



DESIGN REVIEW PROGRAM IMPROVEMENTS BACKGROUND REPORT

DRAFT V1
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City of Seattle
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Introduction

The Design Review (DR) Program has improved the design of over a thousand development projects since its inception in 1994. In addition to improving design, the Program provides developers with flexibility in the application of the Land Use Code and provides the community a forum for dialogue about development projects in the neighborhood. The Program has evolved over time. However, the basic structure and organization has not significantly changed since it was established two decades ago.

DPD is leading a process to identify, evaluate and implement organizational, structural and procedural changes to refine and refresh the Design Review Program. This process intends to build off of previous reviews of the Program. Some in the development community are requesting cost reductions and more predictability. Simultaneously, some community groups and individuals are requesting that the program address concerns about growth more holistically. Given markedly changed conditions and strong interest from numerous stakeholders, it is appropriate to explore improvements and updates to the program.

Project Goals

- *Identify options to make the design review process more efficient and accessible*
- *Improve community dialogue on design review*
- *Identify new and emerging technologies for more effective community engagement*

Design Review Program Background and History:

The City established the Design Review Program by city ordinance in October 1993 (ORD 116909), and the Department of Planning and Development administers the Program. Prior to that, public input on new project design occurred solely through the State Environmental Protection Act (SEPA) review process and appeals of land use decisions to the Hearing Examiner, the City Council, and the courts.

The purpose of the Program, as outlined in SMC 23.41.002, is to:

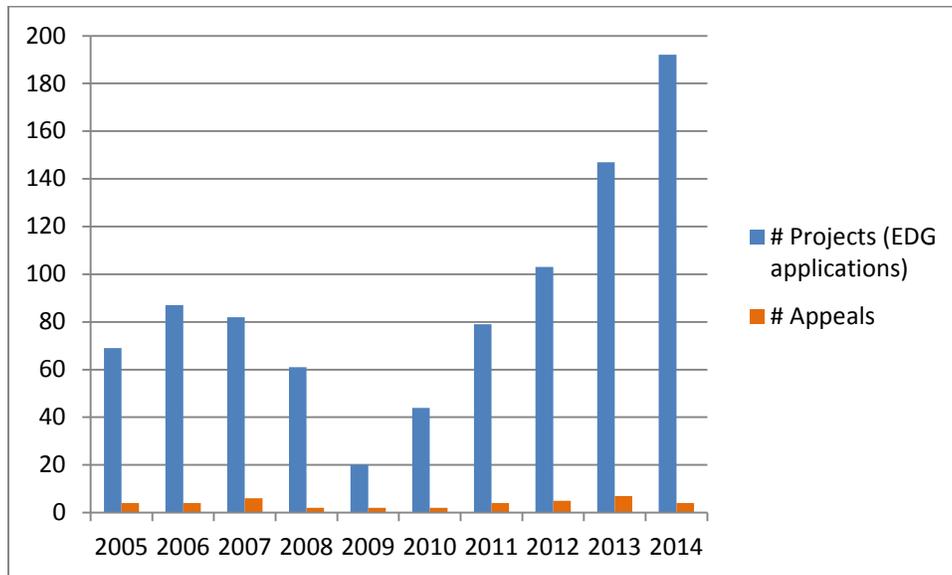
- A. Encourage better design and site planning to help ensure that new development enhances the character of the city and sensitively fits into neighborhoods, while allowing for diversity and creativity; and
- B. Provide flexibility in the application of development standards to better meet the intent of the Land Use Code as established by City policy, to meet neighborhood objectives, and to provide for effective mitigation of a proposed project's impact and influence on a neighborhood; and
- C. Improve communication and mutual understanding among developers, neighborhoods, and the City early and throughout the development review process.

In addition to encouraging design excellence, the Program provides developers with more flexibility than the Land Use Code previously allowed and provides the community a forum to have a dialogue about a

project's impact and influence on their neighborhood. Overall the program has provided that forum, reducing the number of appeals to major development projects.

Since the Program launched in 1994, the Design Review Boards (DRB) have reviewed over 1,500 projects and hundreds of projects have been reviewed through the Program’s Administrative (ADR) or Streamlined Design Review (SDR) process. The number of projects reviewed by the DRBs has steadily increased over the years, with the average number of projects reviewed each year increasing from 14 projects the first year of the Program, an average of 80 project per year between 1995 -2001 to an average of 111 projects per year from 2005 - 2014.¹

In 2014, 192 projects were reviewed by the DRBs; of that, only two percent (four projects) were appealed.



