



Cultural Overlay District Advisory Committee

MEETING SUMMARY, March 27, 2009

Committee members present: Randy Engstrom, Jerry Everard, Pat Graney, Doug Ito, Hallie Kuperman, Matthew Kwatinetz, Fidelma McGinn, Richard Muhlebach, Jim Reinhardtsen, Michael Seiwerath, Robert Sondheim, Cathryn Vandenbrink, Paige Weinheimer

City of Seattle attendees: Rebecca Herzfeld (City Council central staff), Michael Killoren (Office of Arts and Cultural Affairs)

Consultant staff: Kjristine Lund, Dennis Sellin

1. Review meeting summary from March 13 meeting

The meeting began at 11:00 am.

The meeting notes from March 13 were reviewed and approved, without comment.

2. Discussion: committee members' recommendations proposal

A draft proposal, prepared by three members of the committee, was circulated for comment between the previous meeting and now. All members of the committee offered comments or other review, and comments have been incorporated into the draft¹ presented for review today by the entire committee.

Presentation

This latest proposal puts the issues into context and frames the discussion, identifying arts and culture as the driver of commerce in this neighborhood. The proposal looks back to CODAC's core issues and vision; the loss of the Odd Fellows Hall was the catalyst that energized the arts community and the public, but it is not the only issue that arts and culture face: Seattle's livability as a city that attracts and keeps creative people is at risk. Like other over-successful cities, the math does not work for arts and cultural groups to remain in their old homes. Development and higher-priced demand is driving these uses away. Other cities in North America and Europe are facing the same issues, so it is a universal problem.

We envision a city of neighborhoods with cultural districts: the districts are organic ecosystems, embracing a diversity of people and a diversity of uses (as reflected by the diversity of this committee) with arts and culture as the economic driver of the district.

There are four key recommendation concepts included in the proposal:

- Creation of cultural districts.

¹ see appendix A of the proposal.

- Provision of incentives to encourage or retain arts and cultural uses.
- Mechanisms for financing projects.
- Staffing to oversee the development and implementation of cultural districts.

The most significant thing about this proposal is that, instead of moving away from something that we do not want to see happen, we are now being more proactive, and moving toward a vision of what we do want.

Admittedly, the proposal is not complete. There are two holes in it that we can identify: the process of designating a district was not fully addressed, and it was assumed that the Department of Planning and Development (DPD) could create new zoning for cultural uses. Also we are not fully able to model the results of the proposed incentives, which means that we do not know for certain if they would be attractive to developers, and would yield the results we are hoping for.

We need to look more closely at how districts are defined, the process of designation, and the possibility of a commission or advisory board.

Discussion

A committee member recommended looking at Capitol Hill Housing's (CHH) proposal for the Seattle Police East Precinct parking lot site (Twelfth Avenue north of Pine Street) as a model or test project. Additionally, there are other areas along Twelfth Avenue, Broadway, the Pike/Pine corridor, and the Sound Transit station area that could also be pilots.

A committee member noted the frequent use of the conjoined term "arts and entertainment" in the proposal, and noted that this is different from "arts and culture" as the committee had previously been using. She noted that, for the purposes of grant proposals and other funding sources, there is a very clear distinction between "arts and culture" and "entertainment." The former tends to denote non-profit organizations, while the latter is generally a for-profit business. We need consistency and clarity in our terminology; otherwise, it is confusing.

A committee member wanted to re-visit and discuss the whole notion of "cultural districts." CODAC should be encouraging the creation of cultural space, wherever and whenever it occurs. The heart of real estate development is opportunity, and opportunity cannot wait for an official designation. Therefore, what is the purpose of a bounded district? Can't any developer who wishes to include cultural space in a development take advantage of the proposed incentives? Isn't the lack of cultural space a citywide issue? Do we want to limit cultural districts to specific neighborhoods, and, if so, what are the social justice implications for leaving out neighborhoods that are not as proactive or organized around the issues of arts and culture.

There were several responses to this comment. The first notion is that districts bounded by geography create a scarcity of benefit, making the incentive more attractive to a developer. Second, CODAC is responding to areas that are under active threat, where gentrification is occurring now and forcing arts groups out of the neighborhood. Third, an incentive, such as allowing additional building height, can only be done by creating a district; it cannot be done citywide.

