



AIA
Seattle

Mr. William Mills
Department of Construction and Inspection
City of Seattle
P.O. Box 94788
Seattle, WA 98124-4019

Re: Proposed Design Review Amendments

June 19, 2017

Dear Mr. Mills,

AIA Seattle

Center for Architecture
& Design
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Seattle, WA 98104

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Thank you for the opportunity to respond to SDCI's proposal to amend the Land Use Code to modify the Design Review process. AIA Seattle's members – around 2,000 architects and professionals working on the design of our city – care passionately about making better buildings and neighborhoods. Our members possess a deep body of experience with Seattle's current Design Review process, encompassing the full range of project types and scales and a diversity of perspectives. We appreciate the City's long-term focus on making positive changes to the Design Review process to develop a better system for all involved. AIA Seattle's previous comments to the City on this topic called for improvements to make Design Review more consistently rigorous, equitable and effective in fostering good design. Specifically, we advocated for better design, greater consistency and better communication. We recognize SDCI's work to address our concerns. While we support many of the changes outlined in the proposal, we would like to highlight our concern that the proposed changes be applied rigorously, provide greater definition and clarity and result in greater consistency and transparency for the process.

The following are our comments regarding each of the recommendations for improvements in the Design Review process.

Project Thresholds

Size

AIA Seattle supports the proposed amendments to modify project thresholds based on square footage rather than both size and the number of dwelling units. Clarifying and simplifying which projects meet the Design Review threshold reduces confusion about which projects need Design Review, reduces the project load on Boards and frees up available slots for applicants. We also support the proposed changes to reduce Design Review thresholds for projects less than 10,000 sf in size. This reserves the Design Review process for larger projects where it can have more impact and, in particular, removes a large number of townhouse projects that currently go through the Streamlined Design Review process. That said, we would like to ensure that the new thresholds are high enough to meet the HALA goal of increasing affordable

housing units in a meaningful way. We encourage SDCI to monitor the outcomes that result from the new thresholds to make sure they do not hinder the growth of affordable housing. If the HALA goals are not being met, we suggest considering higher thresholds.

Project Complexity

AIA Seattle supports the proposed amendments intended to refine Design Review thresholds by considering the complexity of a site related to the context, scale and special features of the proposal. This change would continue to require more complicated projects to fall within Design Review while freeing up Board member capacity to review the most important projects. We suggest lowering the street lot line to 200 feet from 250 feet as the threshold for “complex” development in the scale category – 200 feet is long enough to require major modulation moves in massing to break down the scale for the pedestrian experience and avoid monolithic development.

Hybrid Design Review

AIA Seattle also supports the proposed new Hybrid Process for smaller and less complex projects that would allow those projects to be reviewed administratively by staff at the Early Design Guidance meeting. This step will significantly reduce the review burden for smaller projects. Many of these are housing projects that need to move forward faster than is currently possible to help address Seattle’s affordable housing shortage. In addition, measures to reduce the number of projects that fall under Design Review will focus the City's efforts on those projects of the highest priority. While we support this change, we are concerned that the new Hybrid Process be implemented consistently and executed appropriately. We encourage SDCI to implement this process with the goals of the process revisions in mind: to make Design Review more consistent, efficient and predictable.

Other thresholds

We believe that the proposal requiring commercial and institutional projects in Industrial Buffer and Industrial Commercial zones to be reviewed under Design Review is a positive change to ensure these projects maintain the appropriate scale for these neighborhoods. Adding institutional uses to the design review process is also welcomed to maintain consistency of neighborhood design standards. AIA Seattle also supports the proposed change to allow affordable housing projects to be reviewed administratively. This will reduce the burden on these projects, which already have an internal review process tied to public funding, and help accelerate the construction of badly needed affordable housing units. That said, we would like to see the Design Review process further incentivize efforts to build affordable housing in our city. Using Administrative Review as an incentive for projects to provide on-site affordable housing through the new MHA zoning – rather than making payments in-lieu – would be an example that would support the HALA goals of making affordable housing more equitable and geographically spread throughout the city.

Earlier proposals discussed the possibility of eliminating Design Review for projects participating in the Living Building Pilot Program. We are disappointed to see this idea missing from the current proposal. We believe that allowing such projects to go through Administrative Review would encourage others to participate in the program and help Seattle achieve its commitments toward a more sustainable future.