Design Review Process

The Program requires that new commercial and multifamily development exceeding a certain size threshold in certain land use zones undergo a review of the projects design characteristics, based on a set of citywide and neighborhood design guidelines. This review is part of the Master Use Permit process. Today, DPD administers three types of design review (see pages 5-7 for graphics outlining the review process for each type):

Full Design Review is a review conducted by five-member appointed citizen design review boards. Design review is conducted in public meetings held in neighborhood locations. Public notice of the project is provided on the website, and in a mailed notice to nearby residences. Members of the public have the opportunity to comment to the assigned DPD planner. The

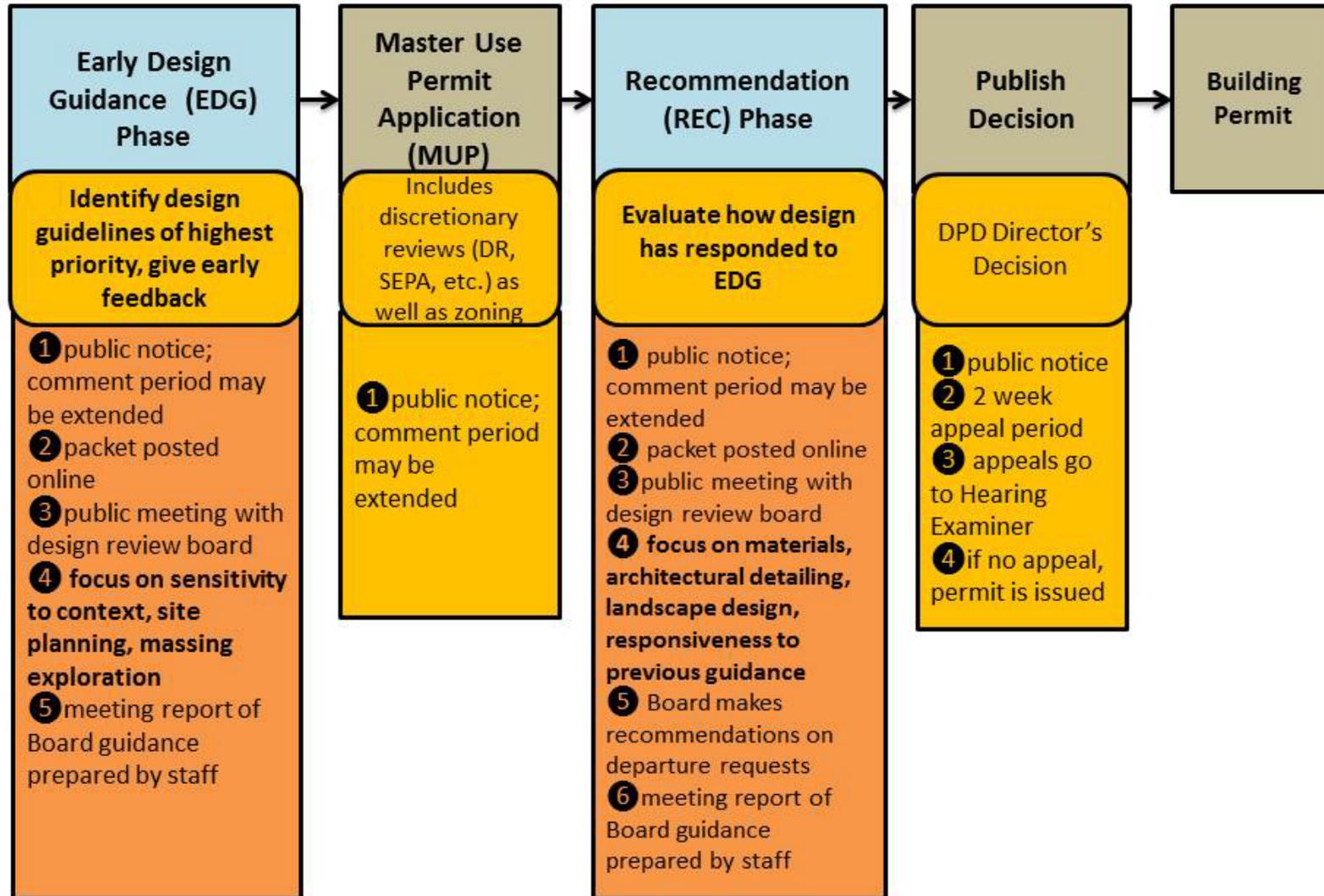
¹ Note: Data for 2002-2004 is unavailable at the time of this report.

process requires three alternative design concepts be presented. There are two principal steps, Early Design Guidance (EDG) and Design Recommendation. At the Early Design Guidance (EDG) meeting, a site plan and a context analysis are presented along with alternative massing concepts. At the recommendation phase, the architectural design developed in response to the EDG is presented. Design review decisions involving Board review are appealable to the City's hearing examiner (type II land use decision).

