DESIGN + REVIEW

DEPARTMENT RECOMMENDED
PROGRAM IMPROVEMENTS FOR PUBLIC REVIEW

Seattle Department of Construction & Inspections (SDCI)
& Seattle Office of Planning & Community Development (OPCD)

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Seattle's Design Review Program evaluates the appearance of buildings and their relationship to adjacent sites, and reviews most new multifamily, commercial and mixed used development projects in Seattle.

The purpose of the Design Review Program is to:

- Encourage better design and site planning to ensure new development enhances the city and sensitively fits into neighborhoods.

- Provide flexibility in the application of development standards to better meet the intent of the Land Use Code.

- Improve communications and mutual understanding among developers, neighborhoods and the City.

The Program Improvements project

In 2015, the City Council requested an evaluation of the Design Review program. The study was commissioned in response to concerns and ideas shared by the public and stakeholders. In addition, during 2015 Mayor Murray and City Council assembled a Housing Affordability and Livability Agenda (HALA) advisory group to address the rising cost of housing in the city. One of the group's recommendations was to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the Design Review process. The recommendations in this report are consistent with those put forward by HALA. In addition, going forward, consideration should be given to implications an updated Design Review process could have on increasing the cost of housing.

This recommendations report is prepared jointly by the Seattle Department of Construction and Inspections (SDCI) and Office of Planning and Community Development (OPCD) after taking into account input from a broad variety of community members, stakeholders and the Design Review Advisory Group described below. A range of actions and policy options are identified to implement structural and procedural changes to Design Review. After public comment is taken on these recommendations, a final set of code changes and program improvements will be delivered by Mayor Murray to the City Council for consideration.

The Design Review advisory group

A major component of outreach for this project was the assemblage of a 16-member Advisory Group comprised of architects, project applicants and community members to explore key issues and develop recommendations to improve the Design Review Program. The concepts put forward by that group, which met from April through September of 2015 (documented under Appendix E), greatly informed the recommendations in this report.

Other stakeholder input

In addition to the Advisory Group, public input was gathered directly from community members in 2015 through a variety of means described on the following pages. Input received from other efforts is also considered, including past studies of Design Review, and stakeholder comments about Design Review provided directly to SDCI and OPCD.

Design Review 101

How the Design Review program works today

Seattle is one of the only large cities in the U.S. where Design Review is conducted primarily by neighborhood-based citizen-volunteer boards. Under the current system, the City is divided into seven districts that are geographically based, each with its own Design Review Board. Each district board consists of volunteers appointed by the Mayor and City Council and serve two-year terms.

As part of the Full Design Review process, the district boards review private development projects in Seattle and provide advice and guidance on issues such as:

Design Review Districts

1. Northwest
2. Northeast
3. West
7. East
6. Downtown
5. Southwest
4. Southeast

Urban Village or Urban Center

0 0.5 1   2
Miles
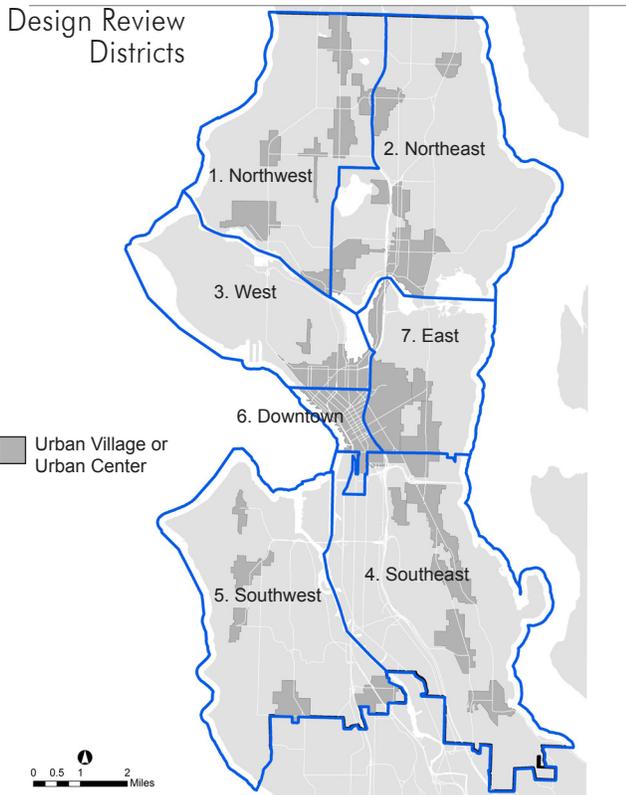
- The overall appearance of the building and site design, including materials, open space and landscaping.
- How the proposal relates to adjacent sites and the street frontage.
- How the proposal relates to unusual aspects of the site, like views or slopes.
- Pedestrian and vehicular access.

What's working well?

The Design Review Program was first established in 1994, and since then well over 1,500 projects have been reviewed – or around 111 per year. Over that time, the City has also conducted numerous evaluations of the Program, which have indicated that many aspects of the program are working well, such as:

Creating Dialogue

The opportunity for public comment and dialogue between developers, communities and the City is highly valued and can greatly reduce conflict in the land use review process. Of all the projects reviewed in 2014 and 2015 only 2% were appealed, and project land use appeals dropped significantly after the Design Review Program began in 1994.

Improving Design

Design Review is particularly helpful in preventing negative project design outcomes that could be incompatible with a neighborhood. Many designs are modified substantially during the review process.

Providing Flexibility

Many projects request and are granted at least one 'departure' - a flexibility to depart from a rigid code standard in order to better meet a design intent, which often helps a design respond to unique site conditions.

The Design Review process today

Today's process includes an Early Design Guidance (EDG) phase, and a Design Recommendation (Recommendations) phase. Both include a public meeting before a Design Review Board. At Design Review Board meetings the public has the opportunity to comment, and project sponsors/applicants describe how their project will meet citywide design guidelines, and if applicable, neighborhood-specific guidelines. In turn, the Board and City staff provide feedback and guidance to the applicant. At the EDG meeting, the Board will decide whether a project is ready to move on to the Recommendations phase, or if additional EDG meetings are required. Completion of both the EDG phase and the Recommendation phase are needed prior to a project receiving its Master Use Permit (MUP) and building permit from the City.

In addition to the Full Design Review process, there are currently two other review processes (Administrative and Streamlined). Neither involve Design Review Board participation and are typically used for smaller projects.

PROJECT GOALS

The goals for the Design Review Program Improvements project are listed below. These goals are based on input from members of the community, designers and project applicants, as well as findings from previous studies of the Design Review Program. A summary of how the goals are met is provided.

