



SUMMARY OF PREVIOUS FEEDBACK AND RECOMMENDATIONS ABOUT THE DESIGN REVIEW PROGRAM

DRAFT – VERSION 1

APRIL 2015

NOTE: This document provides a summary of previous reviews and feedback received about the Design Review Program. This is not an endorsement of any specific strategy or recommendation; it is meant to provide background information on challenges that have been raised previously and serve as a starting point for discussions. DPD will work with the Advisory Group to prioritize areas for improvement and consider changes to improve the Program.



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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 basic structure and organization has not significantly changed since it was established two decades ago. However, DPD has implemented a number of changes in a continuous effort to make the program run more efficiently and effectively. Changes that have been implemented over the years are outlined below.

DR BOARD AND MEETING MANAGEMENT

- Requiring the Board Chair/Staff provide a verbal summary at the conclusion of Board deliberations. This has clarified the Board's direction on a project to everyone in the room including the applicant, public, staff and the Board themselves.
- Requiring that Board members speak directly about departures in terms of better meeting the design guidelines.
- Overhauling the design guidelines to include current concepts such as sustainable building practices and transportation. The new guidelines also address earlier concerns regarding overall design integrity.
- Land Use Code amendment to allow DPD to retain a Board member for an additional year if more than two members are retiring, to create more consistency between project meetings.
- In response to concerns that Board members might not be familiar with architecture, land use codes, DPD permitting, etc. more and more members are professionals affiliated with the design and development fields.
- DPD purchased a sound system to amplify voices during large design review meetings.
- DPD staff now prepares a memo to Board members that are sent out with the meeting packets outlining key issues to bring the Board up to speed as they prepare for meetings.
- Implemented changes to the Design Review Program calendar to reduce numbers of district meetings held the same evenings to allow Planners greater flexibility to attend more meetings.
- Added language to the meeting noticed to explain Design Review and the type of comments that are helpful versus those that are outside the Board's purview.
- Provided orientation and training sessions starting in 2013 for all Board members regarding the City's Race and Social Justice Initiative with intent to reiterate and repeat on annual basis.
- Provided a training series in meeting facilitation to all Board members in 2014 with intent to reiterate and repeat on annual basis.

APPLICANT INFORMATION AND OUTREACH

- Overhauled the website to offer better navigation and communication of information. This also included:
 - Information providing a clear path for submitting applications;

- Consolidating and clarifying the numerous forms that were available and often caused confusion;
- Updating the examples of great projects to reflect more current projects and illustrate new design guidelines concepts;
- Updating the calendar to clearly show upcoming projects and the associated documents.
- Developed checklists of packet expectations for EDG and REC packets in an attempt to standardize the contents and create a more efficient review by the Staff and Boards.
- Technology development such as the implementation of Project Dashboard that keeps Planners' project reviews ordered by due date so that we are far closer to reaching target dates than ever before.

DR PLANNER STAFF MANAGEMENT

- Hired 4 new Design Review Planners in 2014.
- Developed and expanded training binder for all new Staff and Board members.
- Established a dedicated team of Planners conducting design review and weekly internal meeting is now mandatory for all DR Planners. Established expectations for when projects are presented to team for review.
- Dedicated Planner assigned at the earliest phase, the pre-submittal, stays with the project through inspection at Certificate of Occupancy. This includes the assigned Planner reviewing the building permit for consistency with the MUP, which did not occur earlier.
- Formalized Design Review inspections process; inspections now occur with regularity to ensure that projects are built per the approved design.
- Clarified when and how EDG and REC meetings are scheduled and what is expected to occur in each case.
- Created and maintain a database of all design review procedural issues that are discussed by staff to create library for staff to refer to and maintain consistency among projects.
- DR staff brings cell phone numbers for the staff and Board members to meetings for use in cases of emergency.
- Developed meeting report templates for all citywide, neighborhood and downtown guidelines to achieve greater consistency in format and save considerable time in creating reports -- cuts time in half! Also established a 14-day target turnaround from the date of the meeting. Set expectation that all drafts are reviewed by the DR Program Manager or supervisor before finalizing.
- Empowered DPD Planner to follow up on Board recommended conditions without needing to return for another Board meeting, unless the issue is large or complex.

1. BOARD STRUCTURE

EXISTING STRUCTURE:

The city is divided into seven geographic districts. Each district has its own designated Design Review Board, made up of volunteer members who are appointed by the Mayor and City Council. The 5 positions represent the following interests: design, community, residential, development and community. One designated young adult position is added to a Design Review Board under the Get Engaged Program.

IDENTIFIED CHALLENGES:

- Lack of consistency across seven 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

POTENTIAL STRATEGIES:

A. Design Review Districts

1. Reduce the number of Boards (i.e. such as 3 boards divided by North, Central South)
2. Collapse all boards into a single board that meets downtown
3. Organize boards by project type (office, small/infill residential, large multi-family etc.) rather than geography OR have floating project type specialists.