Early Community Outreach

AIA Seattle does not support Early Community Outreach as it is currently described in the proposed amendments. While we are supportive of more effective public outreach, we remain concerned about making community outreach a formal requirement. A stated goal of this process is to reduce confusion among members of the public about Design Review, but the Early Community Outreach recommendation does not address the real possibility of contentious debate regarding project aspects beyond the control of the applicant (e.g., parking requirements, zoning height, allowable floor area ratio). The burden is placed on the applicant to navigate this outreach alone. We do appreciate the changes to the “How it would work” section from earlier proposals; the current version is better defined and clear, with one written, electronic and in-person outreach required. However, how the Department of Neighborhoods will verify that outreach requirements have been met is less defined and badly needs clarity. We also remain wary of the implications of protests by the public, including claims that the community outreach “requirement” was not met. There remains a real potential for onerous legal claims and crippling delays for every project.

Part of the rationale for revising the Design Review process is to make it less burdensome so we can build more housing in the city. This requirement makes this goal harder to accomplish, not easier. We believe it is the City’s responsibility, not that of the applicant, to achieve the appropriate level of public engagement. We suggest amending this recommendation to require applicant participation in a more clearly defined, city-led early public outreach effort. Moreover, the community engagement process as outlined by SDCI does not define how Boards will manage public objections that do not fall under Design Review purview – a major problem in slowing down reviews as often Design Review is the only outlet for the public to comment on issues (related to design or no). Applicants and Board members need a clear place to direct these comments as well as a well-defined process for letting the public know what can and cannot be accomplished via the Design Review process.

Board Structure

Board Composition

AIA Seattle supports the proposed modification of the composition of seats on each Board. We agree that additional review slots will be opened up by other proposed changes commented on above.

Board Meeting Format

We applaud the proposed change to allow for two-way dialogue between the Board and applicants to provide time for clarifying questions – this is badly needed and will be welcomed by applicants. We encourage even more opportunities for applicant-Board dialogue, including during the deliberation process, to ensure that all assumptions are correct and to allow the applicant to respond to public comment.

Board Meeting Training

AIA Seattle also welcomes the proposed expansion of the types of training made available to Board Members. We suggest that additional training be focused on how to address Design Review issues specific to complex projects. Also helpful would be a very clear

definition the Design Review Board's purview and increased opportunities for Board Members to engage in dialogue with other city commissions such as the Landmarks Board or the Design Commission.

Board Meeting Limits

We support the proposed changes to limit the number of Board meetings for certain projects, particularly those that are not seeking departures from standards or are less complex. This change will provide more opportunity for complex projects to be heard and help limit the Design Review Board's ability to overreach its authority. That said, we would like to see additional clarity on the procedures related to decision-making over departures from the stated limits.

Other Changes

Program to Reward and Publicize Design Excellence

AIA Seattle is deeply disappointed by SDCI's election to disregard the 2016 Recommendation Report recommendation to develop a program to reward and publicize design excellence. We believe a yearly awards program to honor design excellence is an outstanding way to recognize and promote well-designed projects, and we encourage you to reconsider this decision. AIA Seattle has experience designing our own awards programs and would consider collaborating with the City on this initiative.

Dedicated Note Taker at Meetings

AIA Seattle previously advocated for dedicated note takers at Design Review meetings and we continue to recommend this change as necessary to maintain predictability and a timely review process.

Design Review is a tool that can improve our city for everyone. We believe that the proposed amendments to the Design Review process would create a more nimble, functional and efficient Design Review process. However, these proposals badly need clarification on what is to be expected for each new step in the process to ensure that applicants and the public are well-informed and the process is both timely and predictable. While we support many of the proposed changes, we have concerns about the application of the changes. Our goal as frequent applicants is to have the most consistent and transparent process possible.

We encourage SDCI to take another look at specific areas where we feel the final process can be improved: eliminating Design Review requirements for Living Building Pilot Program projects and MHA affordable housing units; reviewing the unintended consequences of making Early Community Outreach a requirement for applicants; developing a program to reward and publicize design excellence; and adding a note taker to Design Review meetings.

We appreciate the thoughtful work that has gone into the recommended changes to the Design Review process and sincerely hope you will consider our comments in an effort to further improve on this effort. We look forward to working with the City to develop a final Design Review process that focuses on the highest priorities while ensuring consistency, providing transparency for all and elevating the level of design in our city

Respectfully,

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Lisa Richmond
Executive Director

A handwritten signature in dark blue ink, appearing to read 'RR', with a large loop and a cross-like stroke at the beginning.

Ron Rochon, AIA
President