Also, creating a district still would allow for individual arts and culture-related capital projects to go forward, whether in or outside a district. A district gives the additional force of a critical mass of creativity within a zone, and recognizes the economic engine already

existing within that area. This, in turn, helps to focus political and stakeholder support upon a place, which is something that everyone can grasp and envision. If you lose the notion of a district, you scatter the opportunities, and dilute the impact.

Regarding the social justice issue, one of the reasons that the cultural manager position is recommended is so that a staff person would be responsible for educating and empowering neighborhoods to envision their own cultural districts.

A committee member noted that certain crucial incentives, such as up-zoning, historic preservation, and loan funds, are feasible only in a district.

The committee member with the original question noted that there are places (Washington Hall/Sons of Haiti Hall, for example) that would be outside of a district. Would this project then be excluded?

A city staff person said that, while some zoning regulations were designed to be applied in a district, individual projects outside districts could apply for waivers and receive technical assistance.

Another committee member said that that neighborhood lacks a critical mass to be a district, but that the development of that space for cultural use could be a great one-off project.

The commission or council should be citywide, and not specific to each neighborhood. That way, the most general and basic tools would be given to each district, allowing for individual districts to develop differently, depending on the characteristics of the neighborhood.

Districts with neighborhood representatives can decentralize the decision process, instead of creating top-down decision-making.

The best thing would be to embed the CODAC proposal into an existing program, such as the comprehensive plan, or neighborhood planning. This proposal needs to get into something that is up and running, and that has funding.

The critical issue, said another committee member, is to leverage existing processes. However, we still need a staff person to be the liaison to the neighborhoods.

Q: How do we remove layers from the process? Can we assign a specific number of neighborhoods to this process?

A: Perhaps we can roll out station areas first; they are the first priorities for neighborhood planning updates. Starting with Capitol Hill would be justified because this was the neighborhood that caused the creation of CODAC, and it is also undergoing station area planning right now.

A committee member stated that limiting the districts to station area overlays or urban villages could omit key areas, such as areas within the Broadway Action plan for Capitol Hill.

The facilitator commented that some neighborhoods become cultural districts not by designation, but organically: Ballard, Columbia City, Georgetown, Pike/Pine. Balancing opportunities allowed by incentives —up-zoning, for example— will be difficult in a residential neighborhood that doesn't want higher height allowances.

A committee member offered the suggestion of having citywide applicability for some incentives, and reserving other of the incentives for the designated districts.

The co-chair stated that the issue of the applicability of incentives, as well as resource allocation, are two thorny issues that need to be moved forward.

Regarding the recommendation for a staff position, Council has made clear that, if this position requires new funding, we won't get it. So perhaps we need to think about adding duties to an existing position, or the creation of a cross-departmental task force.

It would be a mistake to ask for a new hire, but it would be within reach to reallocate a position as part of a departmental reorganization.

Two final suggestions on the proposal: green and sustainability issues have not been addressed. Additionally, an "overlay" district has bad connotations for developers: it signifies another layer of paperwork and bureaucracy. Call it a "bonus" district instead.

3. Discussion: integrated draft recommendations

It is important to remember that we all have different viewpoints, and we will not get everything that we want from these recommendations. Our recommendations will not be the perfect fix, but we can say what it is we must do now. For example, we could emphasize that work by the Department of Planning and Development should start this year.

We will also need a time line, so that the program may develop incrementally.

District Concept

Regarding the recommendations, one member believes that the district concept is too narrow.

Response: First off, we are committed by Council to working on Capitol Hill. Also, there are districts where implementation could be accelerated through their involvement in other ongoing planning efforts: station areas, urban villages, and transit-oriented development.

Artist Housing

Question: Where does artist housing fit into this proposal?

Response: Current affordable-housing programs, such as those run by ArtSpace, already take advantage of the bonus programs and incentives that are available.

Question: Do we want to see those programs broadened to be more specific to artist housing?

Response: Artist housing is already allowed by existing affordable-housing programs. If we approach this issue from that perspective, we risk a backlash from housing advocates.

Comment: Some artist live-work housing does not qualify as "affordable" because of unit sizes (larger size units needed for studio space).

Temporary Space

Question: Do we wish to generate any incentives for temporary space?

Response: There is an existing ordinance that allows artist live-work space on the ground floor in transitional neighborhoods. Also, I believe the focus of CODAC's efforts is specifically for permanent space, not temporary.

Question: Temporary space could be an agenda item for immediate action.

Response: The staff person who fills the recommended position could be responsible for advocating for that. (This sentiment was seconded by another committee member.)

