



City of Seattle

Seattle Planning Commission

McCaela Daffern and David Goldberg, Co-Chairs
Vanessa Murdock, Executive Director

SEATTLE PLANNING COMMISSION

Thursday, July 13, 2023
Approved Meeting Minutes

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- Commissioners Present:** McCaela Daffern, Andrew Dannenberg, David Goldberg, Rose Lew Tsai-Le Whitson, Rick Mohler, Dalton Owens, Dhyana Quintanar, Julio Sanchez, Monika Sharma, Lauren Squires, Jamie Stroble, Kelabe Tewolde, Nick Whipple
- Commissioners Absent:** Roque Deherrera, Matt Hutchins, Radhika Nair
- Commission Staff:** Vanessa Murdock, Executive Director; John Hoey, Senior Policy Analyst; Olivia Baker, Planning Analyst; Robin Magonegil, Commission Coordinator
- Guests:** Lyle Bicknell and Geoff Wentlandt, Office of Planning and Community Development (OPCD)

Seattle Planning Commission meeting minutes are not an exact transcript and represent key points and the basis of discussion.

Referenced Documents discussed at the meeting can be viewed here:

<https://www.seattle.gov/planningcommission/meetings>

Chair's Report & Minutes Approval

Co-Chair McCaela Daffern called the meeting to order at 3:06 pm and announced several upcoming Commission meetings. Co-Chair Daffern offered the following land acknowledgement:

'As we begin our meeting, we respectfully acknowledge that our meeting today is taking place on occupied Coast Salish land. We pay respect to Coast Salish Elders past and present and extend that respect to their descendants and to all Indigenous people. To acknowledge this land is to recognize the history of physical and cultural genocide and settler colonialism, which continues to displace Indigenous people today. It is to also recognize these lands, waters, and their significance for the resilient and wise peoples who continue to thrive in this region despite the consequences of displacement and broken treaties. Those who hold settler privilege in this city must work towards supporting the Coast Salish people and all Indigenous people using the various forms of wealth and privilege they reap due to it.'

Co-Chair Daffern noted that this meeting is a hybrid meeting with some Commissioners and staff participating remotely while other Commissioners and staff are participating in the Boards and Commissions Room at Seattle City Hall. She asked fellow Commissioners to review the Color Brave Space norms and asked for volunteers to select one or more of the norms to read aloud. She suggested to Commissioners that they collectively agree to abide by these norms.

Announcements

Vanessa Murdock, Seattle Planning Commission Executive Director, reviewed the format of the meeting. She noted that public comment could be submitted in writing via email at least eight hours before the start of the meeting or provided in person by members of the public attending the meeting at City Hall. Ms. Murdock stated that full Commission meetings will be recorded and posted to the Planning Commission's website. She noted that these recordings are not in lieu of the Commission's minutes, which are approved at the next full Commission meeting.

ACTION: Commissioner Kelabe Tewolde moved to approve the June 22, 2023 meeting minutes. Co-Chair David Goldberg seconded the motion. The motion to approve the minutes passed. Commissioners Andrew Dannenberg and Nick Whipple abstained.

Public Comment

There was no public comment.

Briefing: Downtown Office to Residential Conversion Competition

Lyle Bicknell, OPCD

Mr. Bicknell provided an overview of the recent Downtown Office to Residential Conversion competition. Fourteen applicants submitted project ideas and three were selected by a jury. Commissioner Rick Mohler was a member of the jury.

The first honorable mention award went to Miller Hull for their proposal for conversion of the Polson and Western Buildings. The proposal maintains office functions on the lower levels with residential spaces above. The proposal presented solutions for internal courtyards and highlighted conversion of existing floor plans linking two separate buildings into a continuous floorplate. Mr. Bicknell stated that this proposal could have a potential ripple effect for Pioneer Square and the Central Waterfront.

The second honorable mention award went to Gensler for their proposal highlighting a generic post-modern building. This proposal made a case for which buildings make the best case for conversion, highlighting the calculated greenhouse gas emissions savings for conversion.

First place was awarded to the proposal for conversion of the Mutual Life Building, a historic building on a prominent corner in Pioneer Square. The proposal demonstrated that this building is an excellent candidate for conversion. The designers suggested a mix of unit types including standard efficiency, one bedroom, and co-living congregate units sharing a kitchen and other amenities. This proposal

showed how realistic their goals are, highlighting such features as the building's high windows and natural light.

Mr. Bicknell stated that all fourteen submittals are available for viewing online (see link in Resources section below).

