

STAFF REPORT

TO: Planning & Economic Development Committee **DATE:** 1/26/16

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SUBJECT: Options for Reviewing and Adopting the Downtown Design Review Guidelines

Summary

A staff briefing that outlines Council's interest in adopting the Downtown Design Review Guidelines and amending them to ensure greater outcomes that protect and enhance community character.

Background

At its December 8, 2015 meeting, the City Council directed staff to review the current Downtown Design Review Guidelines and to consider a number of options to implement those guidelines. These options included potential adoption of the current design guidelines, designating an historic overlay or conservation area, or a more robust architectural review as part of the development review process in Downtown Asheville. At the meeting, Council expressed the following:

- ensure quality new construction that balances quality contemporary design with sensitivity to historic context
- determine strategies to implement components of the Historic Preservation Master Plan
- enhance the preservation of older historic buildings
- consider ways to strengthen compliance with the design guidelines, while continuing to allow and encourage creativity in design
- adopt the design review guidelines so that larger projects following a conditional zoning process for example, can be evaluated for compliance with adopted plans
- compare guidelines from other cities and evaluate their programs to provide additional analysis, recommendations and best practices

In addition, there are recommendations to study areas of downtown to enhance compatibility for new construction and strategies to protect historic structures that are recommended by the Historic Preservation Master Plan approved in 2015. The Downtown Master Plan also recommends strengthening downtown's identity as a series of distinct neighborhoods, including enhancing existing neighborhoods and shaping emerging areas through land use, scale, access, views, parks and architecture that reinforces downtown's tradition of beautiful and innovative design.

Review and Analysis

Elements of the Downtown Design Review Guidelines were drafted as a part of the Unified Development Ordinance (UDO) amendments that were required with the adoption of the Downtown Master Plan (in 2009). The UDO drafting and the text for the guidelines took nearly a year to complete. Several members of the Downtown Commission, architects, a member of the Historic Resources Commission and other community stakeholders participated in this effort. Council adopted the UDO amendments pertaining to the Central Business District (CBD) in 2010 and the Downtown Commission approved the guidelines in the same year. However, the current guidelines lack graphics, photos and images that would typically help developers, architects, city staff, City Council, other boards and commissions and the public visualize the intent and purpose of the guidelines. Furthermore, many of the design guidelines were not codified and

were not adopted by City Council. As a result, proposed projects in the CBD are required to review the Downtown Design Review Guidelines but are not required to comply with them.

The guidelines are formatted to reiterate all of the CBD code requirements and provide associated recommendations that enhance compatibility of new development and improve the functioning of the streetscape and the character of the area. Aside from the UDO requirements, the guidelines are recommendations and are not codified because they may not be appropriate based in every situation or may not be reasonable for all parcels due to lot size or other specific conditions in downtown. There are 80 recommendations within the guidelines that cover a wide variety of suggestions from materials used for new construction to the organization of building bays and window spacing.

Staff offers the following options for consideration:

1. Adopt the Downtown Design Review Guidelines as written so that projects that are following the conditional zoning or conditional use permit process may be considered and evaluated for compliance with adopted plans. This could be considered a phase one of a greater more holistic effort if Council should choose to proceed in this way. The Downtown Design Review Guidelines graphics may be updated as a separate effort by staff that would not need Council approval.
2. Review the design guidelines and reconsider recommendations to understand if any can be codified as part of the CBD standards in the UDO. This effort can be augmented with additional consideration of other goals identified in the Downtown Master Plan, such as to identify and define neighborhood character areas and determine if specific guidelines are appropriate to them.

In addition, the Historic Preservation Master Plan provided a variety of strategies to enhance historic preservation within the downtown area and ensure that new development is compatible within the neighborhood in which it is proposed. This could also be considered in a more enhanced study to improve the relevance of the design guidelines.

This option is currently identified in the Planning & Urban Design Department's enhanced budget scenario for FY 2016-2017, which, if approved, includes the hiring of a consultant to assist city staff in the review of the current design guidelines and preparation of amendments to the guidelines. Under this option, the consultant and staff would work with the design review committee of the Downtown Commission to review the guidelines. Following the study, the guidelines can be adopted by Council as noted in option one above.

Financial Impact/Resources

Staff anticipates that option one to adopt the existing guidelines could be completed using current staff resources over a period of seven to 10 months.

Option two to review the guidelines more holistically with consideration of other goals identified in the Downtown Master Plan and the Historic Preservation Master Plan will take more time and would likely require the hiring of a consultant so that other current department initiatives, such as the Comprehensive Plan update and River Arts District Form Based Code, remain on target in 2016 and 2017. The anticipated timeframe for this option would be 12 to 18 months.

Recommendation

Staff is seeking Council's guidance in moving forward with one of the proposed options.

Attachment:

(1) Downtown Design Review Guidelines