B. Design Review Board Composition

1. Establish on-call Board, not just former member, for periods when the current boards are at capacity
2. Add more members to each Board. This could happen with the current seven Boards or if the number of Boards is reduced from seven to some other number
3. Reduce the categories of representation from 5 to 3 (Development Interests, Design Professions, General Community)
4. Transition from volunteer based boards to paid members and provide more training

2. MEETING LOGISTICS

EXISTING STRUCTURE:

Design Review meetings are held in the district where the project is located. The location of meetings varies depending on availability of meeting spaces within the community; because meeting locations vary, the availability of technology and consistent room layouts also varies broadly.

IDENTIFIED CHALLENGES:

- Seattle is one of the only jurisdictions in the country where design review meetings are held somewhere other than City Hall or downtown government office building. 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 (particularly when they locations vary frequently)
 - Staff time involved in finding and scheduling space is considerable, and still the Program lacks consistent spaces in which Boards can meet
- The assigned DR Planner is responsible for helping facilitate the meeting, setting up the room, coordinating with the Board, applicant and the public, answering questions and taking notes; this all contributes to challenges in running efficient meetings on a consistent basis and is an expensive use of public resources.
- During busy development cycles, the turnaround time for meeting minutes following an EDG meeting can be lengthy; this impacts the overall MUP submittal timeline.

POTENTIAL STRATEGIES:

A. Meeting Location & Space

1. Hold all meetings downtown in the Boards and Commissions Room
2. Identify spaces throughout the City that can be regularly booked in advance and accommodate technology (this may be more realistic if coupled with a reduction in the number of Boards)
3. Consider options for mobile technology that could be used in any space and allow recording and live streaming for people unable to attend in person

B. Clerical Support

1. Add a clerk position or other support staff to the DR team who attends meeting to assist with meeting logistics and is the official note taker.

C. Meeting Recording

1. Record meetings so minutes can be verified if needed.

EXISTING STRUCTURE:

Today, meeting agendas typically include two project discussions, with 1.5 hours allotted to each project. Meeting agendas are organized as follows:

- Welcome, Introductions, Opening Remarks by Chair; Opening Remarks by DPD Staff (includes statement about what the discussion can focus on) *5 minutes*
- Presentation by the applicant of development program objectives, urban design analysis of vicinity, Land Use Code and site characteristics important to the design *(20 minutes)*
- Clarifying questions by the Board *(20 minutes)*
- Public comment on design-related issues (please direct comments to Board Chair) *(20 minutes)*
- Design Review Board deliberations and identification of priority guidelines for the proposal (this is a closed discussion) *(20 minutes)*
- Summary by Chair and Staff *(5 minutes)*

IDENTIFIED CHALLENGES:

- Because of the number of planners and Board members involved in the Program, there is not always an opportunity to develop strong working relationships between Board members and planners, that may contribute to inconsistencies in how meetings are run.
- Depending on the location and scale of a project, 20 minute time slots for applicants to present is sometimes too much time or not enough time.
- There is a lack of clarity in the roles and responsibilities of Board members versus planners that contributes to confusion, lack of parity and ineffectiveness (can be confusing for everyone involved in the process, including staff, Boards, applicants and the public).
- During the meeting, it is not clear how public comments heard at the meeting and received by mail or email have been incorporated into the DRB's deliberation.
- Deliberations are closed discussions between Board members and staff. Sometimes issues the Board is grappling with have been addressed but were not highlighted during the applicant's presentation; this can be frustrating and lead to conditions or a need for a 2nd meeting when the issue could have been resolved.
- Requiring three massing options is not always productive and adds cost and time to the applicant developing the packets.
- During busy development cycles, the turnaround time on EDG meeting notes can be lengthy, which impacts how quickly a MUP application can be submitted.

POTENTIAL STRATEGIES:

- A. Provide professional facilitation and/or additional training for staff and Board chairs on how to run effective meetings
- B. Allow the applicant more than 20 minutes for large scale or complex projects
- C. Allow the applicant(s) and Board to have a dialogue (answer questions, clarify misunderstandings) during Board deliberation to better reflect the design process

- D. Use simple checklist that requires confirmation that the guidelines identified as highest priority have been met
- E. Allow affordability (cost) impacts to be considered in design review recommendations
- F. Use simple checklist that requires confirmation that the guidelines identified as highest priority have been met
- G. Adopt a consistent framework of dialogue that allows both applicant and Board to offer comment and questions throughout the entire proceeding, including Board deliberations. Consider how to address the roles of the Planner and Public in this exchange
- H. Encourage design conversation by requiring applicant in Early Design Guidance to summarize the rationale for the proposed design concept. Sketch drawings should be included in the written response. Subjects to be addressed would include: Massing alternatives considered; Form alternatives considered; Materials and color; Character and fenestration; Site ingress and egress; Street presence; Other relevant considerations
- I. Allow a 15 minute sessions for "clean up" on a new departure and a more general notice that says "departure requested"
- J. Focus on massing at DRB meetings, instead of three design options
- K. Let the applicants write up the notes from the DRB meeting and send them to the planner for review and approval, to improve timeliness and efficiency