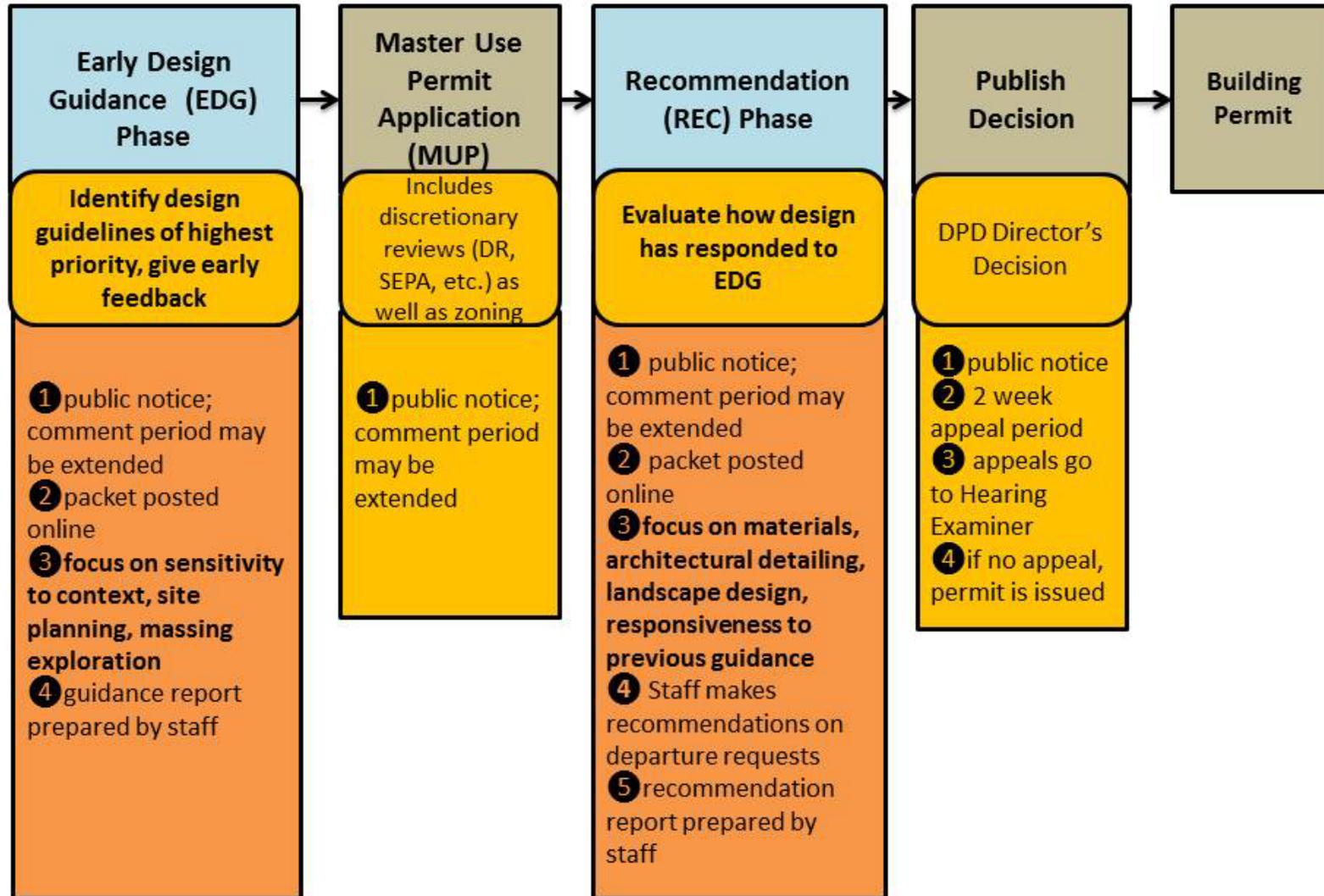
Administrative Design Review (ADR) is a form of design review that mirrors the steps of Design Review but is conducted by a DPD design review planner instead of a board. Public notice of the project is provided on the website, and in a mailed notice to nearby residences. Members of the public have the chance to comment to the planner, but there is no public meeting. There is a formal decision appeal opportunity to the hearing examiner (type II land use decision). ADR may also be used when an application without mandatory design review voluntarily enters the program.

