

# Welcome

Welcome to the Design Review Program Improvements Project open house. This open house is intended to:

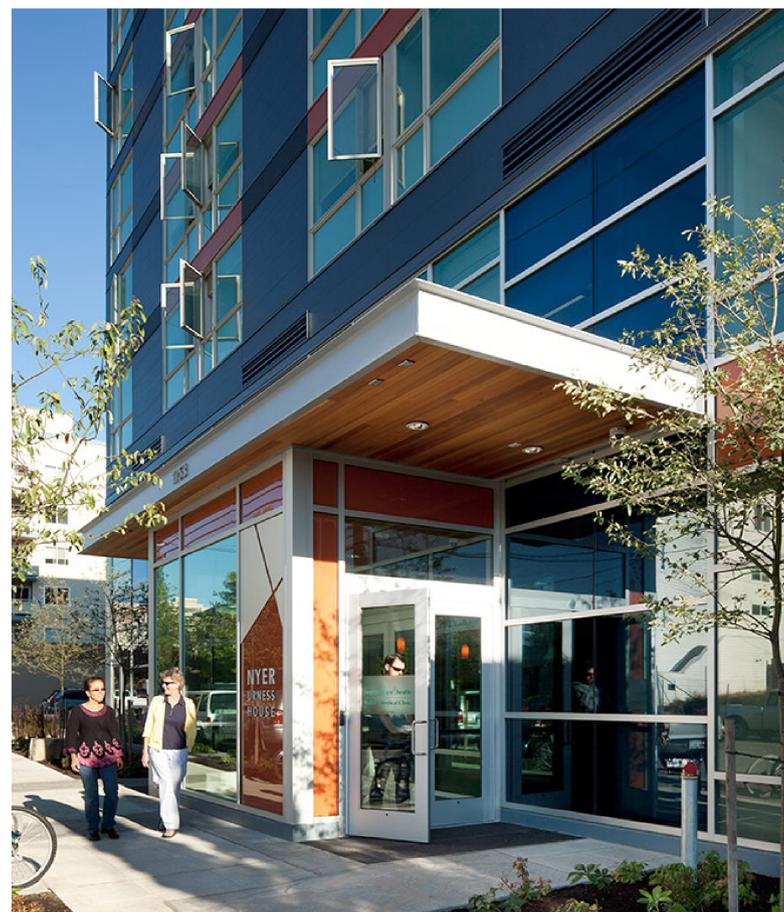
- Introduce and familiarize you with the City of Seattle's Design Review program.
- Update you on current efforts to improve the program.
- Get your feedback on some initial ideas to improve the process.

# Agenda

6:00 - 6:30PM - Browse materials

6:30 - 7:00 PM - Presentation by City staff

7:00 - 7:30 PM - Discussion with staff



*The Nyer Urness House, an affordable housing development in Ballard went through the Design Review process.*

# Background

The Design Review Program evaluates the appearance of buildings and their relationship to adjacent sites for most new multifamily, commercial and mixed use development projects in Seattle.

## Key Facts

- Seattle's Design Review Program was established in 1994.
- Over 1,500 projects have been reviewed since the program began - or about 111 projects per year.
- The Design Review Program reviewed 14 projects in 1994. In 2014, the program reviewed 192 projects - including the majority of all large new commercial and multi-family buildings built in Seattle.
- Design review takes place before a new development can apply for construction permits.
- Seattle is one of the only large cities where Design Review is conducted primarily by neighborhood-based citizen boards.

