

Notes from October 16th joint meeting of the Landmarks-PSC Work Group

Attendees

Historic Landmarks Commission: Kristin Minor, Matthew Roman, Wendy Chung

PSC: Katherine Schultz, Teresa St. Martin, Eli Spevak

BDS staff: Hillary Adam, Kara Fioravanti, Megan Walker

BPS staff: Tom Armstrong, Brandon Spencer-Hartle, Bill Cunningham

The focus of this meeting was to discuss Better Housing by Design proposals to allow development bonuses and FAR transfers to be used in multi-dwelling zones located within historic or conservation districts.

Comments from Historic Landmarks commissioners:

- An important consideration in reviewing proposals for new development in historic districts is context, and having new buildings fit into this context.
- Whether or not a proposal includes affordable units as part of a development bonus does not figure into historic review.
- If the bonus development scale, or even base development allowances, do not meet context-related review criteria, Landmarks may not approve the proposal. Providing zoning code allowances for development scale that is too large for the context puts the commission into a difficult position.
- In some cases, some historic districts are over-zoned to begin with, even without development bonuses.
- Affordability is not just about density and scale.
- Concerned about greater development allowances leading to increased demolitions.
- Historic districts, including within the Central City, have existing affordable housing – historic districts are not counter to affordable housing.
- Key issue with providing FAR/scale allowances that are too big is that they can be reduced by the Landmarks Commission.
- There is a need for family-sized units, not just small units.
- Regarding the 100' allowance in small portions of the RM4 zone (such as southern edge of the Alphet Historic District), need to look at the context of this area to see if it would be appropriate.
- Need more incentives for retaining existing buildings (staff indicated that transfers of development rights from historic properties are one of the reduced number of ways of gaining additional development scale, and that transfers are proposed to be allowed citywide [except Central City]).

Comments from PSC commissioners:

- There is an equity issue in not being able to use bonuses for things like affordable housing in historic districts, which are typically in affluent areas.
- Concerned about the additional process and unpredictability involved with affordable housing projects in historic districts.
- Interest in updating the Historic Resources Inventory (current historic districts do not reflect the resources located more broadly across the city) and potentially having historic districts in areas further from the Central City – Historic Landmarks commissioners agree with the need for an HRI update and additional historic districts.
- Can't context be addressed by hiding development bulk from being viewed from the street, so that buildings larger than nearby existing development can be approved?
- The proposed development bonuses may not work well if there is a low probability that they can be used in historic districts. Providing predictability and setting clear expectations for developers is important.
- Idea for compromise approach: decrease scale allowances in historic districts, but make it more predictable that this scale can be achieved (with less discretion to deny the development scale allowances).
- Consider allowing FAR bonuses and transfers in historic districts, but not allowing increases in allowed building height (staff also raised the idea of allowing the deeper affordable bonus in the lower-scale zones, but not in the RM4 zone).

Key take aways and next steps:

- Landmarks commissioners are concerned about the proposals (especially for the larger-scale RM4 zone) allowing more development scale than could be approved through historic review, and are also concerned that increased development allowances could lead to demolitions of historic resources.
- PSC commissioners are concerned about denying the use of development bonuses, especially for affordable housing, in historic districts (especially since they are located in close-in, high-amenity areas), and would like more predictability in achieving development scale.
- Members of both commissions are interested in the idea of a future project that could “right size” zoning in historic districts, while providing more predictability in achieving development allowances.
- PSC will discuss the historic district development allowances during their work session on November 13th.
- BPS staff will look into alternative approaches to balancing priorities related to historic districts and development allowances for PSC consideration. This could also draw from Central City approaches that provide incentives for transfers of development rights from properties with historic resources.