

## Summary of Seattle Planning Commission Comments on Draft Downtown Regional Center Plan

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### **General Comments**

The Commission is excited to see accessibility and people with disabilities included, beginning with recommendations for meeting the unhoused communities' needs with alternative response programs. While we are happy to see more representation for people with disabilities here than many plans include, we are concerned that this inclusion will end at the policy level in this visioning document. With other plans, we have been frustrated when the needs of people with disabilities are not included in the implementation phase. We hope to see this vision carried further into the future zoning and code changes for Downtown and for all neighborhoods across the city. Overall, the Downtown Regional Center Plan lays out a vision that we felt was missing in the comprehensive plan with policy recommendations that are innovative, include diverse communities, and plan for complete communities for all ages.

We are also pleased to see policies that reallocate space on streets to put people first and policies to increase housing for seniors and families with children.

When goals are identified as near-term, the associated actions should reflect a higher level of readiness. We suggest a comb through of the policies and actions to double-check the feasibility of near-term actions. This will be important to improve the credibility and effectiveness of the plan overall.

We recommend adding a Big Idea to address the activation of the zone between Pike / Pine corridor and Pioneer Square from First Ave. to Interstate-5. With the Big Idea for activating this portion of the Downtown Core missing, the graphic on page 26 comes across as out of touch with current conditions. The graphic should directly recognize the lack of activation and vibrancy in the Downtown Core and provide a Big Idea response, linked to specific goals and policies.

The commission is concerned that the economic feasibility study shows development for all housing types is currently infeasible. The Plan predicts continued population growth Downtown but where will that growth go without new buildings? The feasibility study should be more prominently referenced in the Plan. We would like the City to be more specific about this issue and the solutions they are putting in place. In the near term, we need creative pilots and developer incentives that can stimulate change but as the market shifts, we want to make sure current market conditions do not cause the City to back down on developer requirements that support public life and livability in the long term.

In order to move toward a Downtown that is more balanced between residential and commercial uses, the area needs to evolve dramatically. We are looking for a clearer statement that in 20 years, Downtown will look very different both in built form and in population.

The comments above are tied to a broader recommendation we have for the Plan. We would like to see an acknowledgement that the work to achieve the vision of this Plan will need to occur in phases. For some parts of this vision to be realized, we need to first create the right environment, which will take time and interim phases that acknowledge and address current conditions. We feel this work to more

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explicitly identify phased steps is missing and is a key piece of the puzzle to moving Downtown toward the outcomes imagined in the Plan. We appreciate that the implementation chapter of the Plan begins to connect actions with a timeline. We would like to see this go further to include a key that clarifies and standardizes what near-term, mid-term, and long-term mean in months and years across actions.

We recognize that some aspects of change, such as current market conditions, are out of the City's hands and are encouraged to see that the City is starting to build up its toolbox and support readiness so that when the timing is right, we will be ready to move. We would like this Plan to provide a clear roadmap for how the City plans to tackle Downtown's challenges, phase by phase, in order to achieve the vision laid out in this Plan.

### **Draft Downtown Plan theme: Downtown is Home**

We appreciate the Plan addressing the needs of current and future residents.

However, we find the draft Plan omits important details about how to make Downtown more livable. Where are the nearest grocery stores, schools, and recreational facilities/gyms? We recommend conducting a gap analysis to determine availability of services. Does existing transit provide easy access to these amenities? To increase residents Downtown, we suggest focusing not just on building housing but also ensuring walkable, rollable access to everyday goods and services. Many policies mention family and child-focused residential amenities, which are needed, but Downtown also requires policies that encourage more general residential amenities for people of all ages. Can the needed amenities be incentivized or added to existing vacant spaces?

More housing, particularly more family-friendly housing, means more children. However, there is no mention in the Plan about adding schools or how students living Downtown will connect with nearby schools. We encourage collaboration with Seattle Public Schools to plan ahead for an increase in children living Downtown. The Plan should make clear how the City will remove any barriers to citing schools Downtown and clear the path for schools to be implemented when the timing is right.

Housing in the Plan seems to be focused on adding new residential towers and providing some protection for very low-income residents but this leaves a gap for middle-income residents. We would like the Plan to address the full spectrum of housing needs for all income levels.

Public safety is covered in the Safe and Welcoming theme but is also related to adding residents Downtown. If public safety is not addressed, developers will not be interested in projects in areas considered unsafe, such as along Third Ave, regardless of incentives.