## The Purpose of Design Review

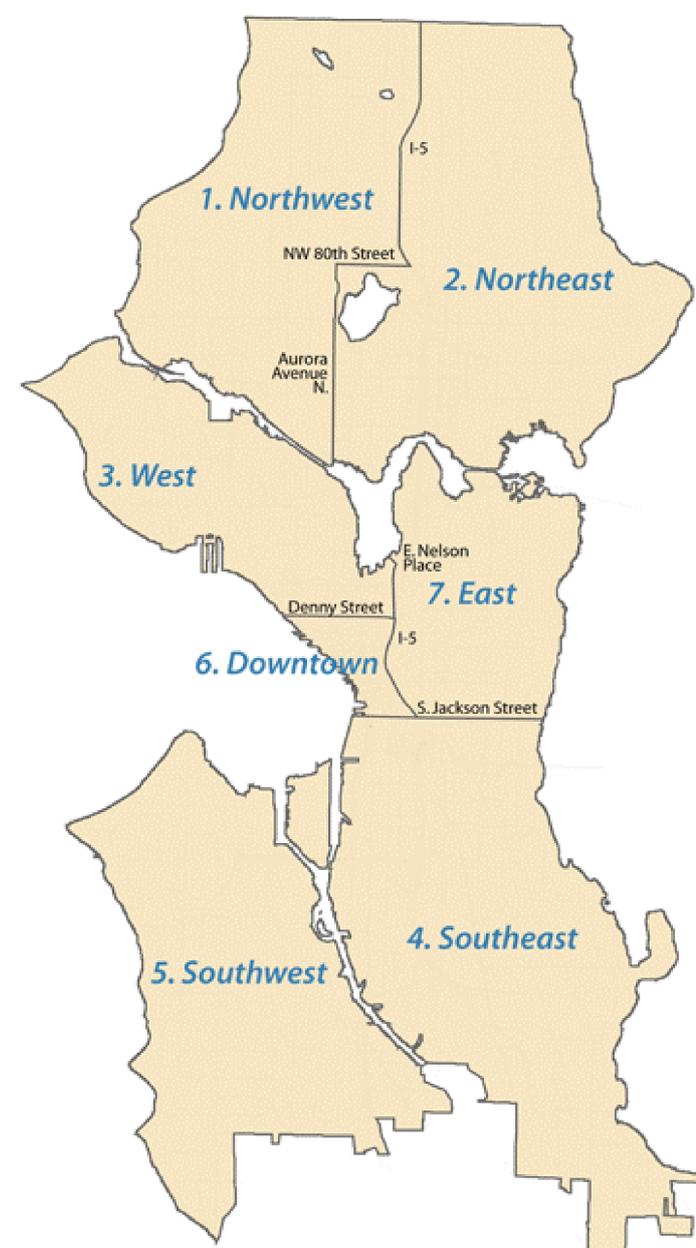
- Encourage better design and site planning to ensure new development enhances the city and sensitively fits into neighborhoods.
- Provide flexibility in the application of development standards to better meet the intent of the Land Use Code.
- Improve communication and mutual understanding among developers, neighborhoods and the City.

## Design Review Boards & Districts

Each district board consists of volunteers appointed by the Mayor and City Council and serve two-year terms. Their duties include synthesizing community input on project design, providing early design guidance, recommending conditions of approval and ensuring fair and consistent application of citywide or neighborhood-specific guidelines.

## Seattle's Design Guidelines

Seattle's design guidelines are the backbone of the Design Review program and the Seattle Municipal Code requires the Boards and City staff to use these guidelines as the basis for their recommendations and decisions.

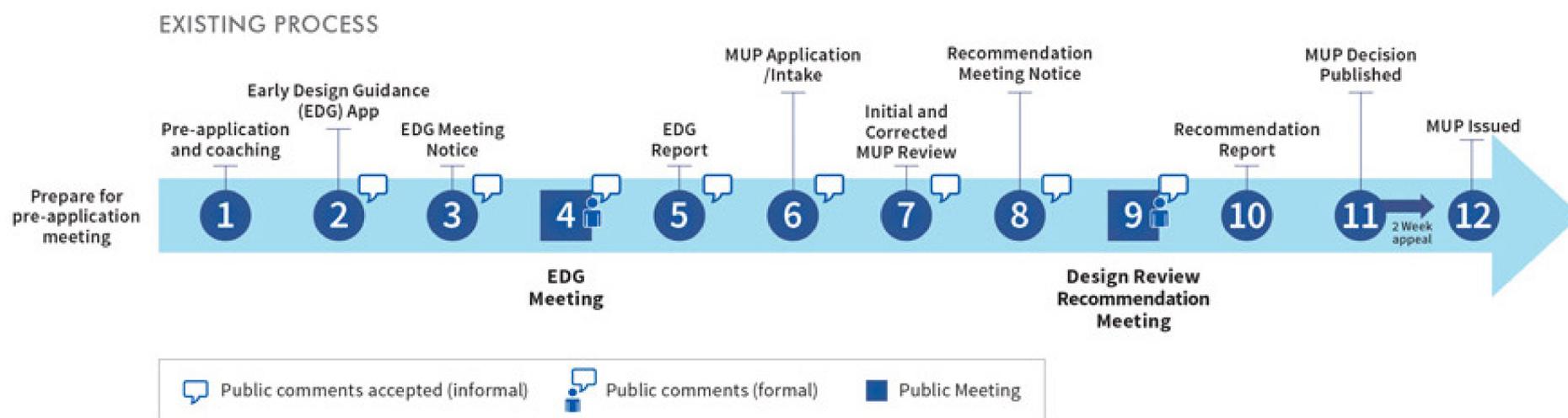


Existing Design Review Board districts.