Streamlined Design Review (SDR) is a simplified form of design review that is conducted by a DPD design review planner. Public notice of the project is provided on the website, and in a mailed notice to nearby residences. Members of the public have the chance to comment to the planner. Applicant submittal requirements are reduced and the number of approval steps is limited to an administrative EDG phase. There is no formal decision and no appeal opportunity to the hearing examiner (type I land use decision).

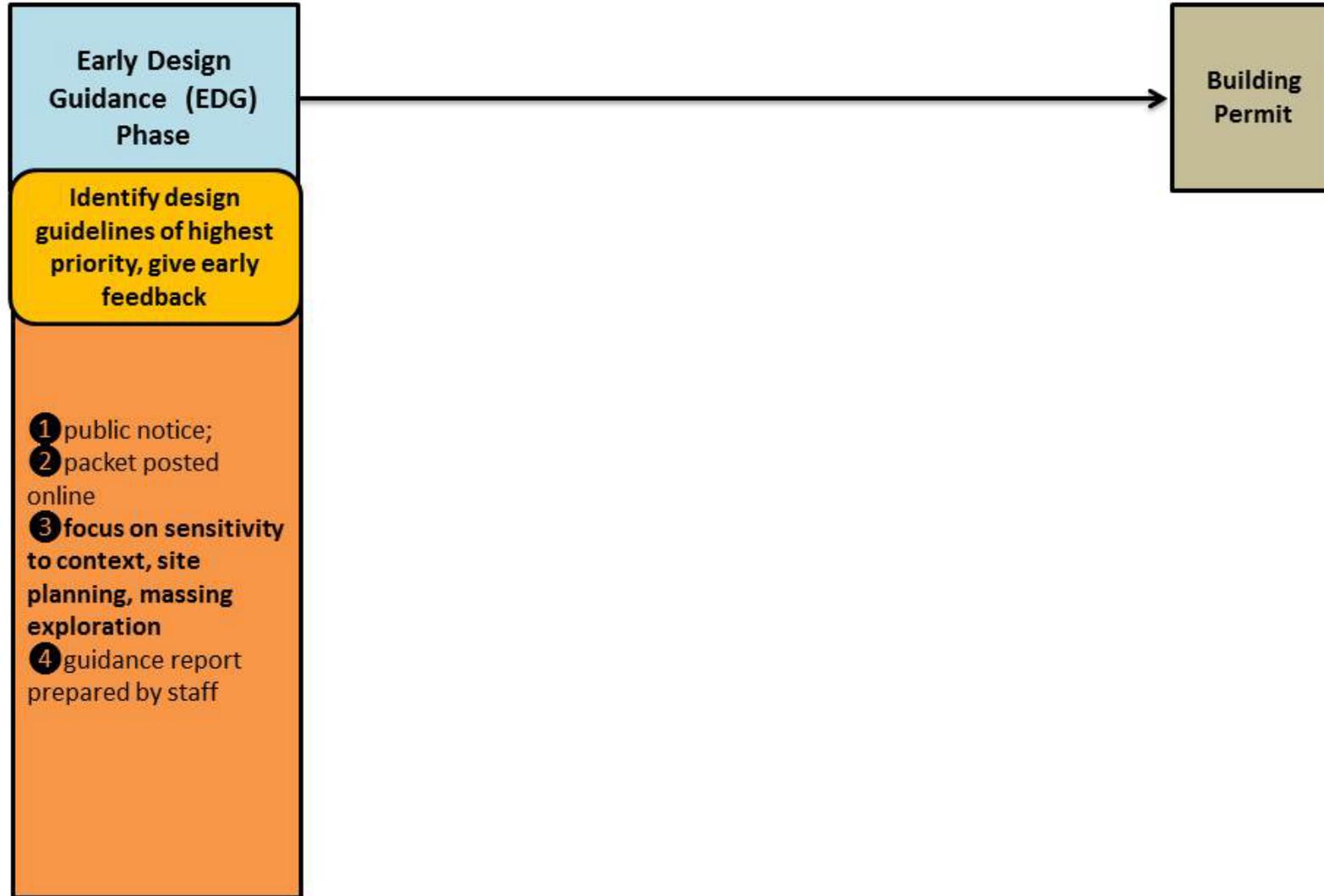
Full Design Review (DR)