The plan should explicitly connect Downtown housing growth to reducing regional commute distances. Positioning a Downtown housing hub as a regional commute-reduction strategy strengthens the case for both residential growth and transportation investment. (Related to Goal DH 1 & tied to Goal FW 4)

### **Policy-specific feedback:**

DH 1.2 Prioritize residential development in the Downtown Core

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- One action item under this policy is to allow more housing types with a focus on family-friendly housing and affordability along Third Ave. Commissioners expressed concern about the near term readiness of Third Ave. for housing, especially family housing.

DH 1.3 Increase flexibility in new commercial building designs to plan ahead for future conversions to residential use

- Ensure the policy does not add to construction costs and add financial burdens to new construction. Requiring new commercial buildings to be designed for future residential use would require significant building design modifications. Building modifications could include reduced floor plate depths to 65' - 85', revised stair and elevator design, distribution of vertical shafts across floor plates for future use, etc. Each of these design modifications may hamper financial viability of commercial building construction. If financial viability review shows this policy would deter new commercial construction, revise DH 1.3 to focus on existing rather than new commercial building design.

DH 3.2 Simplify the housing production process thereby reducing upfront development costs

- We find the policy is too vague. Examples such as reducing permit review times and/or action items to support the policy would be helpful. This policy may be better placed under goal DH 1.

DH 3.3 Support new models of income-restricted and market-rate homeownership (community land trusts, cooperative or shared equity models, and co-housing).

- We suggest adding support for social housing to this list.

### **Make Downtown Safe and Welcoming**

#### **Policy-Specific Feedback:**

SW 1.1 Ensure outdoor spaces are accessible, well lit, comfortable and clean

- Increase bike safety in Downtown access. With the rise of e-bikes and scooters on the roads or on sidewalks, protected and separate (from cars and pedestrians) facilities should be considered as well. Suggested protection should encompass more than just paint and include physical separations.
- Clarify that this goal includes an effort to disrupt and discourage anti-social behavior common along sidewalk near 12th and Jackson. Name the specific issue in order to address it.

SW 1.2 Create a comfortable and convenient transit experience for everyone, including while waiting for buses and making transfers

- Suggest expanding this policy to include commitments to seamless transfers between ferry, rail, bus, bike, and walking modes.
- Improving pedestrian comfort based on street activity on Third Ave. is very important for the success of bringing more residents and business patrons Downtown.

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- We suggest also including a commitment to unified regional wayfinding standards and the use of multilingual, culturally relevant navigation tools.

SW1.3 Maintain public spaces through dedicated resources and continued partnerships with local communities and businesses, to reduce the burden of public space maintenance on historically underinvested communities

- We appreciate the more equitable distribution of needed investment.

SW 1.4 Enhance community policing services and alternative response programs

- Improve community education around community policing services and alternative response programs so community members are able to utilize these resources when they encounter neighbors in need of emergency support that doesn't require police intervention.

SW 2.2 Plan for additional primary and urgent healthcare facilities to provide local support to Downtown residents

- We believe this is important. Reduce building use restrictions to enable more services and job opportunities Downtown in order to support increasing residents Downtown in ways beyond simply adding housing. This would support the 15-minute neighborhood concept.

SW 3.2 Improve underpass connections within the Chinatown-International District (CID)

- Develop more programming below the Interstate-5 overpass to activate this space similar to CID block party and the Fremont Bridge Winter Market with activities such as food trucks, farmer's markets, clothing/goods swaps, concerts, etc. Add environmental design elements linked to CPTED principles.

SW 3.3 Improve the walking experience from the waterfront to other neighborhoods, especially along steep slopes

- Support and encourage existing and future sidewalk vendors to activate pedestrian connections.

SW 3.4 Further adapt land use regulations to support the activation of ground floors, storefronts, and landscaping and loading adjacent to the waterfront along Alaskan Way

- Discourage service uses for buildings fronting Alaskan Way and provide flexibility in how businesses meet city regulations related to waste/recycle pick up, loading, etc. in order to encourage more pedestrian-oriented uses and activation along Alaskan way.

SW 4.1 Expand access to park space in areas with gaps, and in communities that were disproportionately affected by past planning actions

- Appreciate intent to repair past harms and neglect. Development is often focused on areas with much past investment, many of which have appropriate access to parks. Find ways for

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development in areas already well-served by parks and open space to financially support creation of parks and open space in areas of the city that lack these amenities based on racial equity toolkit priorities.

SW 4.4 Seek opportunities to repurpose or activate the right of way for recreational opportunities

- Yes! See the Commission's Repurposing the Right of Way issue brief.
- We appreciate effort to reallocate space on streets to put people first.
- Replace "seek opportunities" with direct action words to move away from the consideration phase into the action phase of this work. Use instead "Repurpose or activate the right of way for recreational opportunities." This concept can be applied broadly across policies in the Plan to be direct and avoid starting with weaker language like "consider" or "look for ways to."

