

## Seattle Design Review Program Improvements

### Online Survey Summary

April 2015

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#### PURPOSE

The Seattle Department of Planning and Development (DPD) created an online survey to provide general information on the purpose of the Design Review program, and obtain input from the broader public on strategies for engaging the public in the Design Review process.

The survey went live in late March 2015 and had received over 200 responses as of April 21, 2015.

#### TARGET AUDIENCES

- Members of the public who are likely already engaged in the Design Review process (e.g. attending meetings, providing comments, etc.) or have an interest in topics related to urban design/planning
- Readers of local neighborhood blogs

#### HOW THE SURVEY WAS DISTRIBUTED

The link to the online survey link was distributed in the following ways:

- At Design Review Board meetings
- Emailed to local neighborhood blogs (Capitol Hill Blog, Central District News, MyBallard.com, Next Door Media (parent site for several local blogs), Rainier Valley Post, West Seattle Blog, The Urbanist
- In Seattle DPD's weekly Land Use Information Bulletin emails
- On the Design Review main webpage, and on the webpage announcing upcoming Design Review Board meetings
- Seattle Design Commission (provided to staff for distribution)
- Seattle DPD Building Connections blog
- Seattle Planning Commission (provided to staff for distribution)

#### MAJOR COMMENT THEMES

- Strong public appreciation for opportunities to provide input on local projects and for receiving information about changes occurring in their neighborhoods
- Sense that that public feedback is not being adequately considered or incorporated as part of the Design Review process
- Identified areas for improvement include:
  - Receiving more advanced notice about projects
  - Increased focus on how projects fit within neighborhoods and on potential impacts to neighborhoods
  - Making the process more predictable
- Providing 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

Total survey participants as of April 21, 2015: 205

**1. In your opinion, what about the current Design Review program works well?**

Responses (156):

**a. Key themes & sample responses**

*i. Nothing*

*ii. Board is qualified/articulate/informed*

1. "Careful review of each project - board members are skilled and conscientious."
2. "The Review Board / Staff relationship, the composition of the Boards, the timing of the public meetings."

*iii. Public can influence developers/ citizens can provide input*

1. "It is an opportunity to let the community interact and influence developers and their design."
2. "The ability for citizens to give productive input on projects so that they will fit well and be constructive in their neighborhood. Projects easily pass through and get built."
3. "It's the only forum I'm aware of that allows citizen input on shaping development design decisions."

*iv. Good at following-up/notifying people of changes*

1. "Very good at notifying people about changes in the neighborhood."
2. "Public notification attempts are usually well posted."
3. "I like that proposals are posted online with renderings and explanations of design decisions."

*v. Encourages designers and developers to improve quality and process of projects*

1. "The Design Review program pushes designers and developers to make their projects the best they can be."
2. "Pushes building owners to present a complete design to the public, this forces architects to focus on the building materials earlier than in the past and provides incentives to use more interesting and durable materials."
3. "Another benefit from the public involvement is that they will really push for higher quality materials that developers try to hold back on."

## 2. Is there anything that could be improved?

Responses (178):

### a. Key themes and sample responses

#### i. Everything

#### ii. Advanced notice of projects

1. "Advanced notice and details of projects provided earlier with ample opportunity to comment digitally ahead of time."
2. "Affected neighbors need to be given more time during the review period. Clear information on who should be contacted to get more information needs to be provided. Really important, the public should have access to plans and models of project during review period. Design Review must enforce things like setback from street, etc. as THIS IS NOT HAPPENING."
3. "Earlier notification of meetings, clearer communication about process and roles. More information for citizens to understand the best way to impact the process."
4. "Communication about how the public can be involved; also involvement that doesn't require attending a physical meeting at a certain time and place -- include virtual comment. It's not clear to me how or when I could engage, nor for what types of projects."

#### iii. Streamline process

1. "It takes way too long, the planners and DRB members often stray from the boundaries of the adopted DRB rules and get far too granular in their requirements. I'd be happy to share specifics from past projects."
2. "The boards are bureaucratic with difficult terminology and guidelines that make it hard to follow their deliberations."
3. "Need to improve access to DRB sessions and reduce timeframe to get in front of the board."
4. "The process is long, expensive, increasingly requires too many arbitrary diagrams and renderings, planners have enough power to allow a design to evolve after recommendation, etc."