# Background

## The Design Review Process Today

The chart below outlines key steps in the full design review process, which includes Design Review Board involvement. Today the process has an Early Design Guidance (EDG) phase, and a Design Recommendation phase, each with a public meeting, that must be completed before a development can be granted a Master Use Permit (MUP).



In addition to the full design review process, there are two other review processes (Administrative and Streamlined). These processes do not involve the Design Review Board, and are typically used for smaller projects with fewer impacts.

Over the last 15 years, the City has conducted numerous reviews and evaluations of the Design Review Program, which have indicated that there are many things that are working well, including:

### Creating Dialogue

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

### Improving Design

Design review improves project design outcomes. Many project designs are modified substantially from what was originally submitted for permit applications to what is submitted as part of the design review recommendations phase. Design Review is particularly helpful in preventing negative project design outcomes that could be highly incompatible with a neighborhood.

### Providing Flexibility

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



*A citizen provides public comment on a development proposal during a Design Review meeting.*

# Project Goals

Goals for the Design Review Program Improvements project are listed below. The goals are based on input from members of the community, designers, and project applicants, and findings in other past studies of design review.



## Design Excellence

Cultivate the program's purpose of encouraging better design.

- There is room for improvement on encouraging exceptional design. Some designers may defer to previously approved approaches to reduce risk and unpredictability, instead of striving for more innovative or creative design solutions.



## Consistency, Predictability and Efficiency

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

- The full design review process can be time consuming, adding to total project cost, which can translate to higher rents in the new building.
- It can be difficult to maintain consistency in how projects are reviewed by different boards, or how the boards operate.



## Set Clear Expectations

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

- There is sometimes confusion on the purpose of design review, how the process works and which issues design review addresses.



## 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.

- Opportunities for meaningful participation in the process with online tools are 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.



*The Design Review process helped shape design of the Stack House Apartments in South Lake Union.*

Draft 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.

## Details To Consider

(based on input received to date)

- Create an outreach guide to help applicants conduct effective outreach to communities.
- Set clear standards for what outreach is acceptable or 'enough'.
- 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 is accessible to diverse audiences.

## Project Goals Addressed



### Communication & Dialogue

- Creates relationships and dialogue directly between community members and applicants.



### Predictability / Efficiency

- DPD has found that applicants who conduct early engagement with communities usually have more predictable and timely design reviews.



### Design Excellence

- Could encourage more design responsiveness to local concerns.



### Clear Expectations

- Additional forum for dialogue (outside of formal Design Review meetings) allows the design review process to focus more directly on relevant issues.

How important do you think Early and Ongoing Engagement is to improving the Design Review process?



Draft Recommendation #2

# Set Design Review Thresholds Based on Site Characteristics & More Administrative Design Reviews

The steps in the Design Review process would be tailored to meet the unique characteristics of different types of projects.

Projects that are more complex or have greater impacts would go through formal review by the Design Review board for both major phases of Design Review. (Track B). Other projects with fewer impacts or fewer design challenges would have one of the two phases led by the DPD design review planner. (Track A).

The intent is to focus board reviews on the projects that need the most attention, and open more available board review times so there are fewer 'bottlenecks' in the process.

## Details To Consider

(based on feedback received)

- The characteristics for determining the tracks needs to be clear. Draft characteristics include:
  - The project's context & surroundings
  - If the project is very large in scale
  - If unique features are present (ie. a landmark)
  - A policy priority is present (ie. affordable housing)
- Provide clear expectations on the role of design review staff and board for reviews where there is a greater administrative (staff) role than today.

## Project Goals Addressed



### Design Excellence

- Focuses the attention of Design Review Boards on the most complex projects with greatest design challenges.



### Predictability / Efficiency

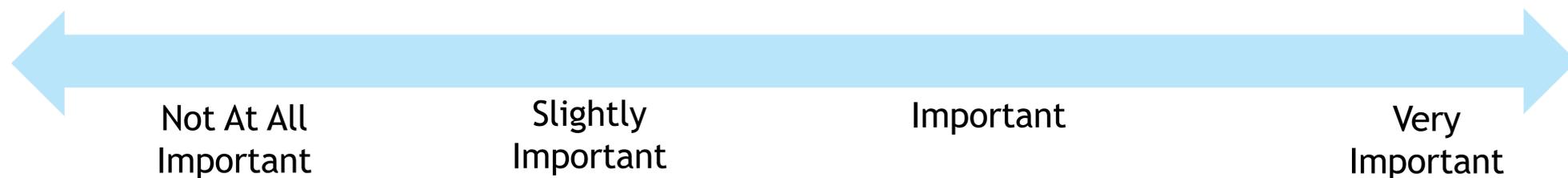
- Opens more timeslots for Design Review Boards (over 70 per year), reducing scheduling 'bottlenecks'.