Commission Discussion

- Commissioners inquired about the average square footage of the conversion proposals. Mr. Bicknell stated that the submittals included a range of residential spaces from studios to three-bedroom units. He stated that some of the studios could be expanded.
- Commissioners asked if the design teams had any ideas for repurposing parking areas. Mr. Bicknell stated that including parking garages in the design criteria would have been a good challenge. He stated that none of the applicants included proposals for converting parking areas.
- Commissioners asked whether additional services will be provided with the congregate units. Mr. Bicknell stated that the proposals are hypothetical at this point with the common objective of creating pleasant conversions at an affordable price.
- Commissioners asked whether the Pioneer Square example would assume addressing unreinforced masonry. Mr. Bicknell stated that the City would not want to waive existing rules but addressing unreinforced masonry would make the conversions very expensive. These costs would result in more expensive units.
- Commissioners inquired about the condition of the electrical and plumbing systems in these buildings. Mr. Bicknell stated that addressing those systems is necessary in an adaptive reuse conversion process.
- Commissioners inquired about other pros and cons associated with these proposals. Mr. Bicknell stated that updating historic windows can be prohibitively expensive, but there are successful examples around the country.
- Commissioners asked whether there are any historic preservation concerns that would make these proposals difficult to implement. Mr. Bicknell stated that the State legislature recently passed legislation that would waive State Environmental Policy Act (SEPA) rules for downtown buildings.
- Commissioners asked if these proposals would require any specific actions through the Comprehensive Plan update process. Mr. Bicknell stated that this project has been going on a fast pace since March and the OPCD team is working to implement the results quickly. One applicant pointed out the need for open space and other amenities.
- Commissioner Rick Mohler provided additional perspectives from his role as a member of the proposal review jury. He stated that one of the winning schemes had a unique proposal to convert a large floorplate with a central common space. The congregate housing concept was very logical. The post-war project by Gensler did not include financial details but it was clear that they had that information in developing their proposal. The proposal from Miller Hull included an appealing idea for a courtyard that would be very expensive. He stated that mixing offices and residential spaces is a great idea but is complicated.
- Commissioners asked whether there are any projects in process that might consider market conditions and the challenges of having both residential and office uses. Mr. Bicknell stated that it is possible that some projects may be considering that as they move through the process.

- Commissioners asked whether OPCD is looking beyond this contest for analogs or codes for adaptive reuse to inform revitalizing downtown. Mr. Bicknell stated that he is aware of current projects in Chicago and New York and is looking at precedent projects in other cities. OPCD will create a description of their findings.
- Commissioners commented that this project will assist the Planning Commission in thinking about the future of downtown. The Commission will consider themes of affordability and inclusivity while considering expanding opportunities for people living downtown. A downtown school would be very beneficial. Certain streets should be closed to cars to create a walkable, healthy downtown.
- Commissioners noted that this project raises concerns about affordability and who the beneficiaries of these proposals are. It is difficult to imagine a downtown that is affordable for residents and small businesses. The City should consider how to create a downtown for everyone. The Pike/Pine corridor has examples of successful adaptive reuse projects. We have local expertise.
- Commissioners expressed interest in learning more about how the Mayor's office is considering incorporating arts and cultural spaces. Seattle has lost some good spaces over the past several years, for example Café Nordo. The City should generate some creative ideas. Mr. Bicknell stated that recovery of Downtown will not be a silver bullet. OPCD would be very interested to have a discussion on ground level retail and ways to increase arts and cultural spaces.
- Commissioners asked whether some of these proposals are a live/work model. Mr. Bicknell stated yes, although the conversions would require street level amenities and pedestrianizing.
- Commissioners expressed support for ownership opportunities, such as co-housing. There are large co-ops on Capitol Hill that can serve as examples.
- Commissioners noted that the state condo insurance policies may need to be revised. This would be an interesting opportunity.
- Commissioners expressed concern about food deserts in Downtown for future residents. Mr. Bicknell stated that affordable fresh food is a critical amenity. The existing Downtown grocery stores, Whole Foods and PCC, are very expensive. Pike Place Market offers fresh food but is not a full-service grocery opportunity.

Resources

[Mayor Harrell and Office of Planning and Community Development Unveil Competition Winners Advancing Innovative Office Space Conversion Ideas Focused on Sustainable Downtown Activation](#),

Office of Planning and Community Development Daily Plan It Blog

[OPCD Office To Residential Submissions](#)

Briefing: Selected Downtown Activation Plan Land Use Changes

Geoff Wentlandt, OPCD

Mr. Wentlandt stated that the Mayor has established several high priority Downtown Activation Plan concepts. These priorities are short-term minor actions, not major long-term strategies. The Mayor has identified the following land use concepts for potential or proposed legislation:

- Downtown Retail Core zoning
- Belltown lodging flexibility

- Office to Residential conversion

The Downtown Retail Core (DRC) zoning amendment would rezone parts of Third Avenue between Stuart and Union to encourage residential development. Mr. Wentlandt stated that this proposal is intended to encourage residential density on a key block or two, including key sites such as the Kress building (the former site of an IGA grocery store) and other vacant sites including the former Abercrombie and Fitch store. The Downtown core has not seen the same amount of residential development that the Belltown and Denny Triangle neighborhoods have. The proposed rezone is from the Downtown Retail Core (DRC 85-170) zone to the Downtown Mixed Commercial (DMC 240/290-440). This proposal would incentivize the possibility for downtown school facilities.