#### iv. Provide resources online

1. "Have an online presence- in a way, simulate meetings with a survey much like this one. Not everyone can attend meetings, but can pitch in their thoughts online."
2. "Better online participation would be really helpful - meetings are difficult to find time for."

#### v. Pay more attention to aesthetics in design review

1. "It's too much large scale development too fast exceeding demand. Buildings seem empty, look cheaply made and without aesthetic concern for the history of the area. Over scale, they block sunlight and

views with bland, voting monoliths. We need more overall design guidance and color to make a beautiful neighborhood. Not enough care put into how these huge buildings and transient occupancy impact the neighborhood.”

2. “The design guidelines can be too prescriptive - I'd like to allow for a more qualitative evaluation (I'd rather see a flat façade of high-quality, well-detailed materials than a modulated façade of uninteresting, commonly-colored painted materials). So much new development is looking same old, same old.”
3. “More attention should be given to how the project fits in the neighborhood i.e. socially, physically, architecturally and functionally.”
4. “Many of the buildings which receive little resistance from the board are not well designed, but simply follow design guidelines. Bulk and scale should be less emphasized and aesthetics should be a larger part of the discussion.”
5. “Work more closely with the DPD and neighborhoods to come up with AESTHETIC and ARCHITECTURAL requirements, rather than just bulk and scale. People often reactively try to limit size when they should be concerned about aesthetics.”

*vi. Include zoning in process*

1. “Better ability to recommend deviation from zoning codes to improve solution.”
2. “It would be great if zoning changes went under a review as well since I have been at meetings where citizens didn't know the zoning for their neighborhood had changed. The city needs to adjust the Urban Village concept for livability and some degree of historic preservation.”

*vii. Design Review costs too much*

1. “Design Review costs too much, taking design time away from us to please the city and residents that don't even show up to meetings (but snark in blogs and news articles). There must be a middle ground here.”
2. “The process adds a ton of expense to the design process while not always resulting in a better designed building. In fact it could be argued that the design suffers as a result of spending so much in design fees to get through the process.”

*viii. Consider traffic/parking*

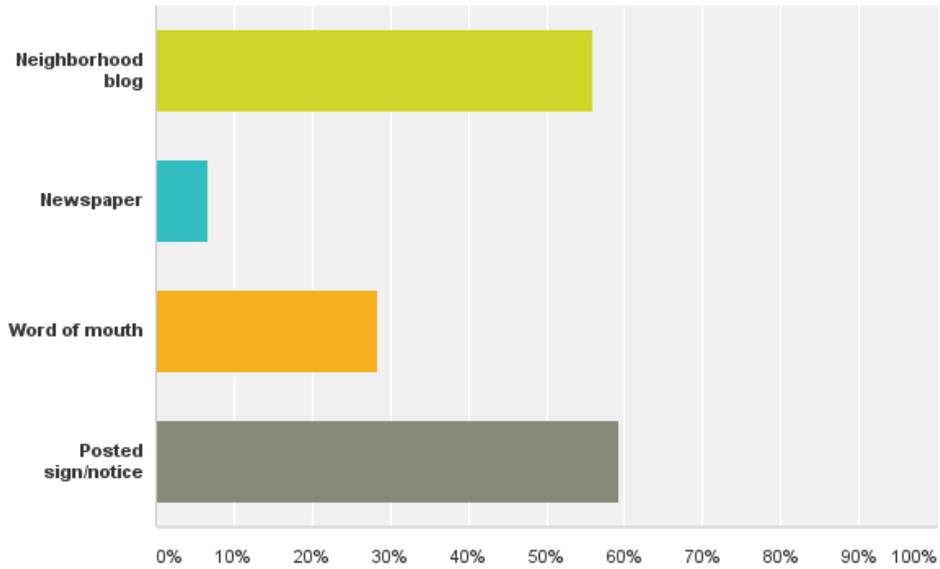
1. “Yes, consider traffic congestion, parking and other ongoing projects when approving new construction. Traffic in areas of our city is impossible on most days in large part because of all of the blocked lanes of traffic due to construction permits.”
2. “Impact on traffic! Pedestrian and vehicular.”

