

AIA Seattle Comments on
Design Review Advisory Group Recommendations

Sept 15, 2015

Dear Design Review Advisory Group and DPD Staff,

Thank you for including AIA Seattle in the important work you have been doing to improve Seattle's design review process, and for allowing us this chance to comment on proposed new tools and strategies.

AIA representative Erik Mott has shared the list of strategies being considered, and we appreciate the opportunity to share input both in this letter and through notes on the DRAP Worksheet. Our key observations and recommendations are summarized below.

AIA Seattle and its 2,000 professional members remain keenly interested in a design review process that produces a better designed built environment, and will welcome opportunities to support changes that move us toward that goal.

Make design review more about design

The task force has identified many creative, valuable changes that could improve the current Design Review system. However, none of them adequately address the core problem that Design Review meetings have trouble focusing on getting better design for Seattle's neighborhoods, rather than addressing concerns about development and land use more generally. Because there is no other easy outlet for communities to share their concerns about land use and zoning changes, Design Review meetings can quickly become focused on these entitlement issues and lose their efficacy for producing better projects.

Empowering DPD staff and board members to have stronger, more consistent control over design review meetings is an important step in the right direction. We also encourage the task force to consider fundamental structural changes to decouple design review from entitlements.

Make Training a Priority

Adequately trained Design Review board members and staff are essential to a successful process, and we support the recommendations under Training and Education. Training board members and staff on all facets of the process – design, community interaction, and neighborhood context – will better set the design review boards up for success. We particularly appreciate and encourage the number of board positions dedicated to knowledgeable design professionals, including architects and landscape architects.

Support structural changes, but prevent overload

We support the consolidation of boards, the reconfiguring of districts, and the ensuing ability to focus on particular project scales and types. These changes will promote consistency and predictability. We are concerned, however, about the volume of work for the central board in

particular, and therefore support lowering the threshold for administrative design review as a mechanism to manage the number of project the board must consider.

Focus public involvement

The recommendations did not include adequate mechanisms to empower and inform community participants to elevate the quality of public involvement. We strongly recommend taking steps to establish expectations for public dialogue, defining the types of input that would be most valuable and impactful from community members, and giving board members and / or staff the skills and authority to facilitate board meetings so that they remain focused on their core purpose. Training for staff and board members, sharing consistent written expectations of public input, and directing public dialog through more explicit questions and prompts are ways this might be accomplished.

Implement all recommended format changes

We generally support recommendations under Format and Logistics. Allowing for longer presentations and encouraging dialogue would allow for better understanding of ideas and concerns on all sides. The process should encourage participation from the best qualified, most accomplished design professionals in our community. Professionalizing the boards with paid positions and dedicated clerks, we hope, would promote consistency, but board appointments should be monitored after this change is made to ensure it is having the desired effect of attracting qualified board members.

Thank you for this opportunity to participate and comment.

Regards,



Mary Johnston FAIA
President
AIA Seattle