GOAL 1. Cultivate the program's purpose of encouraging better design

Identified challenges:
- There is room for improvement on encouraging excellent design.
- Some designers may defer to previously approved approaches to reduce risk and unpredictability, instead of striving for more innovative or creative design solutions.
- During a period of rapid change in recent years in Seattle many residents are expressing concern about the overall quality of design of new buildings.

How this goal would be met by the recommendations.
- Encourages more responsiveness to local priorities through early outreach. (Rec. 1)
- Focuses more attention of the Design Review Boards on the most complex projects with the greatest design challenges. (Rec. 2)
- A new formal and prestigious award program would publicize and encourage design excellence. (Rec. 3)
- Adds more design expertise to each Board, such as a landscape architect or urban designer. (Rec. 4)

Additional details to consider

Other ways to improve design
Since zoning and development standards set many parameters for new buildings, the potential for future improvements to these standards should be considered as well. Though not part of recommendations for Design Review program improvements, we acknowledge potential upcoming efforts that could improve design through adjustments to development standards.

- As zoning is amended to implement Mandatory Housing Affordability (MHA) through the HALA process, urban design standards should be carefully considered. It is possible to achieve improvements in building form through the process.
- A review of development standards for transitions between zones in lower scaled zones (i.e. Lowrise zones, and Neighborhood Commercial zones) should be considered.

Partnership with organizations including AIA and the Seattle Planning Commission to explore effective design approaches and prototypes - particularly for smaller scale zones should be considered in the coming years.

GOAL 2. Improve the level of consistency, efficiency and predictability in how the City administers the program

Identified challenges:
- The Full Design Review process can be time consuming and unpredictable, adding to project costs.

- It can be difficult to maintain consistency in how projects are reviewed by different boards, or how the boards operate.

How Goal 2 is met by the recommendations.
- We estimate the recommendations will lead to a timeline reduction of 4 to 8 weeks on average for Design Review.

- The total number of needed Design Review Board meetings will be reduced by 50 - 70 per year, which will significantly reduce lead-time for meeting scheduling. (Rec. 2)

- Increased early and ongoing engagement usually leads to more predictable and timely design reviews for applicants. (Rec. 1)

- More training for board and staff improves consistency. (Rec. 3)

- New tools and techniques like an independent note taker improves consistency. (Rec. 3)

- Limits the number of Design Review meetings for a project through the use of more administrative (staff) review. (Rec. 2)

- Increased size of each board means fewer cancellations and board substitutions due to board member absences. (Rec. 5)

- Greater number of reviewers on a board builds more "checks and balances" into the process. (Rec. 5)

An applicant presents design options to community members at a Design Review Board meeting.

GOAL 3. Set clear expectations

Ensure the design review process is transparent, understandable and accessible to community members, applicants and board members.

Identified challenges:
- There is sometimes confusion about the purpose of design review, how the process works and which issues design review addresses.

How Goal 3 is met by the recommendations.
- Early engagement and dialogue (outside of Design Review Board meetings) allows meetings to focus more directly on relevant issues. (Rec. 1)

- More training for board and staff helps establish clearer protocols for Design Review meetings. (Rec. 3)

- Better able to produce meeting reports in a timely manner with a dedicated note taker. (Rec. 3)

- Modifies Design Review thresholds to be based on gross square footage, which is more clear than unit counts, and is consistent with Design Review's purview over building massing and form, not density of housing units. (Rec. 5)

Additional details to consider

Better policy dialogue with communities
Sometimes community members come to Design Review meetings expecting to comment on parts of a project that can't be influenced through Design Review, like the required amount of parking. It can be frustrating when they learn this is not a topic for comment.

To improve on this, the City should provide more chances for dialogue with communities about basic land use policies and plans for growth. The City's new Office of Planning & Community Development (OPCD) is well positioned to create more opportunities for regular dialogue with communities - before a specific development project becomes the flashpoint for land use policy discussion.

GOAL 4. Support communication and dialogue

Increase accessibility to encourage better dialogue between the boards, applicant and community. Use communication strategies and tools to improve how information is presented, shared and reviewed.

Identified challenges:
- Opportunities for meaningful participation in the process with online tools are currently too limited.

- It is not always clear to community members how comments are incorporated into the Board's review.

- Limits on two-way conversation between Boards and applicants sometimes make it difficult to respond to and resolve issues.

How this goal would be met by the recommendations.
- Broadens participation and public commenting with more web-based tools. (Rec. 3)

- Creates time during board meetings for 2-way dialogue between board and applicant. (Rec. 3)

- Improves dialogue between applicant and community through early engagement. (Rec. 1)

- Expands opportunity for community member participation on boards, potentially increasing participation and providing a more diverse variety of perspectives. (Rec. 5)

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Outreach and engagement

Formal outreach and engagement with the public and key stakeholders began in early 2015
and included:

Interviews with key stakeholders, including architects, designers, community members and past project applicants (March - April 2015).

A 16-member Stakeholder Advisory Group met six (6) times between April – September 2015.

Online open house (June 15 – Aug. 21, 2015)

486 Participants

Conducted two (2) online public surveys to seek input on:

• How people like to learn about and provide feedback on projects in their neighborhoods (March - June 2015).

429 Participants

• Proposed recommendations to improve the Design Review Program. (June - Aug. 2015).

278 respondents

• Two in-person public meetings. Sept. 29, 2015 (Columbia City) Oct. 14, 2015 (University District)

90 Participants

Researched past feedback on the Design Review Program[*], received through the processes listed below, and reviewed what has worked well in other cities.

• Seattle Design Review Process - Recommended options for Improvement led by the Seattle Chamber of Commerce, prepared by BERK Consulting (2014)

• Design Review Process Improvements - Report by Crandall Arambula (2013)

• American Institute of Architects (AIA) initiated a task force - recommendations and considerations (2014)

For more information on previous feedback received on the Design Review Program, see Appendix A

Community members make suggestions for Design Review Process Improvements.

The following summarizes the input received through the Community Engagement process. For each type of outreach method key comment themes are summarized.