3. “The Design Review should have to present impact statements if it’s a large project and it won’t have parking for all tenants, explain where additional people will park.”

**3. How do you most often hear about projects that are planned for your neighborhood?**

**Q3 How do you most often hear about projects that are planned for your neighborhood?**

Answered: 179 Skipped: 22



Neighborhood blog	55.87% 100
– Newspaper	6.70% 12
– Word of mouth	28.49% 51
– Posted sign/notice	59.22% 106

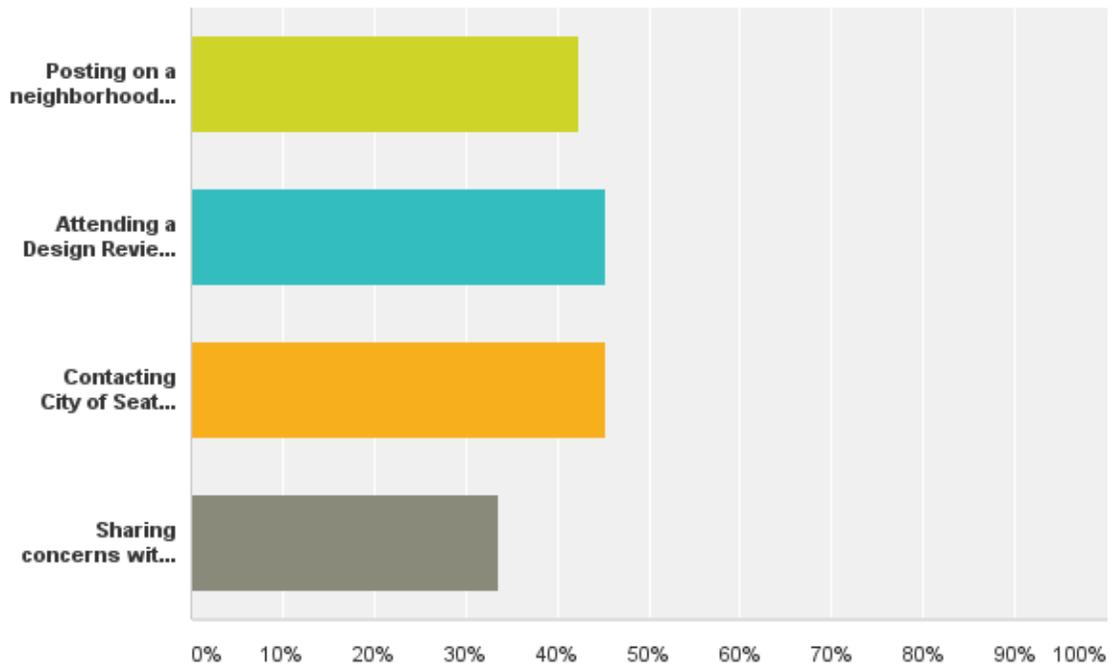
**Other responses:**

- a. Land use information bulletin
- b. DPD website/bulletins/notices
- c. Neighborhood/community councils
- d. Facebook

4. If you had concerns about a project planned for your neighborhood, how would you most likely provide feedback?

### Q4 If you had concerns about a project planned for your neighborhood, how would you most likely provide feedback?

Answered: 179 Skipped: 22



Posting on a neighborhood blog	42.46% 76
Attending a Design Review Board meeting	45.25% 81
Contacting City of Seattle staff or an elected official	45.25% 81
Sharing concerns with a local community organization	33.52% 60

