with design review boards in other communities, to see if any of them have require mandatory compliance or are linked to floor area bonuses. Communities suggested were Seattle and Portland, in addition to the communities that were used as benchmarks in the A2D2 process. They also agreed that it was important to start work on updating the design guidelines, a process that had gotten underway in the summer as the result of a Council resolution, but had not progressed. Rampson and Burns agreed to follow up with the City Administrator and Councilmember Briere about how to proceed with this effort.

Received and Filed

G PUBLIC COMMENTARY (3 MINUTE MAXIMUM SPEAKING TIME)

Ethel Potts said she thought the discussion had gone very well, and the Board got to things that are important to the process. She said context is the single most important thing that the Board needs to call out and make more specific. She noted the code requires developers to give information beyond their properties as part of an area plan, which is the same as providing context for the design review. She noted that others in the community have suggested that DRB members should be at Planning Commission to explain and defend their positions. She asked for the Board to think about where the most useful time in the process would be for their involvement. The public would like to see the Board come in early in the process, if not when the developer acquires the land, then early in the project development process.

H COMMUNICATIONS

[13-1448](#)

Various Communications to the Design Review Board

Received and Filed

I ADJOURNMENT

The meeting was adjourned at 4:45 pm.