The proposal for Belltown lodging use flexibility would exempt floor area ratio (FAR) requirements for lodging between Wall Street and Lenora Street in the Belltown neighborhood. This proposal would only apply for new development, not conversion of existing housing. Lodging is one sector of the economy that is relatively strong. The Belltown Community Council is interested in activation of properties that have potential for lodging. Mr. Wentlandt stated that owners of one site are interested and have already completed a potential design for lodging. Other potential sites include several surface parking lots in the neighborhood.

OPCD is preparing land use code legislation to facilitate office to residential conversion. Mr. Wentlandt stated that this legislation would be similar to new state legislation that passed earlier this year. OPCD and the Seattle Department of Construction and Inspections are convening detailed workshops with those who submitted project proposals during the Office to Residential Conversion Competition.

Commission Discussion

- Commissioners asked whether the City has considered permitting flexibility to bring additional units online faster. Mr. Wentlandt stated that the City wants to advance the SEPA exemption changes allowed by new state legislation but applying that exemption for small, targeted geographies such as in this proposal may not be the best fit.
- Commissioners asked why a larger area of the DRC on Third Avenue is not being considered for this rezone. Mr. Wentlandt stated that this proposal is on a fast timeline. A larger change to zoning would require more review. He stated that the Downtown Retail Core is outdated as it was created around a shopping mall experience that has changed. The City is not ready to change the whole area. This targeted proposal aims to link together some vacant sites for potential redevelopment.
- Commissioners inquired about any potential concerns with the proposed rezone. Mr. Wentlandt stated that some community members have expressed concerns. For example, residents of the Fischer Studio Building are concerned about potential view/light blockages from new development.
- Commissioners asked whether the City has engaged with the Seattle School District. Mr. Wentlandt stated that no specific location has been identified for a potential downtown school facility but would probably need to be identified in the next school levy.
- Commissioners noted that it is helpful to think of the differences between the DRC and Belltown. These neighborhoods are distinct from each other. It is interesting to imagine the possibilities of stitching them together. The DRC could have an updated vision, especially as Sound Transit is

thinking about building a whole new tunnel for the West Seattle and Ballard Link Extensions project. Mr. Wentlandt stated that the City should acknowledge that the DRC strategy and regulations are outdated. The Downtown Urban Center Plan and the Comprehensive Plan policies for Downtown need to be updated. Identifying new zoning would require a separate process. The King County Civic Campus concept is a good opportunity for updating that area of Downtown.

- Commissioners asked for more information on the timing of those planning processes. Mr. Wentlandt stated that they would run almost concurrently. The Downtown Urban Center Plan is required to be completed by 2025. Amy Nguyen of OPCD is leading that planning process. Additional community engagement will happen this summer.
- Commissioners noted that development of surface parking lots seems to have been successful in the University District and asked whether there are any lessons learned from that neighborhood. Mr. Wentlandt stated that it is his observation that there has been a lot more residential development there than anticipated.
- Commissioners stated that we learned during the pandemic that we spend our time in neighborhoods. Downtown would need a lot more amenities to make it more livable.
- Mr. Wentlandt stated that the timing of the Downtown Activation Plan has been a challenge to OPCD's long range planning for Downtown. It has been difficult to engage in long-range planning when responding to a short-term action. He stated that there is still time for input on the proposed rezone, as the legislation has not been transmitted to the City Council yet.

Commission Business

John Hoey, Seattle Planning Commission staff, reported on the status and timeline of the Seattle Transportation Plan (STP). Seattle Department of Transportation staff had originally indicated that the STP and its Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) would be released in mid-July. We have learned that the release has been delayed and is anticipated for early-mid August.

Ms. Murdock invited the three new Commissioners in attendance to introduce themselves.

Commissioner Monika Sharma lives in the Central District and works at the King County Play Equity Coalition. She previously worked at Bike Works and in affordable housing in Massachusetts. Her current work organization's goal is to make play more equitable. She has had to learn to navigate the City as a disabled person. She is interested in bringing a different voice to the Commission.

Commissioner Nick Whipple is a Planner with the City of Bellevue. He is a native of Washington state, is originally from Spokane, and moved to Seattle in 2014. He lives in the North Delridge neighborhood with his wife and young daughter. He is the Code and Policy Division Manager and often presents to both the Bellevue Planning Commission and the City Council. He is currently working on rezoning and state legislative items. He hopes to bring his experience to the work of the Planning Commission.

Commissioner Andrew Dannenberg is a physician who has spent his career working in public health and government. During his work with the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta, he was working with other physicians in public health and identified the built environment as an issue that needs to be addressed. He recognized that urban planning, architecture, and transportation are issues that affect

our daily lives. He committed his work towards how to get public health involved in shaping the built environment. He has been teaching at the University of Washington for the last twelve or thirteen years. He previously served on the Seattle Bike Advisory Board and jumped at the opportunity to join the Planning Commission.

Public Comment

There was no public comment.

The meeting was adjourned at 5:16 pm.