Outreach method	Key comment themes
Stakeholder Interviews	• Importance of strong process guidelines for how the Design Review Board operates. • The Design Review Program provides a good forum for public engagement in the design process, but more can be done in terms of outreach and web presence. • The Design Review Program provides a meaningful connection between developers and the general public. *For more information on feedback received from stakeholder interviews, see Appendix B*
Online Survey • Survey #1 (March – June 2015) • Survey #2 as part of the online open house (June – August 2015)	**How people like to learn about and provide feedback on projects in their neighborhoods** • Strong public appreciation for opportunities to provide input on local projects and for receiving information about changes occurring in their neighborhoods. • Sense that public feedback is not being adequately considered or incorporated as part of the Design Review Program. • Provide more advanced notice about projects. • Increase focus on how projects fit within neighborhoods. • Make the process more predictable. • Provide an online platform where the public can stay up to date on various projects and provide feedback, as it is difficult to attend meetings in person. **Proposed recommendations to improve the Design Review Program** • Involve the public, and provide strong and consistent guidance on effective feedback. • Perform outreach with a variety of tools, both online and offline. • Communicate how feedback from an applicant and/or the public is used. • Support engagement with diverse and social justice communities by performing targeted outreach. • Ensure that larger or more impactful projects receive more review; smaller or less impactful projects may be reviewed administratively.. • Ensure all projects go through adequate review cycles, either through the Design Review Board or staff. • Keep the Design Review Program efficient, focused on design, predictable and concise. • Provide materials online, however, online feedback may be less effective, and difficult to moderate. *For more information on feedback received on through online surveys, see Appendices C and D*

Outreach method	Key comment themes

In-Person Public Meetings

Meeting #1 – Sept. 29, 2015 (Columbia City)

- Support green / sustainable development in Design Review.
- Preserve meaningful public input in the Design Review process.
- Allow for more dialogue in the process, between the board, applicant, and community.
- Try a pilot to test how changes would work in one area first.
- Keep the mission focused on design issues.
- Contact neighborhood and community leaders to make sure outreach is appropriate for the area.
- More balance on boards is good. Don't let 1 or 2 members dominate a review.
- Give special consideration to affordable housing in Design Review.

Meeting #2 – Oct. 14, 2015 (University District)

- Don't reduce the amount of public engagement. More engagement is better.
- Make sure all neighborhoods have strong design guidelines.
- Add more design expertise to boards.
- We need better context-sensitive design. Design should compliment the character and feel of the neighborhood more often.
- Ensure good publication of all the outreach steps in the process.
- Help community members become more educated about the land use process.
- Improve coordination of development reviews across City departments.
- Concerns about reducing the number of boards.

Community members review Design Review Process Improvements materials at the Columbia City open house.

Outreach method	Key comment themes
Background Research Feedback provided through previous evaluation efforts included:	**Board structure** • Lack of consistency across seven (7) Boards / 36 Board members. • Unpredictable and frustrating process. • Lack of consistency in application of design guidelines and what they ask of applicants. • Lack of consistent meeting facilitation. • Difficult to ensure there will be a quorum at each meeting. • Lack of continuity in project reviews: with turnover and attendance, the same project may not have the same set of Board members reviewing the project from one meeting to the next. • Workload imbalances: the district-based system can lead to long wait times for meetings in districts with more development occurring. **Meeting logistics** Neighborhood-based meetings have benefits (closer to area of actual projects, easier for local community to attend, feels more neighborhood based, etc.) but also have some drawbacks, such as: • Lack of consistent access to technology. • Varying meeting locations can be confusing to community members. • Staff time involved in finding and scheduling space is considerable.

An online open house was used to share information and seek feedback on potential changes to the Design Review Program

Outreach method	Key comment themes
Background Research	**Meeting format**

Meeting format
- There is not always an opportunity to develop strong working relationships between Board members and planners, which may contribute to inconsistencies in how meetings are run.
- 20 minute time slots for applicants to present is sometimes too much time or not enough time depending on the project.
- There is a lack of clarity in the roles and responsibilities of Board members versus planners.
- It is not clear how public comments heard at the meetings and received by mail or email have been incorporated into the Board's deliberation.
- Deliberations are closed discussions between Board members and staff, which can make it difficult to address issues that could be resolved with dialogue.
- Requiring three (3) massing options is not always productive.
- During busy development cycles, the turnaround time on EDG meeting reports can be lengthy, which impacts how quickly a MUP application can be submitted.

Board and staff training
- Difficult to ensure consistency with seven (7) Boards / 36 Board members with varying levels of experience.
- The Boards are volunteer-based, so scheduling and attendance at trainings (on top of their commitment at meetings) can be challenging.
- Familiarity with City policy and neighborhood-specific policies vary and is often not considered as part of the broader context.
- Some Boards have more experience reviewing projects while others meet less frequently.
- Facilitation skills vary, leading to some Boards being run more or less efficiently.
- Recommendations are often made without considering how suggested changes might impact project costs.

Design Review thresholds
- The full Design Review process is viewed by some (typically applicants and other project proponents) as time consuming and expensive.
- On the other hand, community members typically express interest in lower, not higher thresholds – promoting broader application for all projects impacting their neighborhoods.
- The ebbs and flows of the development market impacts the Program.

For more information on previous feedback received on the Design Review Program, see Appendix A

Outreach method	Key comment themes
Stakeholder Advisory Group	**Outreach and engagement** • There is a need for the Design Review Program to provide more context and help the public better understand the purpose of the program. • It often isn't clear to the community about which projects fall under the purview of the Design Review Program and which do not. This leads to confusion and frustration. • Need to maintain the connection to the neighborhoods. • Have the applicant conduct outreach to the community prior to the EDG process and provide evidence that outreach was conducted. • Consider allowing the public to provide comments on the quality of public outreach conducted as part of the EDG process. **Tools and technology** • The use of technology should include both traditional and emerging technologies, and should not be limited solely to support public engagement, but rather all elements of the Design Review process. • Explore opportunities for additional training for board members and staff. **Board process and structure** • More thought needs to be given to how projects tie into existing neighborhood plans. The Design Review Program has the potential to provide oversight over the synergy of projects, but there is an inability to do so with the current program. • Interest in learning more about how other cities' design review programs are run. • Handle EDG administratively within SDCI. • Interest in establishing clear thresholds for projects going through Design Review process. • Support for a more robust pre-application coaching process. • Need for more clarity about the role of SDCI staff. • Concern that making the EDG process administrative could weaken the Design Review process and eliminate opportunities for design professionals to provide meaningful input. • Interest in exploring opportunities to reward good design.

Stakeholder Advisory Group

- Support for the two-track Design Review process.

- Emphasis on the need for clear criteria for More Complex and Less Complex projects (See Recommendation #2).

- Plan to evaluate how the revised Design Review process is working following implementation.

- Support for revisions to Design Review Board districts and Board composition.

Meeting format

- There is a lack of consistency between different Boards and how Board meetings are run.

- Agreement that the current structure of Design Review Board meetings doesn't allow for enough dialogue between the applicant and the Board.

- Designate a facilitator and note taker at Design Review meetings, as appropriate.

Advisory Group areas of strong consensus

- Early and ongoing, applicant-led outreach.

- Use of new technologies and tools.

- Revisions to the structure and composition of Design Review Boards.