**Other responses:**

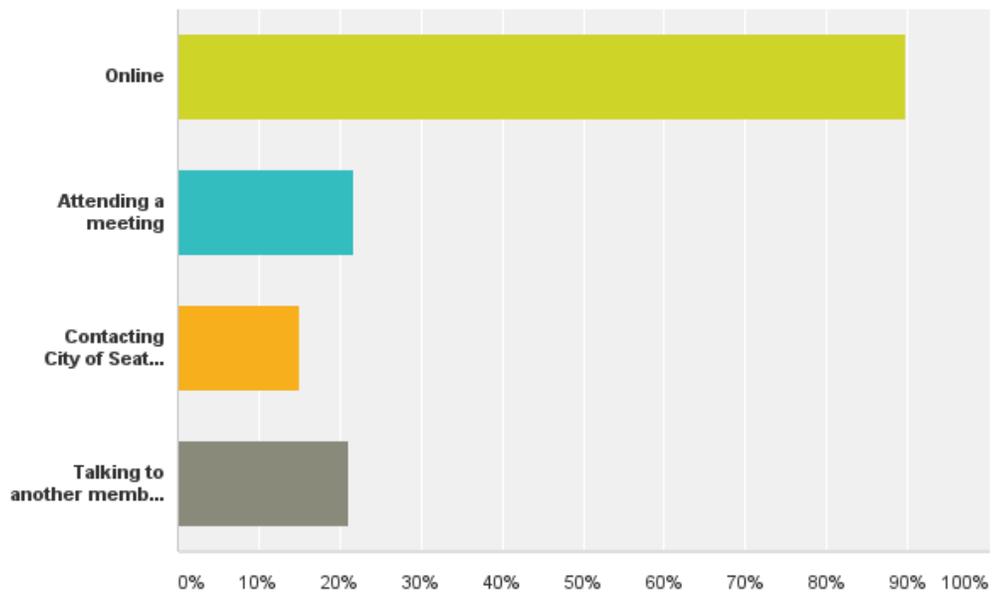
- a. Nowhere - feel concerns/comments would not be heard no matter where comments submitted

- b. Online comments
- c. Community council
- d. Survey

5. If you wanted information about a project planned for your neighborhood, where would you be most likely to go for more info?

**Q5 If you wanted information about a project planned for your neighborhood, where would you be most likely to go for more info?**

Answered: 194 Skipped: 7



Online	89.69% 174
Attending a meeting	21.65% 42
Contacting City of Seattle staff or an elected official	14.95% 29
Talking to another member of the community	21.13% 41

