RECOMMENDATION TO COUNCIL

Design Commission

Recommendation Number: 20261026-002: Future Role for the City of Austin Design Commission and Commitment to Quality Urban Design in the City of Austin

Date of Approval: 10/26/2026

Recommendation 01: Revision to City Code

The Design Commission recommends that Austin City Council rename and redesignate the Design Commission as the Urban Design Commission.

Description of Recommendation to Council:

- *Amend The Code of the City of Austin Title 2, Chapter 2.1 - City boards, Article 2-1-130 to revise all instances of "Design Commission" to "Urban Design Commission"; Amend bylaws to revise all instances of "Design Commission" to "Urban Design Commission"*

Recommendation 02: Revision to Commission Bylaws

The Design Commission recommends the following revisions to the bylaws governing the Commission; Recommendations include:

1. ***Rename the Commission to the "Urban Design Commission";***
2. ***Simplify and clarify purview by shifting from discretionary to mandatory review;*** *Bylaw amendments would require applicable projects to come before the Urban Design Commission before their respective Planning or Zoning and Platting Commission hearings and require projects be presented to City Council and Land Use Commissions with Urban Design Commission recommendation attached. Existing code and criteria manual language would be updated to reflect name change and remove any existing language related to the current Design*

Commission's review of Downtown Density Bonus Program projects for compliance with the Urban Design Guidelines;

3. ***Clarify purpose and duties of the Commission, define mandatory referral items;*** *Bylaws would state that the Urban Design Commission is the City's advisory body of record on urban design outcomes citywide and define projects having specific issues of urban design as as mandatory referral items, generally including: major investments on city-owned land, major efforts impacting street design, land development code amendments in geographies with a multi-modal focus, and customized regulatory tools for special areas, as defined in the bylaws redline below.*

We recommend that Council revise the Design Commission bylaws as follows:

Article 1- NAME.
The name of the board is ~~Design Commission~~ Urban Design Commission.

Rational: *Support clarity and broader understanding of the Commission's role and duties. Shed the Commission's association with project-level 'design review board' functions. This association is no longer appropriate following (1) the replacement of substantial-compliance review under the Urban Design Guidelines with compliance under the Downtown Density Bonus Program Urban Design Standards, and (2) the elimination of the Commission's role in reviewing individual Downtown Density Bonus Program projects.*

(Conforming references should be updated in City Code Chapter 2-1, the Land Development Code, Downtown Density Bonus Program materials, and criteria manuals.)

Article 2- PURPOSE AND DUTIES.
A) The Commission is the City's advisory body of record on urban design outcomes citywide. As such, the commission shall provide advisory recommendations to the city council ~~as requested by the city council~~ to assist in developing public policy, to support interdisciplinary and interdepartmental coordination in furtherance of City plans and priorities, and to promote excellence in the design and development of the ~~urban~~ built environment.

Rational: *This change clarifies that Design Commission review shifts from discretionary to mandatory referral, and expands the Commission's purpose to leverage urban design expertise for interdisciplinary and interdepartmental benefit in support of City plans and priorities. "Urban environment" is replaced with "built*

environment" to clarify that the Commission's purpose extends beyond the Central City District.

B) The commission shall:
   (1) Offer policy recommendations regarding specific issues of urban design.
   (2) Participate in developing design guidelines and urban design standards
   (3) Review approved Density Bonus Program projects on a quarterly basis to monitor the outcomes of Urban Design Standards and identify any necessary amendments to support high-quality urban design outcomes.

Rational: *Downtown Density Bonus Program projects now must demonstrate compliance with Urban Design Standards rather than Urban Design Guidelines. As advisory stewards of urban design, the Commission should also be a primary stakeholder in adopting and amending urban design standards citywide. Additionally, regular monitoring of bonus program development projects ensures an accelerated feedback loop necessary for long construction timelines, whereby the Commission can inform Council of shortcomings well before projects are built and the issues are widespread. Urban Design Guidelines remain the relevant tool for guiding public plans, programs, and projects, and the Commission should continue to develop them and use them as a basis for their review.*

   (4) Review, study, and make recommendations to the Planning Commission, Zoning and Platting Commission, and City Council on:
   ~~Unless otherwise directed by the city council, for projects that require the approval of the Planning Commission or the Zoning and Platting Commission:~~
      (i) Plans, master plans, and major improvements on City-owned land. "Major improvements" are considered to be a project or series of projects with total construction costs of $2,000,000 or greater.
      ~~Review a project only after a formal request by the project sponsor or applicant; and~~
      (ii) Plans, programs, and projects with a material impact on the design of the public right-of-way, including major capital improvements in the right-of-way and updates or modifications to the Austin Strategic Mobility Plan (ASMP) Street Network Table and Map. "Major capital improvements" include street reconstruction and rehabilitation projects, and any project involving 300 linear feet or more of excavation. Where "material impact" is unclear, the Chair shall determine applicability.
      (iii) Land Development Code (adoption and amendment), area plans (adoption and amendment), and City programs and projects affecting the following geographies:
         (i) transit station areas;
         (ii) major transit corridors; and
         (iii) the Central City District planning area.

(iv) Regulating Plans, Tax Increment Reinvestment Zones, and Planned Unit Developments (adoption and amendment).

~~(v) Complete the review before the respective Planning or Zoning and Platting Commission takes final action;~~

(5) Complete the review before the respective Planning Commission, Zoning and Platting Commission, City Council, or administrative approving authority as applicable, takes final action.

Rational: *Changing Design Commission review from discretionary to mandatory referral is necessary to ensure the appropriate projects are seen by the Commission and that Land Use Commissions and Council have the benefit of this Commission's expertise, analysis, and recommendations. These bodies have extensive case loads and are often not positioned to perform these analyses independently or analyze each agenda item to determine which should be referred to the Urban Design Commission. This proposed list of mandatory referral items systematizes this referral to remove that burden from Council and Land Use Commissions. The intent is that Council and Land Use Commissions can assume that agenda items which directly impact urban design issues will be heard by and come with a recommendation from the Urban Design Commission in the same way that they can rely on the Urban Transportation Commission's review on transportation related agenda items.*

Motioned By: Commissioner Wittstruck

Seconded By: Commissioner Salinas
Vote: 6-0
For: 6

Kevin Howard, Vice Chair

David Carroll

Josue Meiners

Jon Salinas

Brendan Wittstruck

Nkiru Gelles

Against: 0
Abstain: 0
Off the dais: 0
Absent: 5

Marissa McKinney, Chair

Ramachandra "Rao" Aradhyula

Saira Khan

Conners Ladner

Evgenia "Jenny" Murkes

Attest:

Vice Chair, Kevin Howard