Administrative Design Review (ADR)



Streamlined Design Review (SDR)



Design Review Boards

The City of Seattle is divided into seven Design Review Board districts. Each covers a specific geographic area. These areas are: East, Downtown, Northeast, Northwest, West, Southeast, and Southwest (see Map 1). Each Board has five members from a variety of backgrounds intended to represent the various interests. Design Review Boards consist of the following:

- Design professional (at-large)
- Developer (at-large)
- Community representative (at-large)
- Residential representative (local)
- Business representative (local)

At-large members can live anywhere in the City; local members must live within the board district. Board members are volunteers who serve two-year terms. They are appointed by the Mayor and City Council and may be reappointed for an additional two year term. The Design Review Boards' duties include synthesizing community input on design concerns, providing early design guidance to the development team and community, recommending specific conditions of approval that are consistent with the applicable design guidelines to the DPD Director, and ensuring fair and consistent application of Citywide or neighborhood-specific guidelines (see SMC [23.41.008.](#)) The DPD Design Review Program Manager, responsible for the Design Review Program, provides voluntary training for Board members.

Map 1: Design Review Board Districts 1



Design Review Guidelines

Seattle's design guidelines are the backbone of the Design Review Program. They direct designers and project reviewers to look closely at the neighborhood and its character to design new buildings that enhance their surroundings. The guidelines are used by the Design Review Boards and DPD staff to assess the merits of a project.

There are three types of design guidelines:

1. Citywide design guidelines;
2. Downtown guidelines; and
3. Neighborhood-specific guidelines²

The Seattle Municipal Code (SMC 23.41.010) requires the DRBs to use these guidelines as the basis for their recommendations and decisions.

Design Review Departures:

As mentioned previously, one aspect of the Program is to provide regulatory flexibility in the application of development standards to better meet the intent of the Land Use Code as established by City policy, to meet neighborhood objectives, and to provide for effective mitigation of a proposed project's impact and influence on a neighborhood. Departures may be granted from most Land Use Code standards or requirements, with some exceptions, such as:

- Floor Area Ratio (FAR)
- Height
- Parking

(For a complete list see section [SMC 23.41.012](#) of the Land Use Code)

The Board makes a determination and recommendation to DPD on a requested departure. A departure may be allowed if an applicant demonstrates that the design would result in a development that better meets the intent of adopted design guidelines.

² Nineteen neighborhoods, in partnership with DPD, have developed neighborhood-specific guidelines to supplement the citywide guidelines. A complete list of these guidelines can be found on DPD's Web site: <http://www.seattle.gov/dpd/aboutus/whoweare/designreview/designguidelines/default.htm>.

Design Review Thresholds

Design review is required for any new multifamily, commercial, or industrial development proposal that exceeds one of the following thresholds outlined below (note that there are some exceptions and additions but this table provides a general overview of the DR thresholds):

Zone	Threshold (when DR is required)
Full Design Review (DR)	
Lowrise 3(LR3)	More than 8 dwelling units
Midrise (MR) & Highrise (HR)	More than 20 dwelling units
Neighborhood Commercial (NC1, NC2, NC3)	More than 4 dwelling units or 4,000 square feet of nonresidential gross floor area
Commercial (C1, C2)	More than 4 dwelling units or 12,000 square feet of nonresidential gross floor area, located on a lot in an urban center or urban village ¹ , or on a lot that abuts or is across a street or alley from a lot zoned single family, or on a lot located in the area bounded by: NE 95 th St., NE 145 th St., 15 th Ave. NE, and Lake Washington
Seattle Mixed (SM)	More than 20 dwelling units or 12,000 square feet of nonresidential gross floor area
DOC 1, DOC 2 or DMC zones	More than 20 dwelling units or 50,000 square feet of nonresidential gross floor area
DRC, DMR, DH1 or DH2 zones, or PMM zone outside the Pike Place Market Historical District	More than 20 dwelling units or 20,000 square feet of nonresidential gross floor area
Industrial Commercial (IC) within all designated urban villages and centers	More than 12,000 square feet of nonresidential gross floor area
IC 85-160	More than 12,000 square feet of nonresidential gross floor area and electing to add extra floor area above the base FAR
Master Planned Community (MPC)	More than 20 dwelling units or 12,000 square feet of non-residential gross floor area
Stadium Transition Area Overlay District (SAO)	Projects exceeding 120 feet in width on any single street frontage in the SAO as shown in Map A for 23.74.004

