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MEMORANDUM

May 8, 2014

To: Diane Sugimura, Director,
Department of Planning & Development

From: Seattle Planning Commission

Re: Commission comments on DPD's Pedestrian Zone Designation

CC: Mayor Ed Murray; Seattle City Councilmembers; Andrew Glass-Hastings, Kathy Nyland, Robert Feldstein, Mayor's Office; Marshall Foster, Nathan Torgelson, Susan McLain, Mike Podowski, Aly Pennucci, DPD; Steve Johnson, OED; Kevin O'Neill, Susan McLaughlin; SDOT

Dear Ms. Sugimura,

The Seattle Planning Commission recently received a briefing from Aly Pennucci and Mike Podowski on the Pedestrian Zone update project. We are pleased to see that the Department of Planning and Development (DPD) is expanding this vital tool to support thriving neighborhood business districts throughout the city. The Pedestrian Zone designation encourages pedestrian activity and assists in making many neighborhoods great places to live.

The Commission is very supportive of the Pedestrian Zone designation. This letter outlines several Commission suggestions for how to improve the pedestrian experience. Recommendation #6 outlines a larger issue that is

relevant to the Pedestrian Zone conversation but not limited only to Pedestrian Zone designated areas.

1. We Support the Current Proposed Uses within Pedestrian Zones.

The current list of Pedestrian Zone uses outlined in the presentation by DPD allows for a viable mix of pedestrian-friendly businesses that can be supported in neighborhood commercial districts. Narrowing the range of allowable uses would make the commercial districts difficult to sustain.

2. Weather protection is a must in Seattle's Pedestrian Zones.

The Commission recommends the requirement of weather protection in Pedestrian Zones. Weather protection should be integrated with street trees and we recommend working closely with Office of Sustainability and Environment as well as the Seattle Department of Transportation (SDOT) to ensure that both programs can be successful. It is our understanding that SDOT requires an annual permit and fee for weather protection that extends over the public right-of-way. The Commission recommends removing the fee for required overhead weather protection in Pedestrian Zones as this is a public benefit.

3. Outdoor cafes increase street life but immovable railings can be a detriment.

While outdoor cafes increase the street life and make for an inviting atmosphere for some months of the year, immovable railings may push pedestrians too close to traffic or under the drip line of the weather protection. Therefore the Commission recommends that the railings within pedestrian zones be removable and perhaps taken out for the months of the year that outside seating is impractical and when overhead weather protection is greatly needed.

4. *Pedestrian Zones need a regular update process.*

The Commission discussed the evolution of Pedestrian Zones and how the DPD might revisit Pedestrian Zone designations in the future. We encourage DPD to provide a schedule on which Pedestrian Zones will be reviewed. This is particularly important in areas that are not yet thriving business districts and may require some additional work from the Seattle Department of Transportation on accessibility and safety issues or from the Seattle Office of Economic Development on vacancy and business vitality issues.

The Commission suggests the Urban Design Framework process is an additional meaningful venue in which to update Pedestrian Zones. The Commission acknowledges the great work DPD does in prioritizing planning through the development of Urban Design Frameworks. We believe that Urban Design Framework efforts will give DPD an additional opportunity to talk to neighbors about Pedestrian Zones and ensure that the vision for each Pedestrian Zone is properly progressing.

5. *Right-of-Way Improvement Manual the proper place for streetscape and sidewalk design guidelines.*

The Commission values the work DPD has done on the update of the Pedestrian Zone project. These zones play a vital role in what makes our city a great place to live. SDOT is currently updating the Right-of-Way Improvement Manual and the Commission sees many opportunities for both updates to work together. We recommend that requirements for land use remain in the purview of DPD while allowing SDOT to manage the streetscape and sidewalk design guidelines.

6. *Incentives and Reduced Retail Depth could be helpful in creating viability.*

We understand that not all proposed Pedestrian Zones are currently comprised of thriving business districts, and that filling storefront vacancies particularly within new mixed use construction can be difficult at market rates. The Commission is very concerned with retail viability throughout the City and particularly in places where there have been consistently high vacancy rates. Therefore, we recommend the exploration of retail viability and how the City and DPD through zone changes might be an active partner in the success of small local businesses. The Commission suggests inviting the Office of Economic Development (OED) to the conversation as well. The OED has an important role to play and should take a more active role when land use designations are being changed.

The Commission has several thoughts on retail viability and would be happy to engage in any future conversations where our advice may be beneficial. As a starting point, we suggest that the DPD examine minimum commercial depths in Pedestrian Zones. A shallower retail depth may help attract smaller businesses and help reduce vacancies. Additionally an examination of property tax exemption for qualified local businesses, following the model of the Multifamily Tax Exemption program where a percentage of targeted tenants qualify the owner to a tax exemption, may be helpful in addressing the vacancy rates in some neighborhoods. The Commission understands that this is a complicated conversation and starts with a visioning exercise for which types of businesses we wish to attract and incentivize. However, it is imperative that we begin to work on the problem of vacancies and business vitality. This is how our city will maintain its great neighborhoods and serve the new residents moving to our city over the next several decades.

We look forward to continuing to work with you on this important update. We are available to answer any questions and would be happy to discuss all of our recommendations in more detail. You can contact either of us or call our Executive Director, Vanessa Murdock, at (206) 684-0431.

Sincerely,



David Cutler
Co-Chair



Amalia Leighton
Co-Chair

SEATTLE PLANNING COMMISSION RECORD OF DISCLOSURES & RECUSALS:

Commissioner Hough Beck disclosed that the firm she works for, HBB Landscape Architecture, has contracts with SDOT.

Commissioner Josh Brower disclosed that his firm, Veris Law Group, represents single and multi-family developers that may be impacted by this designation.