Green Initiatives

Question: Is there any consensus on green programs as part of our recommendations?

Response: Green building projects are more costly.

Response: There are existing general incentive programs for green initiatives.

Response: I would argue, and there is growing documentation to support this, that NOT tearing down old buildings is the greenest thing you can do.

Response: Brownfield funding programs exist now, too.

Comment: we need to find innovative ways to access these types of initiatives.

Comment: I am concerned that when we begin to connect too many dots, or throw too many programs into our mix, we begin to dilute our recommendations and add additional layers to projects.

Comment: There is room to align CODAC with economic development, transit-oriented development, and other things. Green design and building could be an element or an incentive of an arts and cultural space program, but we should avoid being prescriptive about green building code, and LEED certification, and other sustainability agenda items.

Role of Cultural District Manager

Response: The cultural district manager could be tasked with working with graduate student interns to research the history of LEED certification program, and find parallels with a potential arts and cultural space certification program.

An area where the cross-departmental staff person could be of value: All of us know that there are many arts and culture advocates and champions within City departments and agencies. The staff person could bring that energy forward.

Community Definition of Cultural Space

Regarding certifications, is there an expectation that the recommendations would include criteria for who is an “artist”, particularly when we are talking about meeting goals for cultural space.

It should be the responsibility of each neighborhood to determine who or which uses qualify, because culture is reflected differently in each neighborhood. This could be part of neighborhood planning updates.

When there is a good idea in a community, there is something organic about the way it rises to the surface and is embraced by the community. It is not necessarily bound by a definition.

If we expand the definition to include “entertainment,” then it does make it difficult; it raises a fundamental question.

You may be referring to live music, which does raise issues with neighborhoods (i.e., noise). This could also be addressed in the neighborhood plan, designating certain areas as live music or entertainment districts.

The “third place”² notion of community gathering spaces that become so by the nature of their location or ambience, is also one to encourage.

² If home is considered the “first place” and work is considered the “second place”, the “third place” is separate from these two, and is a social space, and a place of civic engagement.

Request to Council

We need to keep the recommendations simple, and put a large number of our “asks” into the job description of the cultural district manager. We cannot add too much time or process for developers. We must make sure that the cost of the additional time and/or process does not exceed the value of the incentives. The recommendations must be as painlessly acceptable as possible.

The executive summary version of the recommendations report can be simplified, but the full report cannot.

By leveraging the things that the City is already good at, and with little investment, our recommendations could have tremendous impact.

4. Next steps: advocacy and outreach

As council member Licata stated (twice) to our committee, outreach and a broad show of support for our effort is going to be crucial to passage of any CODAC-related legislation by the City Council. We have been talking to some organizations during this process, but we need to demonstrate that support is there.

Comment: Organizations cannot blindly support this report without specific recommendations.

Comment: We are now at the point where we need to ask for support of CODAC’s specific recommendations, not general support. If we obtain general support, and come out with specific recommendations within a couple of weeks, organizations that gave general but not specific support might feel blindsided.

We can be open to comment on the recommendations from potential supporters. Support letters could be tailored to the specific mission or concerns of the supporting organization or agency. Also, remind people that there will be a process of adoption of these recommendations.

Be cautious with the recommendations, and consider all angles, especially the possibility of unintended consequences, such as happened in San Francisco’s South of Market district with live-work spaces³.

We can also frame our outreach in terms of neighborhood planning: that the CODAC recommendations could lay the framework for a cultural component in a neighborhood’s plan update.

Our recommendations must be scalable and tangible. We need to prioritize the neighborhoods. Wherever there is a lot of capacity to leverage now, there is our audience.

Whatever is distributed as part of the outreach, the narrative portion of the proposal should be included.

We need to have a traveling road show, with a two-page handout of CODAC’s recommendations.

³ In the 1990s, loft-style condominiums began to appear in the gritty SoMa neighborhood, many of which were built under the cover of “live-work” development ostensibly meant to maintain a studio arts community in San Francisco. However, the occupant of a SoMa “live-work” loft is much more likely to be a software or other well-to-do professional than an artist.

What would be compelling to City Council: a list of partners—such as 4Culture, Artist Trust, and service organizations—that would be willing to state that they have a stake in this effort and are willing partners with the City. Of course, we assume that OACA would be behind us, and advocating for us.

Nathan Torgelson would be the appropriate contact in the mayor's office.

Timing for a meeting or presentation to City Council will be decided after April 2.

The meeting adjourned at 1:00 pm.