



Bureau of Planning and Sustainability

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MEMO

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TO: Portland Design Commission

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SUBJECT: **West Portland Town Center Plan - East African Community Placemaking Focus Group Summary**

The purpose of this memorandum is to share feedback heard during the Placemaking Focus Group with members of the East African community in West Portland Park, on December 4, 2021. The Design Commission work session on December 9 will include time for discussion on this event.

OVERVIEW

On December 4, 2021, the Bureau of Planning and Sustainability (BPS) and Humanitarian Assistance with Kindness and Interculturalism (HAKI) Community Organization co-hosted a focus group to discuss placemaking within the town center and hear more specific feedback as related to elements of the West Portland Town Center (WPTC) character statement. The event was held at HAKI's headquarters in southwest Portland. In attendance were 15 community members, representing a broad range of ages, of the town center's East African community. HAKI provided interpretation (in Swahili) to ensure all participants were able to contribute.

The conversation was organized around the five most common themes heard during community engagement, testimony and Commission discussions: street activation, open space, public art, water features, multi-cultural architecture/urban design. This focus group was an opportunity to explore these topics more deeply and strengthen guidance within the character statement.

WHAT WE HEARD

Discussion of each of the five themes included a variety of inspirational images and a prompting question or observation. Participants were asked to share their observations, likes, dislikes and desires for future development for each theme. Below are the themes and a summary of what we heard for each:

1. **Street Activation.** General support was expressed for:
 - a. Large operable windows, both at the ground floor and upper stories.
 - b. Preference for more openness and hardscape adjacent to buildings with generous weather protection and space for people to walk (either more generous setbacks or shared streets)
 - c. Seating areas designed for families and young children with spaces to park strollers and bikes
 - d. Storefronts/spaces which provide room for outdoor seating
 - e. Inclusion of quiet and intimate spaces to talk to friends/neighbors
 - f. Less landscaping and more plaza-like conditions at entrances to street facing, ground floor residential units.

2. **Open Space.** General support was expressed for:
 - a. Multi-purpose and multi-functional plaza spaces with spaces for playground and market stalls
 - b. Pedestrian courtyards/pathways within developments that offer landscaping and seating
 - c. Locating courtyard spaces between buildings with a variety of seating options for different intimate groups
 - d. Not too much color, prefer more neutral tones with smaller pops of color
 - e. Places for kids to play hopscotch and jacks (free-form) with hardscape rather than playground equipment.
 - f. Balconies or outdoor space to provide ventilation from cooking.
 - g. Outdoor storage areas to avoid balconies being used as storage.

3. **Public Art.** General support was expressed for:
 - a. Murals but preferably of nature (landscapes -beaches/trees/water- of places left behind in East Africa), objects with cultural meaning or abstract art. Representing specific people/historic figures was less culturally relevant/meaningful/acceptable.
 - b. Sculpture but in the form of usable elements like playground structures, benches, signage, etc. Also, having the spaces themselves be “art”.

4. **Water Features.** This topic generated an enthusiastic discussion. General support was expressed for:
 - a. Shallow reflective pools with seating around the edges, providing reprieve from heat.
 - b. Water features with colorful, playful elements for kids, like splash pads. More splash pads!
 - c. Interactive waterfalls with space for kids. (Jamison Square was referenced here.)

- d. Functional elements, allowing for things such as drinking fountains for people (and dogs too).
5. Multi-Cultural Architecture and Urban Design. General support was expressed for:
- a. Use of architectural screens (lattice/trellis/mashrabiya) and transparent material to provide shade but also usable outdoor space in the rain/winter.
 - b. Communal kitchen, places to cook and share food
 - c. Spaces for small businesses, including food carts
 - d. A shared space with different booths and vendors surrounding a central sheltered open space for gathering
 - e. Showcasing foreign language lettering/quotes (showed Arabic example) and including the English translation in the same space.
 - f. More indoor spaces to allow community activities during the winter (references to Fubon in SE Portland)
 - g. Covered seating areas, like the gazebo in Bridgeport, for sitting/eating after shopping
 - h. Preference for taller, mixed-use buildings with adjacent open space, rather than low rise

Note: A big subject of discussion for this topic was what everyone imagined when they heard the words “multi-cultural design”. The responses focused not so much on an architectural style or elements, but more on how spaces should be designed for communal and multi-generational gathering to help maintain community and cultural connections. There was a strong desire to showcase their culture within the broader WPTC community and learn about the culture of others who also lived in the area. Explaining that their culture and community has strong multi-generational roles and relationships, they underscored a desire for communal spaces designed to be both accessible and flexible, serving multiple uses and users.

NEXT STEPS

Staff recommends that feedback gathered at this focus group be integrated into the draft WPTC Character Statement to help strengthen the Community Character and Architecture and Urban Design Character sections.

For example, the feedback received about water features can be used provide more nuance to the Community Character section, 3rd Bullet (Language removed shown with ~~strikethrough~~ and new language is underlined):

- Integrating water features, within ~~the design of sites~~ sites, that are designed to recognize the Islamic community, offer reprieve from the heat and serve young children and families. Features to consider include shallow reflective pools or waterfalls with seating, and interactive and functional water features, like splashpads and drinking fountains. Often found in Islamic gardens and public spaces, these would recognize the area’s Islamic communities while also offering a reprieve from the impact of the area’s urban heat island.

We look forward to reviewing this content and discussing these ideas with you at the Work Session on December 9. In the meantime, please feel free to reach out if you have any questions.