



City of Portland, Oregon
Bureau of Development Services
Land Use Services

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MEMORANDUM

Date: April 24, 2013
To: Alex Bejarano
From: Kara Fioravanti, Senior City Planner – Urban Design
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Re: April 18, 2013 Briefing at the Portland Design Commission
Private Utility Vaults in the Public Right-of-Way (ROW)

This memo summarizes the Portland Design Commission direction provided at the April 18, 2013 briefing on Private Utility Vaults in the Public ROW.

- The discussion started out with a Commissioner asking for clarification – “What is the problem with allowing private utilities in the public ROW?”
- Unanimous support from the Commission about engaging the utility companies earlier in the land use process to coordinate the utility demands of the building and possible locations for the equipment/vaults. The pre-application conference was noted as the right time to start coordinating between the applicant, the City and the utility company. BDS LUS staff is already working to include the correct utility contacts in all notifications.
- The Commission was unanimous about the ROW being the right location for private utilities. Specific comments provided included: “I have no problems with vaults in the ROW,” and “I would rather walk on a vault than walk by one in a building.” The solutions presented in the powerpoint (Pearl Enso and Pearl Safeway) were not embraced by the Commission as ideal locations.
- The Commission did not support the use of words that have a negative connotation in the new policy, such as “discouraged”. The Commission specifically asked that the new policy not use language that precludes the ROW as a viable option for equipment.
- The Commission questioned why a new process (Design Exception) is even necessary after PBOT staff noted, “generally a Design Exception would not be a ‘no’”. Are more processes needed?
- One Commissioner noted vault interference with street trees should not be an issue since the ideal vault location is closer to the building than the furnishing zone.
- The Commission agreed with comment from BDS staff that the cost of the lease should be reasonable so that locating a vault in the ROW is a viable economic solution. The cost of the lease should not be too high such that placing vaults in the public ROW becomes discouraged by default. It was suggested that PBOT consult with developers in town on a reasonable fee.
- When considering possible locations within a building, consolidate back-of-house functions such that a vault room isn’t in addition to the other back-of-house functions. Two examples were noted: (1) if a vault is to be within a building, locate the equipment below-grade, access it from a 6’ x 8’ vault lid that is within the required loading dock, and ensure that there is 3’ clear around the 6’ x 8’ vault lid, and (2) if an at-grade open courtyard is included in a proposal, a discreet out-of-the way vault lid could be incorporated into the space (BDS staff notes that design guidelines still need to be met for a courtyard location, so a courtyard lid cannot detract from a quality landscape design).
- The preferred material for vault lids is the surface of the surrounding sidewalk (i.e. concrete or brick). Even still, Commissioners were more in favor of metal lids than having prime ground level square footage inside a building given over to a utility room.