SW 4.5 and 4.6

- Support community environmental improvement efforts like Growing Vine Street and work with new development projects, existing property owners and city ROW improvements to incorporate these community projects.

### **Make Use of Every Square Foot**

Increasing the number and visibility of creative industries Downtown is very important and should be among the primary guiding goals for Downtown revitalization; we appreciate that the Plan acknowledges this essential component of Downtown.

Policies under the broader goal of attracting and growing creative industries, including SF 6.1, place strong emphasis on cultural consumption. What is missing is a parallel focus on cultural production and long-term sustainability of culture and the arts. The plan does not include clear actions for requirements or incentives for artist studios, fabrication/makers space, performance spaces, or long-term stewardship by cultural producers. Artists are primarily positioned as contributors to public space rather than as workers who need affordable, stable places to operate, aside from one action under SF 6.3. Without dedicated and affordable production space, artists may be commissioned temporarily to support Downtown activation while being displaced permanently. Culture becomes something that is displayed Downtown rather than sustained.

Policies SF 1.1 and 3.5 focus on reuse of office space and aligning city regulations with new retail trends and pilot programs. These could both be strengthened by actions or a new policy to explicitly position Downtown as a testbed for regional economic transitions. Without explicit testbed framing, many of the policies read as defensive responses to Downtown's challenges. Framing as opportunities for testing and pilot programs shifts the frame as intentional leadership tools.

### **Policy-Specific Feedback:**

SF 1.2 Leverage vacant or underutilized publicly owned properties for redevelopment with community benefits.

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- The Commission fully supports this policy. Utilizing this existing resource and reaching out to Community Development Financial Institutions (CDFIs) could lead to some quick wins for Downtown.

SF 6.3 Make it easier to participate in the Downtown creative economy

- We suggest more robust solutions for keeping artists and cultural spaces embedded Downtown.

**Steward our Home for the Next Seven Generations**

We appreciate that the City is planning for who is here now and who will be here in the future and recognizing the importance of generational planning.

**Policy-Specific Feedback:**

SG 1.4 Communicate the value of water resources, urban habitat, tree canopy, and ecological systems that uniquely reinforce Downtown's slopes, green spaces, and waterfront conditions.

- Growing Vine Street project is a good example of the City's past success with this goal and worth mentioning as an example.

SG 3.1 Explore and expand local power generation/district energy approaches and employ a low-pollution neighborhood model.

- We suggest strengthening this policy to reflect the long-standing conversation around low-pollution neighborhoods. Downtown is the most viable place to implement this model at scale. Moving from exploration to clearer commitments around local power generation, district energy, and low-pollution neighborhood implementation would better reflect Downtown's potential as a climate demonstration district.

SG 3.4 Ensure renovated and new construction buildings achieve high environmental and emissions standards.

- Ensure financial impact study is completed for new environmental and emission regulations and balance any increased construction costs with appropriate incentives.

**Find Our Way**

We appreciate the recognition of the important role our Rights-Of-Way play as multi-use public spaces to be in, move within and move through.

**Policy-Specific Feedback:**

FW 1.1 Pursue street transformations to create more space for walking, rolling, biking, transit, and lingering or gathering.

- We are curious to see the exploration of the role of increased bike safety in Downtown access. With the rise of e-bikes and scooters on the roads or on sidewalks, protected and separate

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(from cars and pedestrians) facilities seem like they should be considered as well. Suggested protection should encompass more than just paint and include physical separations.

FW 2.1 Prioritize pedestrian safety and visibility at crossings throughout Downtown.

- Provide pedestrian crossing signals during each light cycle by default – i.e. no skipped crossing signals if “beg button” is not pressed.

FW 4.2 Make frequent service corridors the backbone of Downtown’s surface transit network (buses, bus rapid transit, and streetcar).

- Does existing transit connect easily to grocery stores, schools, etc.? Would the commute be reasonable and support living in Downtown?
- The transit network should also account for people experiencing homelessness and those who need access to the wraparound services concentrated Downtown.
- Keep the Central City Connector streetcar in the long-term vision to ensure SLU streetcar is not decommissioned before full system is built out.

FW 5.3 Plan for and support dedicated spaces that accommodate freight and logistics activities.

- Study areas with high food delivery activity and redesign street and parking as necessary to accommodate temporarily stopped vehicles. Study use of street by delivery drivers/cyclists in areas like Broadway between Pike St. and Union St.

FW 6.1 Celebrate Downtown Seattle’s unique geography.

- We appreciate the inclusion of improving hill climb wayfinding and expanding hill climb opportunities. Hill climbs are a game changer for navigating Downtown but between Metro and SDOT, hill climb maps are either outdated or not available online.