

Summary of October Working Groups

In early October, 2012 the City hosted three working group meetings to review preliminary strategy options for addressing identified objectives and issues in the neighborhoods. The meetings included a mixed group of Eastside and Westside residents as well as industry professionals in real estate, construction and architecture who have worked in the neighborhoods. There were about 45 total working group participants.

The October working group discussion was built on the results of the earlier September working groups. September working group participants reviewed a wide range of potential tools in three categories:

- Education/Communication Tools
- Process/Administration Tools
- Design Standards/Regulatory Tools

Participants in the September groups indicated that several specific tools were most appropriate for further evaluation to address the issues that were initially identified by City Council and then explored further in Phase 1 of the this project. Those tools were presented in the October working groups. Participants then worked together to discuss and comment on strategy options for using the tools.

This document provides a brief summary of the overall discussion themes and more specific comments on each strategy option reviewed in the October working groups. Note that it was not anticipated that all of the strategy options or associated tools would be combined into a single package. While some tools could be combined, others address similar issues and would not be used together. See “Next Steps” on page 8 for more information.

Overall Discussion Themes

Although working group participants expressed a diversity of opinions, a number of general themes emerged from the discussion of strategy options, including:

1. **Process and education tools received the broadest support.** Most participants supported tools to raise awareness and promote compatible design through education and process tools such as:
 - » Increasing awareness of design assistance available from the City
 - » Developing design guidelines or a pattern book
 - » Extending notification programs
2. **Many participants felt that new or adjusted design standards may be necessary.** Many (but not all) participants felt that one or more design standards would be necessary to fully address identified issues. They are:
 - » Adjust measurement of building height at the side yard setback
 - » Consider adjusting FAR standards and/or FAR measurement (if solar access is not specifically addressed)
 - » Consider addressing the character of the front façade, including front porches
 - » Consider building wall articulation/building massing standards (if FAR is not addressed)
 - » Consider addressing solar access (if FAR standards are not addressed)
3. **Some tools in the preliminary strategy options may not be effective.** Participants felt that some of the tools discussed would not sufficiently address identified issues, or would be overly restrictive (note that some participants did support using these tools, however). They are:
 - » Provide for LPC comment on variances
 - » Consider implementing a neighborhood conservation district program
4. **Some participants continue to feel that no action is necessary.** It is also important to note that several participants felt that a "no change" or "limited change" option would be most appropriate.

Discussion on Strategy Options

Following the presentation on preliminary strategy options, working group participants discussed and provided feedback on each alternative tool. Comments on each tool are summarized below.

1. *Increase Awareness of the City's Design Assistance Program*

Based on feedback received in Phase 1 of the project and the September Working Group sessions, participants discussed an option to increase awareness of the City's current design assistance program.

Most working group participants supported this option, although some felt that it would not have a significant impact on homes that appear to be out of character with their surrounding because they are overly large or tall.

Comments included:

- Outreach should ensure awareness among realtors and builders
- Need to ensure that the program is not too bureaucratic
- Also need to increase awareness of the rehabilitation loan program
- Should be promoted in concert with development of design guidelines

2. *Develop Design Guidelines or A Pattern Book*

Based on feedback received in Phase 1 of the project and the September Working Group sessions, participants discussed an option to develop advisory design guidelines or a pattern book to promote compatible development in unique character areas throughout the neighborhoods.

Most working group participants supported this option.

Comments included:

- Should be integrated into the process of getting a building permit
- Link guidelines to the design assistance program
- Needs to be heavily marketed
- Should be considered for mandatory application to projects exceeding a specific FAR threshold

3. Extend Notification of Variances and/or Proposed New Construction

Based on feedback received in Phase 1 of the project and the September Working Group sessions, participants discussed an option to extend neighborhood notification of variance requests or planned new construction exceeding a specific Floor Area Ratio (FAR) threshold to allow for comment on pending changes in the neighborhoods.

Most working group participants supported extending notification for larger projects, but many felt that it should not delay permitting processes, and that further evaluation of potential comment opportunity was necessary.

Comments included:

- Posting a sign would be most effective
- Building plans should be available for neighborhood review
- Consider hosting a neighborhood meeting to record comments
- May not be meaningful if neighbor concerns aren't addressed
- May create unrealistic expectations
- Should not slow down the permitting process
- May not be necessary if maximum FAR was reduced or other standards tightened
- Find a way to encourage notification without requiring

4. Adjust Measurement of Building Height at the Minimum Side Yard Setback

Based on feedback received in Phase 1 of the project and the September Working Group sessions, participants discussed an option to adjust the measurement method for building height at the side yard setback to measure height from the natural grade at the interior side lot line directly adjacent to the wall.

Most working group participants supported adjusting side building height measurement, although some felt that it would be overly restrictive and/or needed additional evaluation.