### Communication & Dialogue

- Could relieve some time pressure on board reviews of difficult projects, enabling room for more two-way dialogue at the meetings.

How important do you think Design Review Thresholds Based on Site Characteristics & More Administrative Review is to improving the Design Review process?



Draft Recommendation #3

# New Tools & 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 (e.g. online commenting, online streaming, web-based mapping and project information)
- Revised formats for Design Review Board meetings (e.g. allowing for dialogue between Board members and applicants)
- Additional training for Design Review Board members and staff.
- A formal program to reward and publicize design excellence.

## Details To Consider

(based on feedback received)

- Venues and resources needed to achieve on-line commenting or streaming of meetings.
- Potential to ‘pilot’ new tools and techniques using City resources at the Downtown 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 issues of concern
  - City policy and planning background
  - Affordability / cost impacts of design choices

## Project Goals Addressed



### Predictability / Efficiency

- Changed format could allow more dialogue at meetings, reducing unpredictability by allowing clarifying information.



### Communication & Dialogue

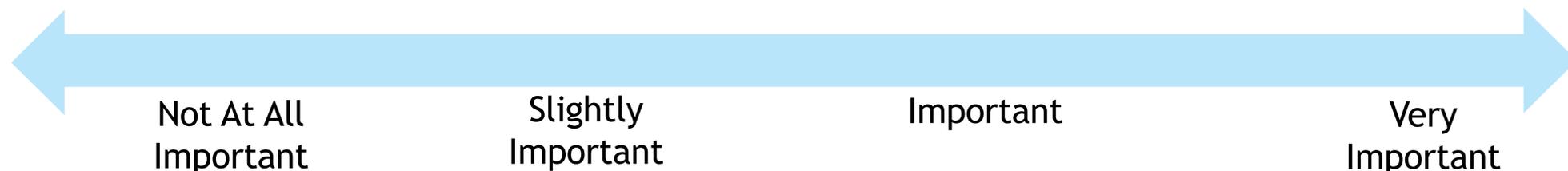
- Potential to broaden participation in design review through web-based tools.
- Potential to receive comment on designs in more ways.



### Clear Expectations

- More training of board and staff could help establish clear expectations for all meetings and steps in the process.

How important do you think New Communication Tools and Techniques are to improving the Design Review process?



Draft Recommendation #4

# Changes to Board Composition & Structure

Changes could 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 in tact, but would expand the Downtown Board to include South Lake Union and other nearby areas where highrise development is allowed.

The intent of such changes would be:

- Using city resources at a downtown location to pilot new tools and techniques.
- Add more design and community expertise to 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.

## Details To Consider

(based on feedback received)

- Careful review of the final makeup of the expanded board slots. (ie. 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 downtown board would be set up with capacity to review the required number of projects.

## Project Goals Addressed



### Design Excellence

- Adds more design expertise to each board, such as a landscape architect, or urban designer position.



### Predictability / Efficiency

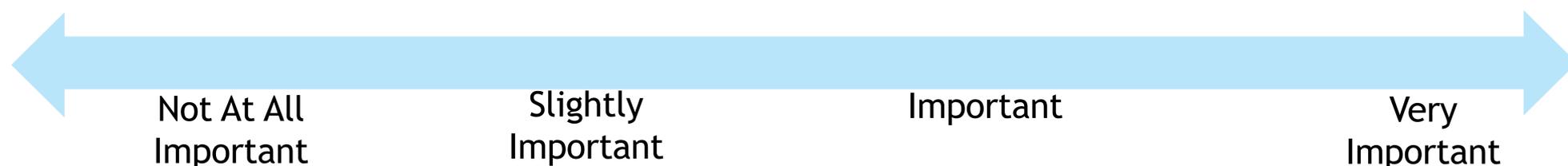
- Reduces meeting cancellations and board substitutions due to board member absences.
- Larger number of reviewers on each board builds more 'checks and balances' into the process.



### Communication & Dialogue

- Expands opportunity for community participation on boards, possibly increasing participation by greater diversity of perspectives.

How important do you think Changes to the Board Composition and Structure are to improving the Design Review process?





Open Houses - Sept. 29, Oct. 14 2015

## Schedule