**Other responses:**

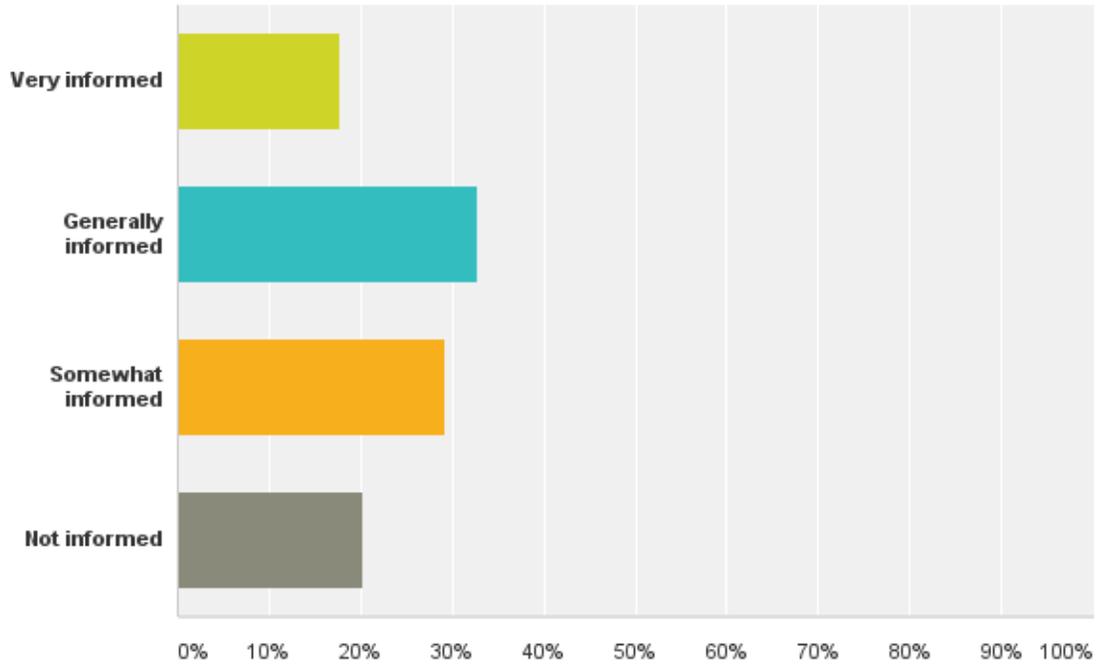
- a. Neighborhood blogs/social media

- b. Community council
- c. Flyer

6. How informed do you feel about projects planned for your neighborhood?

### Q6 How informed do you feel about projects planned for your neighborhood?

Answered: 198 Skipped: 3



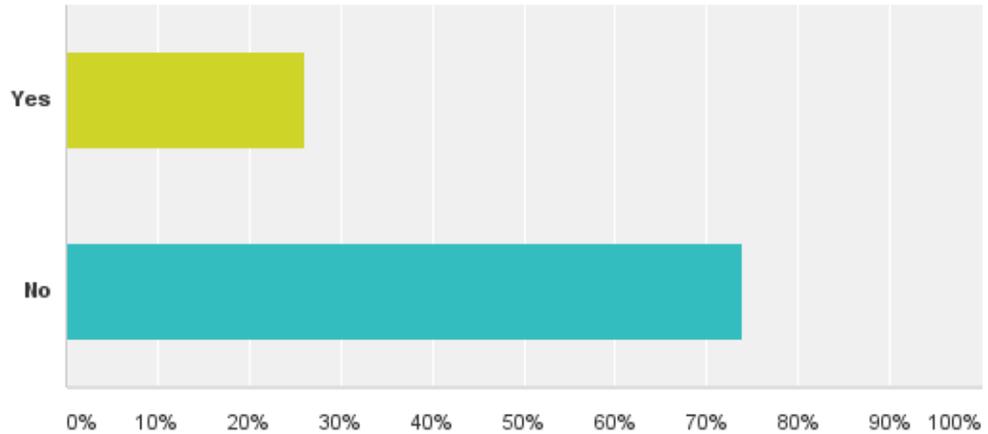
Very informed	17.68%	35
– Generally informed	32.83%	65
– Somewhat informed	29.29%	58
– Not informed	20.20%	40

No “other” responses provided.

7. Please describe any additional questions or comments you have.

**Q7 Do you feel you have adequate opportunity to weigh in on the design of projects planned for your neighborhood?**

Answered: 184 Skipped: 17



Yes	26.09%	48
No	73.91%	136

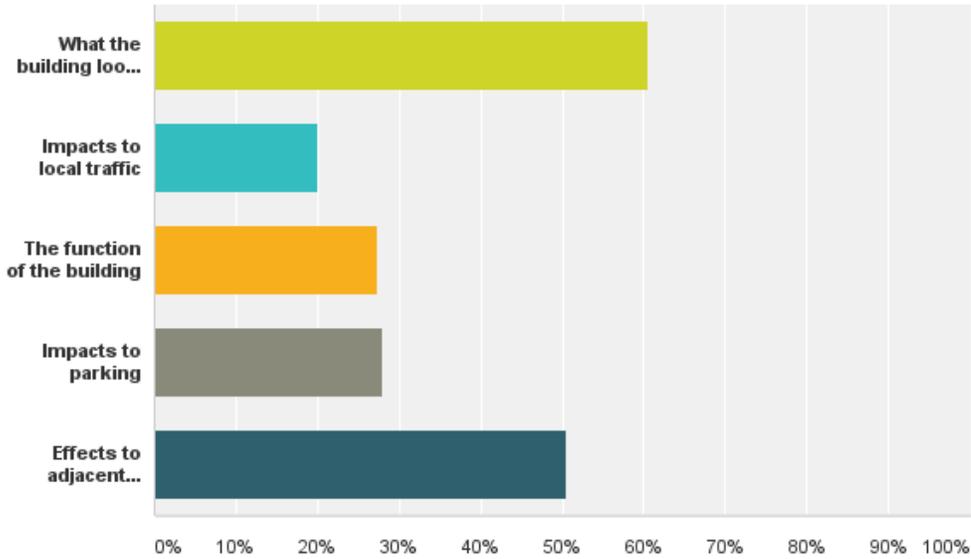
**Other responses:**

- a. Not enough information/communication/advanced notice
- b. People only have opportunity to weigh in when decisions have already been made
- c. There is opportunity but DPD doesn't take into account public's opinion – feels like opinions of developers are preferred
- d. People don't feel heard and don't feel their comments result in meaningful change
- e. Sometimes there is too short of notice to participate
- f. No because difficult to attend meetings
- g. Need more online outlets

8. If you learned that a new building was planned for your neighborhood, which (2) two issues would you likely care most about?