For more information on the stakeholder advisory group process, see Appendix D

The Stack House, a residential development in South Lake Union that went through Design Review preserved historic structures on site as part of the design.
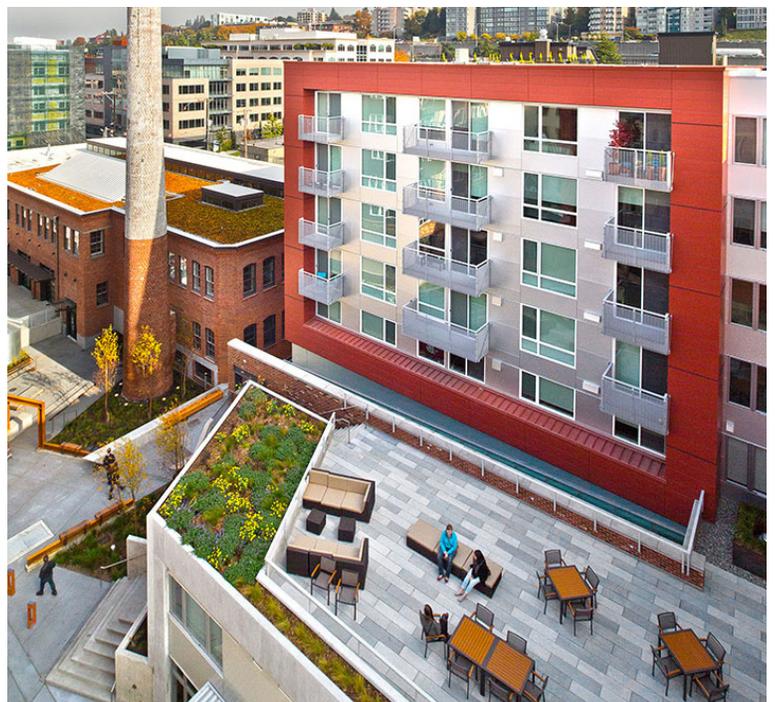
RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are recommendations for specific program changes that should be made to improve the Design Review process. The recommendations are based upon feedback and input received throughout the process as described above. Some of the recommendations include options or alternatives that should continue to be developed before final program changes are made. The five recommendations are summarized below, and explained in detail on the following pages.

RECOMMENDATION #1 – Early and Ongoing Engagement

As part of the Design Review process, the project applicant would be required to conduct and demonstrate outreach to the community prior to permit submittal at a very early stage of design, and continuing throughout the permitting process.

RECOMMENDATION #2 – Set Design Review Thresholds Based on Project Characteristics and Increase Administrative Design Reviews

The steps in the Design Review process would be tailored to meet the unique characteristics of different types of projects and sites. Development proposals that are large and more complex would go through formal review by the Design Review Board for both major phases. Less complex projects would have only one step in the process as a Design Review Board meeting. The least complex projects would be reviewed administratively by staff for both steps.

RECOMMENDATION #3 – New Tools and Techniques

Use new tools and techniques to support the Design Review Program, which could include, but are not limited to:
- Online tools
- Revised formats for Design Review Board meetings
- More training for board members and staff.
- A program to reward and publicize design excellence.
- Dedicated note taker or recording to facilitate production of meeting notes.

RECOMMENDATION #4 – Changes to Board Composition and Structure

Changes would include a reduction in the number of boards (from 7 to 5), while increasing the number of design reviewers on each board (from 5 to 7). Boundary revisions would largely keep the NE, NW, SE, and SW boards intact, but would expand the Downtown Board to a Center City Board that includes South Lake Union and other nearby areas where high-rise development is allowed.

RECOMMENDATION #5 – Updates to Design Review Thresholds

Design review thresholds would be revised.
- Thresholds would be based on total square footage in a building instead of dwelling unit counts.
- Thresholds would apply uniformly to all development instead of zone-by-zone as they are today.
- Thresholds would include all development except Single Family zones, Industrial General (IG) zones, religious institutions, and institutions within a Major Institutional Overlay (MIO).
- Thresholds would adopt the approach described in Draft Recommendation #2.

RECOMMENDATION #1 – Early and Ongoing Engagement

As part of the design review process, the project applicant would be required to conduct and demonstrate outreach to the community prior to permit submittal at a very early, conceptual stage and continuing throughout the permitting process. The intent is to encourage a relationship between the applicant and the community, without the need for direct oversight by the City (SDCI).

Alternatively, instead of a requirement for early outreach SDCI could provide guidance for effective early engagement and actively encourage it, without mandating and monitoring it.

Allow outreach to be varied and tailored to neighborhood specifics including community groups, cultural needs, etc. The applicant would be encouraged to be creative and proactive so that dialogue can flow naturally. The outreach should begin before any project design is presented, in order to have a general discussion of site characteristics and community priorities.

If structured as a requirement, the applicant would meet a minimum standard for outreach, and provide evidence and documentation to SDCI. The requirements would be set to provide many options for how the applicant could meet the requirement while providing clear criteria for sufficient outreach. While the specific amounts and combination of acceptable outreach would need to be developed through future work, the draft proposal is for the applicant to use a minimum of 5 outreach tools, with a minimum of one (1) tool from each of the categories: Electronic, In Person, or Written.

Examples of outreach methods in electronic, in person, and written forms:

Electronic Outreach
- Develop an e-mail distribution list.
- Create a development project website for outreach purposes and updates.
- Update neighborhood blogs or newsletters.
- Post to appropriate social media such as Nextdoor.

In Person Outreach
- Individual or group meetings in homes, businesses or community venues.
- Drop in hours at a business or community location.
- Presence at a community event or festival.
- Discussion during an established community group's meeting.

Written Outreach
- Mailed notice or newsletter to addresses within 300' of the site. (Addresses can be provided by SDCI.)
- Door-to-door flyers.
- Posters in local business venues, community centers, etc.

The following describes how early and ongoing outreach would be integrated into the Design Review and permitting process:

1. Prior to Application Submittal:
*   Develop draft community outreach plan.
*   Identify community contacts and organizations.
*   Begin community outreach (optional at this time).

2. Pre-application and Coaching:
*   Applicant has the option to present draft community outreach plan and implementation approach to staff.

*   At the pre-application meeting, City staff can provide guidance to applicant on the draft plan and can assist in identifying appropriate outreach methods and community contacts. Seattle's Department of Neighborhoods (DON) can help identify appropriate groups and contacts in a neighborhood.

3. EDG:
*   Applicants would be required to submit a community outreach plan with their EDG packet.
*   At EDG the applicant must provide evidence that community outreach has commenced, such as:
    *   Evidence that notices have been mailed or e-mailed to neighbors.
    *   Evidence of in-person meeting(s) or outreach.
    *   Include record of community feedback received to date.

