



## City of Seattle Seattle Planning Commission

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May 19, 2003

Peter Steinbrueck, President  
Seattle City Council  
1100 Municipal Building  
600 Fourth Avenue  
Seattle, WA 98104-1876

Re: Northgate

Dear President Steinbrueck:

This letter is in response to your request, submitted by letter dated March 25, 2003, for assistance in analyzing Mayor Nickels' Northgate Action Plan. The Planning Commission has extensively discussed the thirteen questions contained in your letter, finding each a probing and appropriate inquiry as part of a thorough review of the Mayor's proposal for Northgate. In summary, the Planning Commission finds that the Mayor's proposal is a worthy and realistic first step towards improving the Northgate area.

We have prepared detailed responses to each of your questions and have attached them to this letter. In addition, for your convenience we have distilled our thoughts on the Mayor's proposal to several key points that we believe are particularly important to convey to you and other members of City Council at this time. As a preface to those points, we include below recommendations from our earlier work on Northgate in 2000 and 2001 that we believe still stand the test of time, and bear reiteration as new initiatives are being proposed.

### **Key Points from the Town Center and 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue Work**

As you are aware, the Planning Commission took some of the first steps to engage the Northgate community in developing a more specific vision for the Northgate urban center core, specifically the Northgate Town Center Charette in 2000, and the 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue NE Street Design project in 2002 which was identified as a high priority in the Northgate Area Comprehensive Plan. The observations below are drawn from this work.

1. Foremost, the Town Center vision encompasses more than the Mall itself and should continue to be considered from a holistic and comprehensive perspective, even while individual actions may focus on incremental implementation.
2. The Northgate core requires an approach that focuses on *creating* a sense of place more than preserving one.
3. The Town Center vision can only be realized with significant commitment from both public and private parties, working to integrate and leverage capital investments.
4. We must find the appropriate balance between the competing interests of pedestrian access and mobility and traffic circulation and capacity, and be willing to risk reduced vehicular capacity in order to create a vibrant urban center.

5. We must pledge to a “new way of doing business” including better interagency and interdepartmental coordination, and meaningful and ongoing community involvement in order to keep the momentum for change going.

## **Recommendations on the Mayor’s Northgate Proposal**

▪ **The Planning Commission finds that the current Northgate General Development Plan (GDP) and open space requirements for Northgate have inhibited much needed redevelopment of the mall site.** The proposed Development Agreement envisions an incremental redevelopment approach to the mall coupled with some ambitious City and County actions. It offers an opportunity to break this stalemate and move forward with the upgrading that is needed if the mall and surrounding area are to remain viable. There is a long-term risk that similar incremental development, without the framework of a guiding “plan,” could lead to redevelopment that is not as cohesive, pedestrian-friendly, or functional as envisioned in the neighborhood plans. However, we feel that such an incremental approach is appropriate, given that the alternative of waiting an unspecified period of time for a single master planned action poses a far greater risk.

***Commission Recommendation:** Support the Mayor’s proposal to repeal the GDP requirement, amend the Open Space requirements of the Land Use Code, and enter into the Development Agreement with Simon Property Group. In addition, the City should couple these efforts with ongoing actions to ensure a holistic approach to overall Northgate development.*

▪ **Development of a stormwater detention facility and open space amenity on the south lot is a good approach to making progress on multiple objectives and is an example of creative thinking and the “new way of doing business” that will be required to make Northgate a thriving urban center.** The general concept holds great promise and is an appropriate direction in concert with the open space code changes and Development Agreement provisions; provided that the technical aspects of integrating open space and providing sufficient storm water detention and treatment can be accomplished.

***Commission recommendation:** We support the Mayor’s proposal to develop a stormwater drainage facility and open space amenity on the south lot as a significant step toward remedying inadequacies in the City’s drainage infrastructure; providing needed open space for the area; and addressing some of environmental restoration needs of the Thornton Creek watershed.*

• **Within the context of an area-wide transportation study, it is appropriate that property owners contribute financially to planning and physical improvements commensurate with the impacts and benefits that their development will cause and receive, respectively.** For example, since the 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue improvements will clearly benefit the mall, it seems appropriate for its owners to contribute to construction costs, as in a Local Improvement District (LID).

***Commission recommendation:** We endorse the proposal for a transportation study and suggest that it identify mitigation actions for projected development in order to provide property owners greater predictability with respect to their responsibilities and potential benefits. The study should also investigate new funding and implementation approaches that may have city-wide policy implications, even if policy changes cannot be made operational within the currently proposed Development Agreement.*

• **Although we believe the proposed 150 housing units for the south lot is far too low in density and total numbers, we do not recommend revising the Development Agreement for that point alone if it would jeopardize the larger effort.** Clearly, higher densities in the area of 60-80 units per acre would better support the current growth targets and the community’s and City’s stated visions for the

Northgate area urban center as per the NACP and the Comprehensive Plan. However, we also understand the reluctance the current property owner (Simon Property Group) may have to commit to more housing.

***Commission recommendation:*** *We recommend that the City work with the property owner to find incentives and remove obstacles—even relaxing required parking, open space, or setback requirements as needed—so that dramatically higher density development makes both economic and community development sense.*

The attached documents include a detailed response to each question posed by you, as well as a notebook containing summaries and excerpts from Northgate work the Planning Commission has done over the last several years for your use during Northgate deliberations.

In conclusion, we have appreciated the opportunity to work directly with the Mayor's staff and associated departments. Their input during the past week has been responsive and helpful. In the future, earlier involvement of the Commission and distribution of clearer documentation and supporting materials upfront would greatly facilitate review and public decision-making. Thank you for the opportunity to share our observations with you.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "John Owen". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "J" and "O".

John Owen, Chair  
Seattle Planning Commission

Cc: City Council  
Mayor Greg Nickels  
Mary Jean Ryan  
Diane Sugimura

Cc enclosures do not include the notebook.