3. BOARD AND STAFF TRAINING

EXISTING TRAINING PROGRAM

Currently, an orientation session is given to Board members after Council appointment in order to prepare them for serving on the Design Review Board. In addition, quarterly Board business meetings are scheduled to review and discuss procedural and programmatic Design Review issues, as well as provide training on the various aspects and responsibilities of serving as a Board member. When significant Code changes have occurred, such as the South Lake Union code changes or the Pike Pine Conservation Overlay, additional trainings may be added for the Boards impacted by the new legislation. An annual meeting of all the Board Chairs is also scheduled to discuss issues specific to Board Chair responsibilities.

IDENTIFIED CHALLENGES:

- Difficult to ensure a consistency with 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 of city policy and neighborhood specific policies vary and is often not considered as part of the broader context
- With varying levels of development in different districts, some Boards have more experience reviewing projects while others meet infrequently
- Facilitation skills vary leading to some boards being run more or less efficiently
- Recommendations are often made without considering how suggested changes might impact projects costs

POTENTIAL STRATEGIES:

- A. Continue and Expand Board Training
 1. Provide training in different formats and media
 2. Provide access to design resources and hands-on training in design review issues, meeting facilitation and teamwork, and public involvement. This should include:
 - i. Formal facilitation training for planners who staff meetings and board chairs
 - ii. Training for all members (including Get Engaged members) on how to run an effective meeting, including how to handle common difficult situations.
 3. Training of board and staff to allow affordability (cost) impacts to be considered in design review recommendations
- B. Providing More Background to Boards: Develop neighborhood-based background information for Boards. This could be done by area planners preparing a simple handout that summarizes the policy and regulatory framework for specific areas.

4. DESIGN REVIEW THRESHOLDS

EXISTING STRUCTURE:

Currently, there are three types of Design Review; project use and project size determines if Design Review is required and which type of Design Review is used:

1. **Full Design Review** – DRB input at public meeting
2. **Administrative Design Review** –staff review, optional, for smaller projects
3. **Streamlined Administrative Design Review** –staff review, required for two or more townhouses

IDENTIFIED CHALLENGES:

- 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
- The ebbs and flows of the development market impacts the program; currently the number of projects going through DR is stretching all involved

POTENTIAL STRATEGIES:

- A. Raise the threshold for what goes before Design Review Boards and have smaller projects go through ADR or SDR
- B. Match DR thresholds to SEPA thresholds
- C. Identify ways to develop a program framework that allows more agility when market conditions rapidly increase or decrease the number of applications.
- D. Create a two-tiered design review, one for large projects and one for small projects
- E. Make the EDG phase administrative with more detailed staff analysis and commenting online and via mail.
- F. Require that institutional uses over a certain size are subject to Design Review.

5. ENGAGEMENT AND OUTREACH

EXISTING STRUCTURE:

Design Review Board meetings are an important venue for the public to engage with the Design Review process and address both positive and negative impacts of projects in their community. Because these meeting in many ways acts as the face of the development process, there are heightened expectations about what can and should be accomplished and addressed.

IDENTIFIED CHALLENGES:

- Many 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/address these broader issues.
- During the meeting, it is not clear how public comments made at the meeting, received by mail, or email or other venues, has been incorporated into the Board's deliberation. This contributes to a lack of confidence by the public that their input has real impact on the project's design.
- For applicants new to this process, the timelines, costs and application requirements are not always clear and can add time to the process.

POTENTIAL STRATEGIES:

- A. Provide project materials that are sufficient to ensure meaningful, informed public comment through the development of thought provoking questions germane to the Design Guidelines.
- B. DPD staff should encourage applicants to conduct neighborhood outreach in advance of their first public meeting. However, it should be a balance as outreach itself sometimes sets expectations that the applicant should do whatever is suggested by the public, which may or may not be in the best interest of the project or the City's overall growth and development objectives.
- C. Consider how to meaningfully engage the public while keep focus on design issues - consider if it needs to occur at so many stages throughout the process.
- D. Provide better information about average review time/cost and how those numbers are affected by: lack of preparation, project size, contentious nature of project, etc. Possibly offer extended coaching or presubmittal services. Website and other outreach opportunities could help improve dialogue with potential applicants (personal Q&A, convey DPD expectations, etc.).
- E. More public outreach around long range planning and Design Review as an opportunity to communicate the purview of each process and provide another venue for the public to talk about non-design review issues, such as parking, zoning, height limits etc.