4. Recommendation Phase:
*   Applicants would be required to submit an update on the community outreach strategy with the Recommendation packet.
*   Applicants must provide evidence that community outreach has continued in accordance with the applicant's plan.

Additional details to consider.

*   The City should create an outreach guide to help applicants put together a successful outreach plan and conduct effective outreach to communities.

*   Finalize clear standards for what level of outreach is sufficient to satisfy the requirement.

*   Establish a standard for how far from a project site outreach should be directed.

*   Work with existing community organizations and groups to prepare for new engagement requests by developers.

*   Work with other City departments, including Department of Neighborhoods to help make connections between community members and applicants.

*   Make sure outreach encompasses a wide range of interest groups and stakeholders including traditionally underrepresented groups.

12th Avenue Arts was a finalist project in the People's Choice Awards - a design awards program put together by Design Review program staff in 2015.

RECOMMENDATION #2 –
Set Design Review Thresholds Based on Project Characteristics and Do More Administrative Design Reviews

The current design review thresholds are based on square footage, residential unit count and vary zone by zone. This approach to the design review thresholds is problematic for several reasons:

• The nuances of individual site characteristics are not considered;

• The relevance of the thresholds to design review objectives are unclear; and

• The Design Review Program now includes many more projects than it did when the thresholds were established - creating a strain on the program to handle the volume of reviews.

As a result of the current thresholds, the same resources and program structure are used for the vast majority of all proposed developments undergoing design review. This is no longer sustainable given the high volumes of projects, complexity of site conditions and variety of project types going through design review.

We recommend introducing a new hybrid design review process. And we recommend sorting projects into which type of Design Review, according to a project's characteristics (More Complex, or Less Complex, see chart on page 19). The complexity of a project would be determined based on total project size measured in gross square footage of development, and the project's site characteristics. This would result in three types of Design Review.

1. Full Design Review: *Projects larger than the size threshold that are also More Complex.* These projects would go through formal review by the Design Review Board for both phases (Early Design Guidance and Recommendation) the same basic structure of Design Review as it exists today.

2. Hybrid Design Review: *Projects larger than the size threshold that are Less Complex.* These projects would have only one Design Review Board meeting, with the other portion of the Design Review process led by the SDCI design review planner. This would be a new process that does not exist today.

3. Administrative Design Review (ADR): *Projects that are smaller in scale, but still exceed a minimum Design Review size threshold.* Both phases (EDG and Recommendation) of Design Review are led by the SDCI design review planner. The ADR process exists today, but would be used for a broader array of projects under this proposal. See Draft Recommendation #5 for further discussion of the thresholds for Administrative Design Review.

The intent of Recommendation #2 is to focus Board reviews on the projects that need the most attention (Full Design Review), and open more available board review times so there are fewer 'bottlenecks' in the process. We believe this can both improve the quality of design through more thorough review of complex projects, and improve consistency and efficiency of reviews by increasing the amount of reviews done administratively.

We reviewed all projects that underwent Design Review in the last two years, and analyzed how many projects would have been Full, Hybrid, or Administrative Review if this recommendation (and Recommendation 5 regarding thresholds) were applied. We found that the amount of projects going through Full Design Review would be reduced from 67% to 41% of the total 2 year volume, resulting in the opening of approximately 50 additional Board review timeslots per year. The increase in Board review timeslots would a.) decrease wait times for projects to be scheduled for board meetings, and b.) enable longer reviews for the complex projects the Boards would be reviewing.

The Hybrid process would make one phase of Design Review (either EDG or Recommendation) an administrative phase conducted by a Design Review planner. During engagement, there were different ideas about which phase of Design Review (EDG or Recommendation) should be conducted administratively. SDCI staff recommend that the EDG phase be done administratively, but some members of the advisory group and other stakeholders prefer for the Recommendations phase to be the administrative one. There are good reasons for either approach as discussed below.

Which phase of the Hybrid process to make Administrative was given significant consideration. SDCI emphasizes that significant shifts in practice are essential to make a Hybrid process work in either case. Shifts in practice would include training board members and staff to build understanding of shifted roles and responsibilities for the Hybrid process.

Additional details to consider.

Hybrid Process
with Administrative EDG Phase

If the EDG phase is conducted by the planner, the planner would review the early stage of project design and communicate issues to the Board. The Board would make the final Recommendation on the project. One public board meeting would be held at the Recommendation meeting.

- Boards would acknowledge and rely on planner guidance from the EDG phase.
- Prior to the Recommendation meeting, staff would provide a project briefing to the Board. This report out could contain a written staff report that includes the EDG summary.

Reasons supporting an administrative EDG phase.

- Early outreach (Rec 1) would already provide a means for public input early in the process, so the Recommendation phase could be a more valuable point for the public Board meeting.

- Planner skill sets are better matched to the EDG massing and site arrangement portions of the process, while the Board members' expertise tends to be suited to the architectural concept and detailing portions at the Recommendation phase.
- The citizen Boards would continue to have a final recommendation role, providing a measure of independent oversight of project approvals.

Hybrid Process
with Administrative Recommendation Phase

If the Recommendation phase is conducted by the planner, the Board would review the project during the early stage of design. The Board would provide EDG guidance at one public meeting during the EDG phase.

- Planners would be responsible for the final Recommendation, carrying out EDG guidance provided by the Board.

Reasons supporting an administrative Recommendations phase.

- The public would see and comment on projects during an earlier, more formative, stage of design.
- Allows more flexibility for applicants to work with staff towards a Recommendation, without scheduling constraints for a public Board meeting.
- Some commentors suggested Board guidance would be more valuable during the EDG phase when major massing and site arrangement decisions are being made.

Consider limiting the number of meetings

The City should also consider explicitly limiting the number of Board meetings to one for the hybrid process, or establish the expectation that in a significant majority of cases a project undergoing the Hybrid process should not have more than one board meeting.

Policy Priority

The site characteristic chart on page 16 also includes the criteria of "Policy Priority." This is an effort to expedite projects through the system that provide public benefit such as affordable housing, or cultural/arts space. To allow for recognition of other city policy objectives, if a Policy Priority is present, that factor overrides other factors – directing the project to the Hybrid Track or Administrative Track, which could enable more expedited review.

Although the criteria would need to be finalized through additional work, our recommendation is to allow all projects receiving public funds through the Seattle Housing Levy or the Washington State Housing Trust Fund to access the Administrative Design Review track. We also recommend giving Policy Priority status to projects providing Cultural/Arts space certified by the Seattle Office of Arts and Culture, projects providing a very high standard of green building, such as Passivhaus or Net Zero to access the Hybrid track. Track.