**Q8 If you learned that a new building was planned for your neighborhood, which (2) two issues would you likely care most about?**

Answered: 190 Skipped: 11



What the building looks like	<b>60.53%</b> 115
– Impacts to local traffic	<b>20.00%</b> 38
– The function of the building	<b>27.37%</b> 52
– Impacts to parking	<b>27.89%</b> 53
– Effects to adjacent properties or open spaces	<b>50.53%</b> 96

**Other responses:**

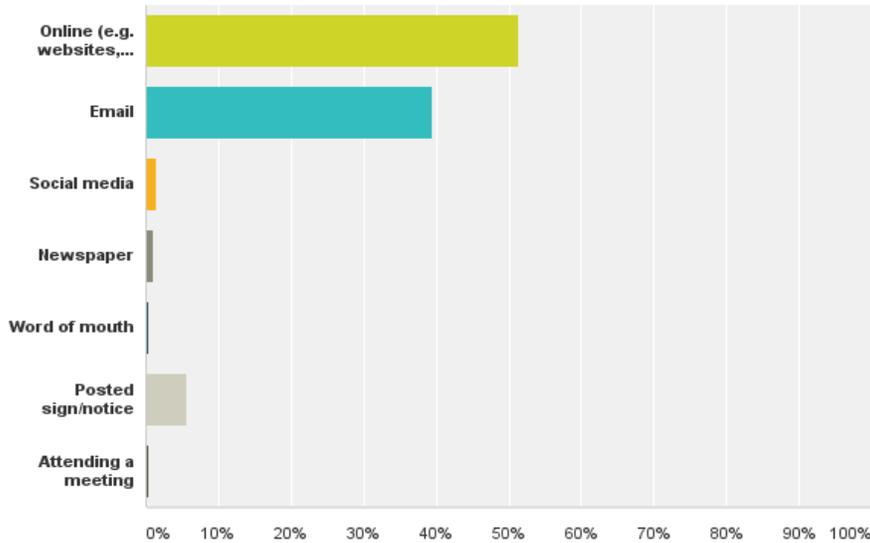
- a. All of the above issues
- b. Pedestrian experience/sidewalks
  - i. "Sidewalks, setbacks, accessibility for people walking/biking, intersection improvements."

- c. Construction impacts
  - i. "Construction impacts--hours, noise, traffic, worker parking."
- d. Economic/demographic diversity
  - i. "Encouragement of economic and demographic diversity."
  - ii. "Cultural change to the neighborhood, gentrification."
- e. Affordability
  - i. "How likely to add more affordable housing - crisis in the city."
- f. Improvements for the neighborhood
  - i. "Improvements to neighborhood (added street trees, sidewalk addition/widening)."
  - ii. "Is this a positive contribution to the neighborhood or a bid for a short turnaround on a land investment aimed solely at enriching the investors at the expense of the place I call home?"

