



Austin Design Commission

Board/Commission Recommendation

20140728-004A

Recommendations for the future role of the Design Commission under the 10-1 Boards and Commissions Transition Plan.

Unanimously approved by the Design Commission on a 4-0 vote.

September 4, 2014

Dear Council Members,

Below are recommendations from the Design Commission on the Boards and Commissions Transition Plan.

1. Core expertise of the Design Commission

The Design Commission is comprised of council appointees whom have backgrounds and expertise in the areas of: Architecture, Urban Design, Landscape Architecture, Physical Planning and Civil Engineering. Each of the current members maintains a practice (either academic or professional) that focuses on the construction of the urban environment and its components. The accumulated disciplinary knowledge held by the membership provides for a multifaceted and unique interdisciplinary perspective on how public and private development can affect the quality of life in the urban environment. In particular, members of the design commission have the training to understand the social and spatial implications of the public and private proposals that are presented to it.

2. Role of the Design Commission as stewards of the public realm.

Uniquely constituted to carry out the role of steward of the public realm, the Design Commission provides guidance and oversight for the vision and values embedded in: Imagine Austin, the Urban Design Guidelines and the Infrastructure Design Guidelines (in progress), the primary documents that govern the future quality of Austin's urban environment. The disciplinary knowledge and background of the membership provides a lens through which individual development proposals can be evaluated in terms of the degree to which the performance criteria embedded in these documents are complied with.

While upholding the principles and values of our citizens, the Design Commission assesses the likelihood that individual propositions will contribute to the collective benefit of the public realm and that this will translate into making meaningful places for the citizens of Austin. In addition, the Design Commission seeks to educate the community about the benefits of good urban design, so that the citizens can understand the importance of building a humane urban environment, and the critical factors that contribute to achieving one.

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3. Response to the Recommendations of the Task Force.

Given that the expertise and role of the Design Commission and its membership is concentrated on the ability to comprehend the implications of projects on the production of an enhanced quality of public life for the citizens of Austin, it is uniquely suited to evaluate those projects (public or private) that impact the public space and infrastructure of the city, and to advise the City Council and the City Planning Commission on the virtues (or lack thereof) of proposed urban projects. The Design Commission has an important and unique responsibility among the city's boards and commissions, helping to steer collective development outcomes toward the construction of environments that are just and humane. The Design Commission evaluates each proposal brought before it with an eye toward the larger social and physical context within which it will be situated. It is important therefore that it can continue to focus on this mission.

In this regard, it is the opinion of the membership that the inclusion of small-scale private projects in the evaluative mission of the Design Commission would be inappropriate. The documentation from which the Design Commission derives its authority, including the Urban Design Guidelines, the future Infrastructure Design Guidelines, and the Imagine Austin Document (along with the future CodeNEXT implementation,) do not include recommendations for private and small site-specific scaled work.

The McMansion Ordinance, in particular, is explicitly focused on single-family private property and is therefore a non-contributor to the larger public space and infrastructure of the city. The Design Commission does not see this component of city governance as an appropriate addition to its scope of responsibilities.

4. Recommendations from the Design Commission for the transition to a new role and structure.

As the City of Austin transitions to a new role and structure for its boards and commissions, it is the opinion of the membership that an enhanced role for the Design Commission should continue to be structured around the core mission and expertise that has already been established, i.e. Urban Design. The growth and speed of development in the City of Austin requires a focused commitment on the part of the Design Commission as projects continue to come online. The Design Commission therefore should continue to review development proposals for conformance with Urban Design Guideline principles, which will be further overlaid with the principles and regulatory frameworks embedded in CodeNEXT as they become codified. This responsibility includes continuing to review large-scale public projects for compliance, in order to assist the City of Austin with achieving excellence in the design of the public realm.

An expanded evaluative role should include development initiatives that would be compatible with the expertise of the Design Commission. In particular, Small Area Plans are not only an appropriate issue to be integrated into the core mission, but would benefit from the disciplinary expertise of the membership. It is our recommendation that these types of projects contain all of the critical aspects that the Design Commission has the qualifications to review. The Complete Community agenda of small area plans is based upon principles of good urban design, and it would therefore be appropriate that this type of project come under the purview of the Design Commission. The success of a Small Area Plan is tied to issues of connectivity, infrastructure, placemaking and sustainability. These are all issues that come under the purview of the Urban Design Guidelines and would benefit from the stewardship of the Design Commission. Additionally, knowledge of the intent and structure of a Small Area Plan would assist the Design Commission with the evaluation of individual component projects within the larger governing planning context, including transitions between new development and existing neighborhoods.

In addition to this expanded responsibility, the Design Commission should continue to serve as a gateway to the Density Bonus Program. Projects that are proposed under this program are evaluated based upon substantial compliance with the Urban Design Guidelines, and a workable and efficient evaluation process has already been established. We will also continue to educate the citizens, developers and city staff on the role of the

Design Commission along with its responsibility as stewards of the public realm.

5. Qualifications for selection to the Design Commission.

Recommended composition of the membership: UD, Arch, LArch, APA, Dev., Civ. Eng.

The Design Commission must maintain the appropriate design expertise necessary to steward both public and private projects toward the quality of life envisioned by the citizens of Austin. This is especially true as the city transitions to the new regulatory framework embedded in CodeNEXT. Appointees to the Design Commission should continue to possess the core expertise necessary to fulfill this mission. It is important therefore, that future appointees hold professional credentials in those disciplines with knowledge of environmental planning: Urban Design, Architecture, Landscape Architecture, Urban Planning, Development, and Civil Engineering. It is also recommended that the makeup of the design commission, in order to best perform its advisory role to the City Council on matters related to the quality of future development, be constituted from a range of these disciplines in order to be able to properly evaluate projects in an interdisciplinary manner.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Dean J. Almy III". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Dean J. Almy III, AIA, FFUD
Chair, City of Austin Design Commission