To provide flexibility proponents of Policy Priority projects would be allowed the choice of whether to exercise Policy Priority entry into the Hybrid, or Administrative Design Review.

Additional details to consider.

Cost implications for housing in general may be better incorporated in the Board review process than is currently the case. The SDCI Director can play a constructive role in the review process by bringing affordable housing issues to bear in final Design Review recommendations as part of the permit decision. Clarification of the roles of the Design Review Board and the SDCI Director could help carry out this option. The clarification could take the form of a formal step in the recommendation phase of design review for consideration of input from the SDCI Director.

Developments like Mercy Othello Plaza, that will house 108 low-income families and received funds from the Seattle Office of Housing would be reviewed administratively instead of full Design Review, recognizing that such projects must already be designed and reviewed by the Seattle Office of Housing to receive competitive funding awards.

DRAFT PROPOSED DESIGN REVIEW THRESHOLDS

The threshold for whether, and what type, of Design Review applies to a proposed development is a two-part determination. The first part is a total project size threshold measured in gross square feet (GSF) of chargeable floor area, regardless of the zone. The second part is the characteristics of the specific site. The outcome of the two-part threshold determines which type of Design Review would apply, if any. Thresholds would apply to all land uses that are subject to Design Review.

Chargeable Gross Square Footage of Proposed Development	Site / Project Characteristics	Type of Design Review*
> 20,000 GSF	More Complex	**Full Design Review**
	Less Complex	**Hybrid Design Review**
> 10,000 – 20,000 GSF	More Complex	**Hybrid Design Review**
	Less Complex	**Administrative Design Review**
<10,000 GSF	Any	**No Design Review**

* Any project receiving funding from the Washington State Housing Trust Fund or Seattle Office of Housing funds may opt into Administrative Design Review.
* Any Hybrid Design Review project may voluntarily opt into Full Design Review. Any Administrative Design Review may opt into Hybrid or Full Design Review.

Categories	Less Complex *All must be true for project to be less complex.*	More Complex *If any characteristic is present, project is more complex.*
Context	• Inside an Urban Village or Center • Lot does not abut a different zone	• Not in an Urban Village or Center • Lot abuts a different zone
Scale	• Site footprint: < ½ block • Site width: < 250' of linear street frontage	• Site footprint: > ½ block • Site width: > 250' of linear street frontage
Site Features	• Does not include any More Complex characteristics.	• Includes street or alley vacation • Designated landmark • Character structure in Pike/Pine • Enrolled in an adopted pilot program
Regardless of whether other characteristics are present, if Policy Priority is present project is Type A.		
Policy Priority	• ArtSpace: Includes Office of Arts and Culture certified arts and culture space. • Deep Green: LEED Platinum, Passivhaus, or NetZero certification.	Not Applicable.

RECOMMENDATION #3 –
New Tools and Techniques

Explore the use of new tools and techniques to support the Design Review program, which could include, but are not limited to:

Online tools

Online tools could include an online commenting platform, video streaming of design review meetings and web-based mapping and project information.

Implementation of this aspect of the recommendation could be tested with the Center City Board (See also Recommendation #4). There is strong potential to leverage City facilities to roll out online platforms with a designated room that is equipped and wired for Design Review meetings.

Revised formats for Design Review Board meetings

Designate time during the agenda for two-way dialogue that includes issues of clarification, before board deliberation. More opportunities for applicant/board interaction were consistently called for during project outreach and past studies. The shift to include a dialogue format would expedite the discussion of the key design issues.

Reserve an amount of time on the agenda for facilitated dialogue that may occur between board and applicant. Modify the agenda to include this time immediately following the applicant presentation. Applicants would be encouraged to focus more directly on key issues and areas of concern, rather than extensive presentation on all items in the packet.

Revise Design Review Packet Requirements

Current practice is to require all applicants to prepare three distinct design schemes in the EDG packet. Modify this requirement to allow applicants more flexibility to show the evolution of the design - instead of a rigid three scheme requirement. This alleviates unnecessary cost associated with fully developing 'straw man' options that the applicant does not intend to pursue.

Additional training for Design Review Board members and staff

Board training would include each board meeting annually to discuss and learn strategies for meeting facilitation and group deliberation, in order to develop and enhance those skills.

Staff training would include professional development relating to urban design topics, as well as meeting facilitation and project management skill development.

In addition, training would include sessions for applicants and developers to receive guidance on effective approaches to design review, and to receive information on any changes to the Design Review process and structure.

A formal program to reward and publicize design excellence

Create an annual or biennial design excellence award program. The purpose of the program would be to encourage and recognize the most successful and outstanding design projects that went through the design review process. Explore combining the awards program with the Seattle Design Commission's annual awards program for an expanded citywide design event that is highly regarded, and look to partner with the annual Seattle Design Festival held in the fall.

Improve meeting documentation methods

Increase staff present at Design Review meetings to include a person who is designated to take meeting notes and generate the meeting reports. An alternative to a dedicated note taker at each meeting is to audio record the meetings, for an audio record. An audio record could be available for documentation purposes, or could be used as the basis for generating meeting notes following the meeting by an independent transcription service or city staff.

Clarify the process for changes to a permit decision in projects with Design Review

It is not uncommon for changes to be sought in development proposals after SDCI issues a permit decision. The needs for changes are varied and include real estate market, financial and legal reasons. The scope of changes can be minor or major. The Code currently lacks a clear process for consideration of changes to permit decisions, particularly when the Design Review Board is involved. This can lead to an inconsistent approach to how changes are processed from project to project, leading to delay and uncertainty for the project proponents as well as the Design Review Board and neighbors. In some cases the changes may require additional consideration by the Design Review Board and in others an administrative review could suffice.

Additional details to consider.

* Venues and resources needed to accommodate online commenting or live streaming of meetings.

* Potential to 'pilot' new tools and techniques using City resources at the Center City board.

* Make it easy to find and use web-based resources and tools supporting design review.