9. What's your preferred way of receiving information?

**Q9 What's your preferred way of receiving information?**

Answered: 193 Skipped: 8



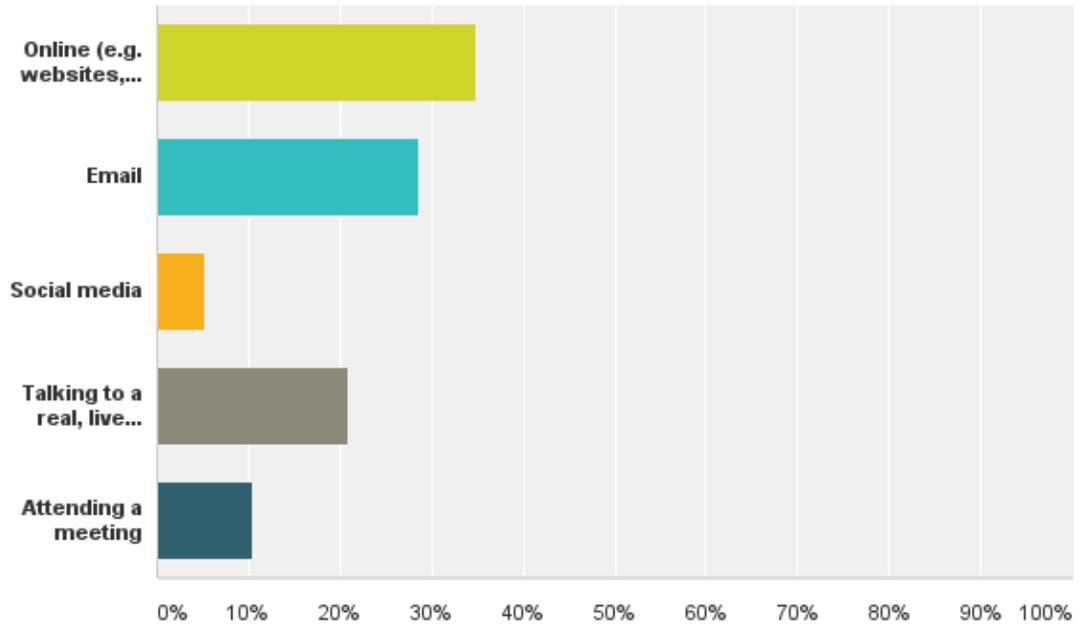
Online (e.g. websites, blogs)	51.30%
–	99
Email	39.38%
–	76
Social media	1.55%
–	3
Newspaper	1.04%
–	2
Word of mouth	0.52%
–	1
Posted sign/notice	5.70%
–	11
Attending a meeting	0.52%
–	1

No "other" responses section was provided for this question.

10. What's your preferred way of sharing your opinion?

**Q10 What's your preferred way of sharing your opinion?**

Answered: 192 Skipped: 9



Online (e.g. websites, blogs)	<b>34.90%</b> 67
– Email	<b>28.65%</b> 55
– Social media	<b>5.21%</b> 10
– Talking to a real, live person	<b>20.83%</b> 40
– Attending a meeting	<b>10.42%</b> 20

“Other” comments were redundant because the options were already provided in the answer choices.

**11. Do you have specific suggestions for things the City could do to:**

**a. Better share information about upcoming projects? (117 responses)**

**Key themes:**

*i. Streamline process*

1. "Process is not intuitive. It feels like many important issues are not up for discussion or are decided elsewhere. This needs to be a one stop shop for public discussion of all the issues associated with a particular site or project."

*ii. Share information earlier in process*

1. "Share information before the design has been approved--in my neighborhood we don't hear about some developments until it is too late."

*iii. Better email and general communication*

1. "Provide timely email communications to affected parties."
2. "Monthly email newsletter containing links to more info on all projects open for public comment."
3. "Give information on posted signs about how a proposed project is going to benefit the neighborhood, how it will help parking, how it will help transportation (i.e., will the developer be cooperative with placement and number of bicycle racks)."
4. "Mail out letters informing residents of upcoming projects within a 10 minute walking radius."
5. "Email or mail me notices. I do not have time to attend meetings, but i care a lot about these things."

*iv. Improve website*

1. "Projects should have easily findable websites."
2. "It can be very hard to figure out how to see plans on the DPD website--improving that would help. Also, posting the plans as soon as they are available so that there is time for public review. In one, case, the plans were not posted until the day of the board meeting--apparently the DPD staff forgot to post them."
3. "Have a blog-like or searchable web site listing of projects."

**b. Make it easier for the public to provide input on the design of those projects? (115)**

**Key themes:**

- i. Take public input into account/ask for input before making decisions*
  - 1. “The input should have an impact...otherwise people won't bother.”
  - 2. “Citizen comments, input and attendance should be strongly encouraged at public meetings.”
  
- ii. Make it easier to provide feedback/ provide online platform*
  - 1. “Provide an online public forum where the public can post concerns, and see the concerns of others.”
  - 2. “Allow for commentary or mark-ups to the DR package online.”
  - 3. “Allow for public comment without attendance at meetings.”
  - 4. “Have more meetings after working hours and in centralized places in a neighborhood, e.g., libraries, community centers.”
  - 5. “Continue to improve online access and participation and inform the public about the specific criterion used by the design review boards in the process of decision making.”