Other frequent comments included:

- The current system includes a large loophole that this adjustment would fix
- Need to consider that raising the grade is sometimes required (up to about 18" in some flood plain areas) and owners shouldn't be penalized for such requirements
- The amount that grade may be raised should be capped
- Need to evaluate potential impact on sloping lots
- The implications of this change may be too complicated to move forward quickly
- This option does not directly address drainage, which is also an issue

5. *Expand Front Entry Standards*

Based on feedback received in Phase 1 of the project and the September Working Group sessions, participants discussed an option to expand front entry standards. This would encourage a roofed porch on the front facade of two-story structures rather than a simple landing or portico to ensure that new construction is pedestrian-oriented and steps down in scale towards the street.

Many working group participants felt that this option had merit but that it should be further refined to better address context (including contexts where porches are not traditional) and allow for a greater range of design options to encourage pedestrian-scale façades. Others felt that porches or one-story elements would not help make overly large building compatible with their context.

Other frequent comments included:

- Should apply only to larger new construction
- Needs to allow for a wide range of designs that meet the objective
- Should address the overall character of the front façade rather than just porches and one-story elements
- Should be implemented as an incentive (consider allowing a greater encroachment into the front setback)
- Any application should be citywide
- This option addresses an issue that isn't as critical as some others (including overall mass and scale and houses that loom over their neighbors)

6. *Consider Building Wall Articulation/Building Massing Standards*

Based on feedback received in Phase 1 of the project and the September Working Group sessions, participants discussed an option to promote articulation of longer two-story walls to break down the apparent mass and scale of new construction exceeding a specific FAR threshold (for example, wall articulation/building massing standards could apply only to new construction exceeding an FAR of 0.35).

Many working group participants supported standards to address building mass, although some felt that it would not sufficiently address buildings that are too massive in relation to their neighbors or the neighborhood.

Other frequent comments included:

- This should be incentivized
- Big is big
- May not be as effective as adjusting FAR standards

7. Consider Addressing Solar Access

Based on feedback received in Phase 1 of the project and the September Working Group sessions, participants discussed an option to review whether specific solar access standards may be needed.

Many working group participants supported considering solar access.

Comments included:

- Solar access issue is economic rather than aesthetic
- Should consider linking standards to an FAR threshold
- The existing building height/side setback standard already addresses solar access
- Link guidelines to the design assistance program
- Needs to be heavily marketed
- Should be considered for mandatory application to projects exceeding a specific FAR threshold

8. Consider Adjusting Base FAR Standards

Based on feedback received in Phase 1 of the project and the September Working Group sessions, participants discussed an option to consider FAR adjustments including a potential sliding scale.

Many working group participants supported this concept, but others were concerned that FAR adjustments would unduly restrict design flexibility or create controversy.

Comments included:

- Sometimes buildings really are “just too big” to fit in
- A sliding scale should be considered
- FAR adjustments are not a good fix

9. Consider Adjusting Measurement of FAR Standards

Based on feedback received in Phase 1 of the project and the September Working Group sessions, participants discussed an option to “close loopholes” in FAR measurement that allow for the construction of large volume spaces that are counted the same as rooms with a typical ceiling height.

Many working group participants supported this option.

Comments included:

- Need to count high volume spaces in FAR
- Need to count very large porches in FAR

10. *Provide for LPC Comment on Variances*

Based on feedback received in Phase 1 of the project and the September Working Group sessions, participants discussed an option that applications for variances to FAR or building height standards be reviewed by the Landmark Preservation Commission (The LPC would provide a non-binding recommendation).

Some participants supported this option, but others felt it could unnecessarily slow the process and create controversy.

Comments included:

- Should apply only to specific variances or projects over a specific threshold
- Should not be required if neighbors do not object
- The ability to get variances should be tightened in general
- Concern that the LPC is not impartial

11. *Consider Implementing a Neighborhood Conservation District Program*

Based on feedback received in Phase 1 of the project and the September Working Group sessions, participants discussed an option to evaluate a conservation district tool that could implement highly context-specific design standards in neighborhood areas with unique attributes such as mostly one-story buildings or especially small lots.

Some working group participants supported a potential conservation district tool, but others felt that it would be too difficult to implement and would not address issues in a timely manner.

Comments included:

- Needs more definition
- The City would need to provide tools to support neighborhoods hoping to create a conservation district
- Presumes more homogeneity than actually exists
- Must be voluntary

Other Feedback

Participants also provided a range of other feedback that was not specific to the preliminary strategy options.

Comments included:

- The strategy options were not sufficiently linked to identified issues or earlier project process
- Giving builders, realtors and developers equal status with residents as 'stakeholders' in the neighborhoods is skewing the input
- Meetings should be kept on time and presentations should be limited

Next Steps

The strategy options discussed in the October working groups will be further evaluated refined based on working group feedback. Those that merit further discussion will be included in a draft strategy report. The report and its associated recommendations will be presented and discussed at a neighborhood workshop on November 5, 2012 and included in an online visual survey. Workshop and survey feedback will be a key factor in determining which options are included in a final strategy report for City Council. Based on Council direction at a November 27, 2012 work session, some tools may be developed for formal consideration in public hearings.