* Training of Board and Staff in areas including:
  ° Facilitation and mediation techniques
  ° Local/neighborhood issue identification
  ° Provide background for policy and planning objectives if applicable
  ° Affordability/cost impacts of design choices
  ° Architecture and urban design

seattle.gov/dpd   About
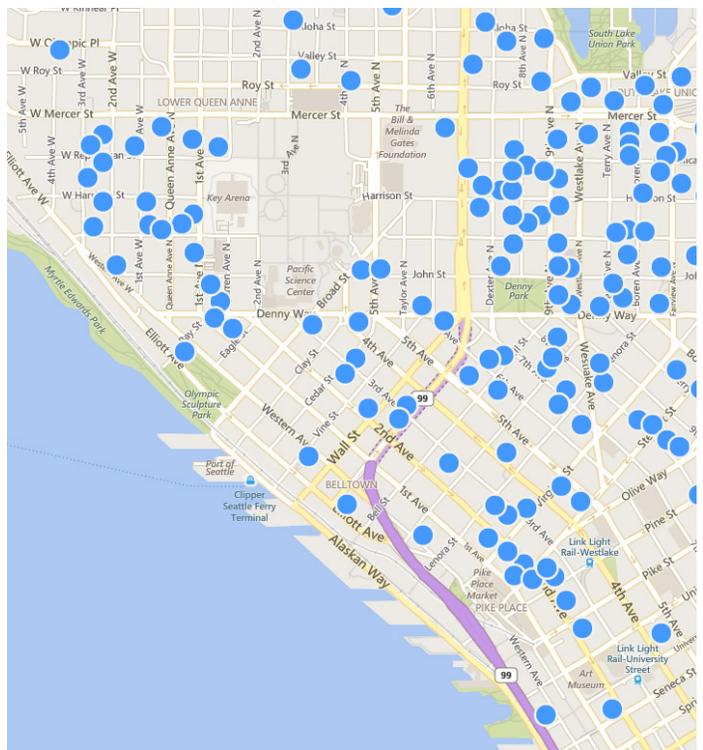
Shaping Seattle is an example of a new tool to support Design Review. It is an online application that displays information about Design Review projects, including posting of Design Review packets.

RECOMMENDATION #4 –
Make Changes to Board Composition and Structure (Reduce number of boards to five and increase number of members to seven)

Proposed board structure

- 36 total Design Review Board members
- Five (5) boards with seven (7) members each, plus one Get Engaged member
- Facilitates quorums, minimizes substitutions

The Center City (Downtown) board would be expanded to include most of the Downtown Urban Center, including South Lake Union and First Hill.
- Longer meetings, daytime locations (e.g. 3 to 8 p.m.).
- Focuses on high-rise/downtown building types.

Four (4) District Boards (NE, NW, SE, SW) would function similar to existing structure.
- Narrowed focus on mid- and low-rise projects.
- Possible reduced volume for neighborhood boards.
- Possibly increases available time for in-depth reviews.

Board composition

- Three (3) design professionals, at least one of which must be a Landscape Architect
- Two (2) developer/real estate professionals – Citywide
- Two (2) community members-District

The intent of such changes would be to:
- Broaden design and community expertise within each Board.
- Increase the stability and balance of perspectives on each Board.
- Reduce the number of cancelled meetings and Board substitutions due to lack of a quorum.
- Consolidates the review of areas with highrise scale development under the Center City design review board.

With the revised board districts the NE, NW, SE, and SW Boards would focus primarily on low and midrise projects like Casa Latina (shown above), while a Center City board would review most highrise and tower projects.

Recommended revised Design Review Board districts.

Northwest

Northeast

Urban Village or
Urban Center

Central

E Pine St.

Southeast

Southwest

0   0.5   1   2
Miles
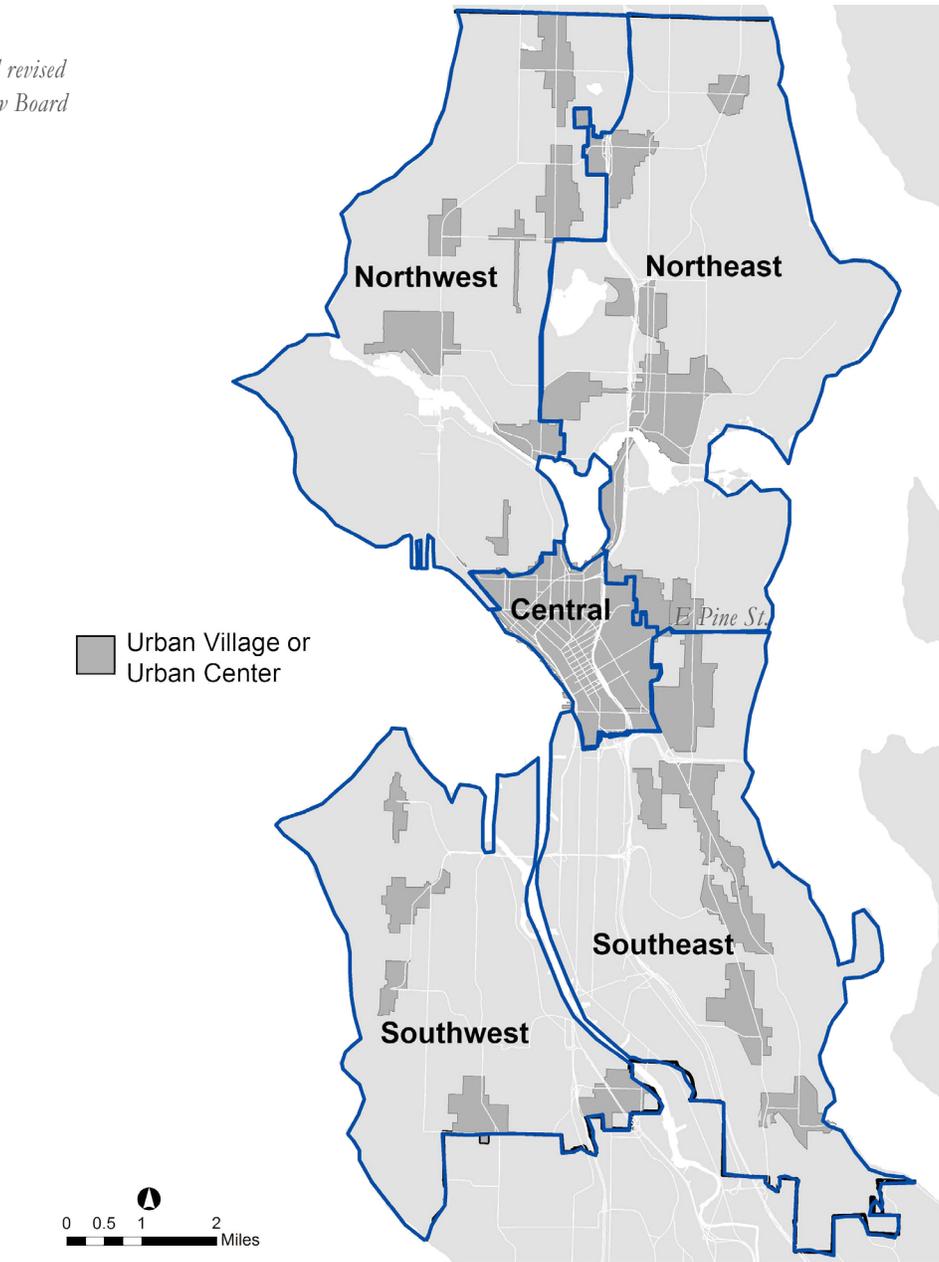
Further discussion of the precise boundaries is needed before adoption of revised districts. Draft boundaries are proposed to avoid dividing any urban village or urban center, with the exception of Capitol Hill. All of First Hill and portions of Capitol Hill with Highrise (HR) and Midrise (MR) multifamily zoning and Neighborhood Commercial 3 (NC3) zoning along Broadway and the Pike/Pine corridor are proposed to be included in the Central review area. Based on comments received, lower scaled areas of Capitol Hill including Lowrise zoned areas east of Broadway are proposed to be in the Northeast district.

