

2021-05-12

Good afternoon Mayor and Commissioners,

Thank you for inviting the Portland Design Commission to testify about the DOZA Recommended Draft.

Portlanders care deeply about the evolution of our city and its neighborhoods. So too do Sandra Wood, Phil Nameny, and Lora Lillard from the Bureau of Planning and Sustainability and Kara Fioravanti and Staci Monroe from the Bureau of Development Services. The Design Commission thanks them for their years of guidance, collaboration, and hard work on the DOZA project.

The Design Commission embarked on this project with just 3 goals.

THE FIRST was to clarify and simplify the guidelines used outside the central city in a manner that would benefit all parties involved in design review.

The recommended Portland Citywide Design Guidelines accomplish this goal:

- They align with the 2035 Comprehensive Plan and focus on “a city designed for people” and “a city built in harmony with nature”;
- They are organized around the three tenets of design—context, public realm, and quality & resilience;
- And they recognize that Portland’s neighborhoods are not static and that an appropriate contextual response considers the past, the present, and the future. This is particularly relevant given the typical pace of redevelopment.

OUR SECOND GOAL was to build on the joint efforts of the Commission and staff to address diversity, equity, and inclusion in the guidelines and the review process.

The new guidelines clearly acknowledge DEI and other values-based policies of the Comp Plan, like resiliency.

We have also worked to make the review process more accessible to all members of our community. This is important because the “d” overlay is the growth management tool Portland uses to foster meaningful community engagement and long term livability around our neighborhood centers that have felt so many growing pains in the recent past. This is a very small percentage of land, but the character of our neighborhoods matters to all of us. And so,

- We developed a charter, changed meeting management style, implemented regular trainings for commissioners and staff, and aligned the review process with the development team's design process;
- And we renovated our communications to increase understanding of and participation in design review. This means better availability of materials, better site postings, and now renters—not just property owners—are included in mailings.

OUR THIRD GOAL was consistent outcomes for both discretionary design review and objective standards.

A subcommittee of the PSC and the Design Commission worked with staff to correlate the two tracks. This effort was largely successful, but through this exercise we learned that there will never be true parity between standards and guidelines, and so Design Commission asks Council to reconsider five code amendments.

FIRSTLY, make Parks and Open Spaces subject to the same thresholds for review as all other development proposals. Commissioner Brian McCarter will address this during public testimony.

SECONDLY, maintain discretionary design review for buildings in the “d” overlay that are 55 feet tall. PSC is recommending a 36% increase—to 75 feet. This hearing is the first opportunity for the public to comment on this issue, and its content and roll out contravene the goals and policies of the Community Involvement Chapter of the Comp Plan and the 2016 deal Council brokered with people who live and work around our neighborhood centers when Council gave them a voice in the projects proposed in their neighborhoods in exchange for greater height and floor area allowances in the zoning code. Commissioner Jessica Molinar will speak to this during public testimony.

THIRDLY, we ask you to restore the Type III review for affordable housing developments in the “d” overlay. This is an equity issue. Households that live in buildings that receive public funding should benefit from the same level of public discourse that informs, improves, and validates the design of all other buildings in the neighborhood. If you want to save money and time for affordable housing developers, look to the expense and timeline necessary to secure a construction permit. Commissioner Chandra Robinson will speak to this during public testimony.

FOURTHLY, we ask you to incentivize better building massing. This is an acute need outside the central city. Design Commission doesn't have the authority to reduce a building's height or

floor area and a building form that maximizes both—the frequent result of proforma constraints—leaves no room for finessing a building’s massing into a sympathetic response to sensitive existing conditions. Design Commission’s ability to award a discretionary height bonus will allow an applicant to use all available floor area and make design decisions that respond to context.

FIFTHLY, we ask you to simply add the professional disciplines of Sustainable Building Practices and Natural Resources Management to the list of qualifications for commission membership. Don’t make these seats mandatory. Design Commission is a significant time commitment and more restrictions make it harder for people with full-time jobs and kids to volunteer. The same goes for people who don’t have a background in a specified field but do have relevant lived experience and an interest in serving.

I’d like to close with a thought about the cost and time involved in the design review process. Critics have focused on this red herring issue on and off for the entire 40 years the City of Portland has performed design review. I’ve been on both sides of the dais, and it’s my experience that the cost is a fraction of a percent of the overall project cost and the timeline sits comfortably within the development team’s design process. And though unwilling participants cry foul, willing participants approach design review with enthusiasm and the certain knowledge that discussion in this public forum will yield better results for the residents of the building, the neighborhood, and the City.

Thank you very much,

Julie Livingston
Portland Design Commission, Chair