Zone	Threshold (when DR is required)
All zones - congregate residences, and residential uses in which more than 50 percent of dwelling units are small efficiency dwelling units.	Developments containing 20,000 square feet or more of gross floor
Full design review is optional to any applicant for new multifamily, commercial or Major Institution development proposals not otherwise subject to Design Review, if the new development proposal is not otherwise subject to Chapter 23.41 is in the Stadium Transition Area Overlay District or if the new proposal is in any multifamily, commercial or downtown zone.	
Zone	Threshold (when DR is required)
Streamlined Administrative Design Review (SDR)	
All Zones	Development with three (3) or more Townhouse units.
All Multi-family and Commercial Zones	If removal of an exceptional tree is proposed and the project falls below Design Review thresholds
All zones - congregate residences, and residential uses in which more than 50 percent of dwelling units are small efficiency dwelling units.	Developments containing at least 5,000 but less than 12,000 square feet of gross floor area.
Zone	Threshold (when DR is required)
Administrative Design Review (ADR)	
All zones - congregate residences, and residential uses in which more than 50 percent of dwelling units are small efficiency dwelling units.	Developments containing at least 12,000 but less than 20,000 square feet of gross floor.
Administrative design review is optional for any applicant for new multifamily or commercial development proposals if the new multifamily or commercial development proposal does not exceed the thresholds provided in Table A for 23.41.004 and is not otherwise subject to this Chapter 23.41 if the proposal is in the Stadium Transition Area Overlay District, or is in any multifamily, commercial, or downtown zone, according to the process described in Section 23.41.016. Projects that are not otherwise subject to this Chapter 23.41 and are in any multifamily zone not listed in Table A for 23.41.004 are eligible only for optional full design review under subsection 23.41.004.B.1 if the number of dwelling units exceeds 20. If the project contains 20 dwelling units or less, then the project applicant may pursue either full or administrative design review.	

Summary of previous reviews of the Design Review Program:

Over the last 15 years, the City has engaged in a series of both formal and informal reviews and evaluations of the Program. In addition, outside organizations have initiated their own discussions and reviews and provided feedback to the City on the program. DPD staff recently reviewed the following reports and feedback about the Program:

- 2002 CityDesign and Design Review Program staff evaluation (internal review)
- 2006 Audit of Design Review Program by the Office of the City Auditor
- 2008 Permitting Process Focus Group Summary Report – prepared by Triangle Associates
- 2009-12 DPD led MUP Process Improvement Effort (internal review)
- 2013 Design Review Process Improvements - Report by Crandall Arambula
- 2014 Seattle Design Review Process – Recommended options for Improvement Led by the Seattle Chamber of Commerce, prepared by BERK Consulting
- 2014 AIA initiated task force – recommendations and considerations

DPD has summarized the challenges identified through these previous efforts and the potential strategies identified. In the list below, we have highlighted some of the challenges identified in these previous efforts (note this is an initial overview and just meant to introduce some of the challenges we have heard). More detailed information will be provided at the second advisory group meeting.

1. Engagement and public input
 - *Example:* Many people are unclear or unsure of the purpose of DR, how the process works and which issues can be addressed. For issues that are outside the purview of DR, it is often unclear where someone can go to discuss other issues and concerns.
2. Board Structure
 - *Example:* Lack of consistency across seven boards / 36 board members
3. Meeting logistics
 - *Example:* Seattle is the only jurisdiction we are aware of where DR meetings are held somewhere other than downtown/City Hall. 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 (lack of consistent access to technology, varying meeting locations, staff time involved in finding and scheduling space).
4. Meeting format
 - *Example:* During the meeting it is not clear how public comments heard at the meeting and received by mail or email has been incorporated into the DRB's deliberation.
 - *Example:* Following the applicant's presentation, questions from the board and public comment, there is Board deliberations. Deliberations are closed discussions between Board members and staff. Sometimes issues the Board is grappling with have been considered by the applicant but were not highlighted during the applicant's presentation. This can be frustrating and lead to additional conditions of approval or a

need for a 2nd meeting when the issue could have been resolved if applicant's could provide additional information.

5. Board and staff training

- *Example:* Difficult to ensure a consistency with 7 boards / 36 board members with varying levels of experience

6. Design Review Thresholds

- *Example:* The full DR 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