Additional details to consider.

- Careful review of the final makeup of the expanded board slots (i.e. number of community members, number of designers, etc.).

- Any boundary adjustments must consider logical neighborhood boundaries and should not split any neighborhood or urban village.

- Make sure the expanded Center City Board would be set up with capacity to review the required number of projects.

Additional details to consider.

Review of board and department roles

Currently if 4 out of 5 board members vote a certain way on a project, the SDCI Director can not overrule that decision. Given the voluntary and advisory nature of the boards, the City should consider altering the threshold to allow the Director to overrule in certain circumstances. The opportunity for Director oversight could improve program consistency across the varied boards.

A community member makes a comment at a Design Review Board meeting. With proposed board districts, Design Review Board meetings would continue to be held in neighborhoods across the city providing good opportunity for public comment.

RECOMMENDATION #5 –
Update Design Review Thresholds

This recommendation is largely developed by City staff, but it incorporates the principles and goals of design review process improvements. SDCI believes an important component of this work is to make more consistent the overall set of thresholds for what types of projects undergo design review and what type of design review.

The recommendation for thresholds compliments Recommendation #2 for more administrative review. This recommendation also addresses several recent amendments to design review thresholds that have been made since 2010 to add design review requirements for specific formats of development or specific issues of concern. While those threshold amendments had been important to address emerging issues (such as micro-housing and townhouse development) they have contributed to an uneven set of thresholds. In addition, new requirements have been adopted to address major concerns, including a requirement to consider adjacent lot development as a factor in whether a design review threshold is triggered.

As discussed above we recommend that thresholds be revised to a two-part determination; the first part would be a general project size threshold measured in gross square footage regardless of what zone the project is located. The second part would be based on the unique characteristics of the specific site. The outcome of this two-part threshold would determine which required Design Review process would apply: Full Design Review, Hybrid Design Review, or Administrative Design Review. (See also Recommendation #2). The proposed thresholds would be more consistent, in that they would apply more uniformly across zones. Additionally, the thresholds would apply design review to some institutional uses for the first time.

- Thresholds would apply to all zones, except the Single-family and Industrial General (IG) zones.

- Thresholds would apply to all land uses except Single Family homes, industrial uses, and Institutional uses that are within a Major Institutional Master Plan area, and Religious Institutions.

Gross square footage of proposed development	Site / Project Characteristics	Design Review Type
> 20,000 GSF	More Complex	Full Design Review
	Less Complex	Hybrid Design Review
10,000 – 20,000 GSF	More Complex	Hybrid Design Review
	Less Complex	Administrative Design Review
< 10,000 GSF	Any	No Design Review

Changes To Design Review Volumes

To analyze how the proposed thresholds would change the volume of projects undergoing Design Review including which type of Design Review, we considered all projects that were subject to Design Review over the last two years. The analysis applied the proposed Design Review Thresholds to see how the volume of reviews would change.

2014 - 2015 Design Review Projects

Volumes With Existing Thresholds		
Design Review Type	Number	% Of 2 Year Volume
Full	257	67%
Administrative	10	3%
Streamlined	118	31%
Total	385	

Volumes With Proposed Thresholds		
Design Review Type	Number	% Of 2 Year Volume
Full	156	41%
Hybrid	88	23%
Administrative	29	8%
No Design Review	112	29%
Total	385	

Under the proposed thresholds there are 101 fewer Full Design Review projects. The new Hybrid process (one administrative step and one board review step) would have 88 projects - reducing the number of reviews that go before the board. Use of the Administrative Design Review (ADR) process (all steps conducted administratively by the planner) would increase to 29. The overall result is a set of thresholds that makes more use of administrative review and varies the type of design review according to project characteristics.

Additional details to consider.

- Consider other measures, outside of Design Review, to improve design quality in lower scale zones for townhouse and rowhouse development that may not be subject to Design Review.
- Explore new development standards to mitigate zone edge transitions in places Design Review is not likely to apply.
- Consider updating and applying the Residential Small Lot (RSL) zone in more locations to achieve compatible design outcomes for lower scale multi-family areas.
- Ensure that the characteristics used to determine which type of Design Review is required are clear and quantifiable.
- Set the threshold square footage to a level that reduces Board calendar wait time.

It is notable that the under the existing thresholds 31% of all Design Reviews are currently Streamlined Design Review (SDR). This process is primarily for small townhouse development, and it was created in 2010 to address concerns about townhouse design. Staff resources to perform this number of SDRs is significant, while the ability of the SDR process to substantially improve design is questionable.

The 10,000 square foot minimum size threshold proposed would largely remove the SDR reviews from the Design Review program. SDCI supports this outcome in order to prioritize projects of a larger scale that have potential to have more impact, and to focus resources on a process that can more substantially affect design. The 10,000 square foot threshold approximates the size of development in the Lowrise zones on two commonly platted lots.

NEXT STEPS

The process to review, discuss and implement the recommended changes to the Design Review Program includes several steps:
- Recommendations for Public Review (February 2016)
- Development of proposed updates to the Land Use Code (Winter 2016)
- Issue environmental review (SEPA) and draft legislation.
- City Council review and approval (Summer 2016)
- Training for Board members and staff
- All process changes in effect

SCHEDULE

2015

Aug.	Sept.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.
Conduct Focus Interviews	Final Advisory Group Meeting			
	Community Open Houses		Draft Report	

2016

Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	April	May	June	July	Aug.	Sept.
				Issue Public Review Draft of Legislation for Comment	Publish SEPA Decision & Draft Legislation		Council Deliberations Begin	
		Release Department Report						

APPENDICES

A. Design Review Background Report
B. Summary of online survey #1
C. Online open house PDF and summary of online survey #2
D. Advisory Group meeting materials and summaries
E. Community meeting materials