

February 17, 2025

Re: Item 25-0242 – Amendments to UDC related to Design Review and Design Review Board

Dear Planning Commission members,

I am writing as a current member of the Design Review Board (DRB) and a former staff planner who was involved in the creation of the downtown design guidelines and design review process. Please note that I am not speaking for the full board, but I believe my comments may resonate with them.

A key role of the Planning Commission is to advise the City Council on matters relating to the future public and private development of the city. You have the difficult task of balancing the short-term needs of private development proposals with the long-term community need for a memorable and attractive downtown that supports economic activity for residents, visitors and businesses. Before taking action to eliminate the DRB and revise the current downtown design review process, I'd encourage you to step back and explore whether this is the best approach to City Council's desired outcome of streamlining the development process.

First, I'd like to point out that the Downtown Design Guidelines could stand to be simplified and made more relevant to current design approaches and materials. Adopted in 2009 after significant citizen and consultant involvement, they were an ambitious first effort that was always intended to be refined. Unfortunately, Planning staff has not been available to assist with revisions, although the DRB has offered to take the lead. So at minimum, I feel that the DRB's expertise should be retained to update the guidelines before making changes to the downtown design review process.

Secondly, I believe that the quality of future downtown development will continue to benefit from citizen design expertise that supports Planning staff in the petition review process. The benefit of retaining the Design Review Board is that members contribute their practical experience as designers or builders, as well as their working knowledge of downtown.

There may be unconventional ways to accomplish citizen design review in a more expedient way, for example:

- Reconstitute the Design Review Board to a volunteer citizen panel of 3 experts: an architect, an urban designer with placemaking experience, and a sustainability expert. This panel would be asked to review and comment on a submittal as part of the current department review process, and provide their recommendations, either individually or as a group, to Planning staff and the petitioners for follow-up.
- Keep the Design Review Board in place or replace it with a smaller panel and have it provide comments to Planning staff after DRB members participate in a required Type 1 Citizen Participation meeting.

If the Planning Commission and City Council decide to dissolve the DRB, the City should secure an outside urban design firm or individual on retainer to comment on alignment with the guidelines as part of the petition review process. This review cost would be incorporated into the petition fee.

Before moving forward with any changes, I encourage the Planning Commission to postpone its recommendation on the proposed amendments. This will allow staff and the DRB to discuss ways to ensure that new downtown development holds its value over time, both as an investment for the real estate community and as a contribution to the future of the downtown.

Thank you for your consideration.

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