

# Agenda Report

November 17, 2014

**TO:** Honorable Mayor and City Council  
**FROM:** Planning & Community Development Department  
**SUBJECT: RECOMMENDED CHANGES TO THE DEVELOPMENT REVIEW  
PROCESS RELATED TO DESIGN REVIEW**

## **RECOMMENDATION:**

It is recommended that the City Council:

1. Find that the review of changes related to the development review process are exempt from CEQA pursuant to Section 15061 (b)(3) the General Rule; and
2. Direct staff to prepare amendments to the Municipal Code which:
  - A. Eliminate the "optional" 50% Concept Review in the Design Review process;
  - B. Modify the make-up of the Design Commission, by reducing the number of members from the current nine to seven; and,
  - C. Establish specific qualifications for the members of the Design Commission:

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

This report provides an overview of the City's development review process, describes recent improvements, and identifies additional efforts that can be taken to further enhance it. Updates on these efforts have been provided through the City Manager's newsletters and staff made two presentations to the Economic Development Technology Committee.

## **BACKGROUND**

The mission of the development review process is to insure that development in Pasadena is both of the highest quality and meets important health and safety standards, while providing a high level of customer service. While development is an important component of the City's economic vitality, insuring quality development and protecting the integrity of neighborhoods is equally important.

The development review process in Pasadena is highly complex. There are City and State regulations enforced by multiple departments including: Transportation, Public Works, Fire, Public Health, Police, and Planning and Community Development. There are also a number of different commissions including the Planning Commission, Transportation Advisory Commission, Design Commission, Historic Preservation Commission and the Arts and Culture Commission which participate regularly in this process.

The first phase of the development review process is the planning entitlement. During this phase, Planning staff coordinates the review of projects that require a discretionary action under the City's Zoning ordinance. Planning staff review the projects for conformance with the General Plan, Zoning Ordinance, any applicable specific plan, and design guidelines and seeks comments from the various departments. These comments typically result in project revisions or conditions of approval incorporated once the project is approved.

Following approval of a project through the Planning entitlement phase is the building permit process. This process is required to review detailed construction documents to insure that construction will be in compliance with all State and City building codes. During this process a customer submits their building plans for review. When all corrections are addressed the field inspections occur and final sign off and/or the Certificate of Occupancy is issued.

#### *DEVELOPMENT REVIEW STUDY*

There has been an on-going effort to assess the development review process and how to provide the best customer service while staying true to the mission of quality and safety. In 2012, a consultant was retained to prepare a study of the City's development review process. The consultant conducted over 20 different focus group meetings with representatives of the development community, resident community, members of the Design Commission, Planning Commission, Historic Preservation Commission, and individual discussions with the Mayor and City Council Members.

The study provided a comprehensive review of then current practices and procedures and compared these with other government organizations and best practices. The result was a detailed study that provided nearly 300 recommendations that could be utilized to create a more effective, customer friendly development process. The study includes an analysis of the Permit Center functions, staffing and service within each division of the Planning and Community Development Department, a review of the Commissions that are part of the development review process and how technology can be used to improve service and efficiencies.

The study found that the City's current process already employed a number of best practices. For example:

- The Permit Center serves as a centralized location for providing information and service to customers.

- The City has adopted CEQA guidelines that are readily available on the internet and staff has been trained in the proper application of CEQA.
- The Planning Commission allocates a substantive portion of its meetings to advanced planning (i.e. extensive role in the General Plan update work).
- Authority for approval of many land use entitlement permits in the Zoning code is with a Hearing Officer.
- Preliminary Consultation within Design Review provides the applicant with feedback early in the process.

The study also identified areas where improvements could be made including:

- Enhancing customer service in the Permit Center.
- Replacing legacy technology used in the development review process.
- Improving existing land use entitlement, building permit and code compliance processes.
- Improving how staff are utilized.
- Improving the Design Review process.

Given the multiple departments that participate in the development review process, an Interdepartmental Review Team (IRT) was formed to further explore and implement where appropriate the study recommendations. The team is comprised of senior level staff from those departments engaged in the development process.

To date, a number of changes have made to internal processes and procedures resulting in staff efficiencies and measurable improvements:

#### *Improved Customer Service in the Permit Center*

- Relocated staff from the Public Works and Fire Departments to the Permit Center to provide more efficient services to customers.
- Established a dedicated permit window to expedite sub-trade permits (mechanical, plumbing, electrical).
- Upgraded the Q-Flow customer service system to more efficiently guide customers through their permit center windows.
- Provided real wait times for each of the windows in the Permit Center on-line so that customers can determine the most efficient time for them to visit the permit center.

#### *Planning Process Improvements*

- Applicants receive early feedback on their applications. Projects are reviewed for completeness, zoning consistency and potential development issues within 30-days of application.
- Cases are routed to multiple departments for review within one week of submittal compared to four weeks.
- New, more concise applications have been created and implemented. Submittal requirements are more clearly defined, resulting in fewer requests for additional information from an applicant, which reduces time and costs to the process.

- Applications are reviewed closely with applicants upon submittal for all necessary information. This reduces the potential of an incomplete application and frustration by the applicant when asked for missing items several weeks after submittal.
- New Design Review staff report templates have been created to focus discussion and analysis on key design issues.

#### *Interdepartmental Improvements*

- A custom tracking system has been created and implemented to monitor the amount of time it takes staff to complete reviews for building plan check and processing for specific Planning entitlement cases. Monthly reports are generated and available for management staff.
- Supervisors are sent an e-mail notification of projects that are approaching a due date so that they can more effectively monitor the project applications.
- Business license applications are being routed electronically which saves time and hassle for customers.
- Staff have been trained on how to properly input data into the Land Management System. This insures that information on the current status of cases is readily available and accurate.
- Custom programs have been developed to enable electronic routing of cases between departments. This replaces the hard copy interoffice mail system with electronic routing. This improves interdepartmental communication as comments are viewable to all staff working on a case and information can be exchanged faster.

These improved internal processes and enhanced interdepartmental coordination have resulted in a reduction in the overall processing time for Planning entitlement cases and building plan check; Specifically:

- Over the last 18 months, the average processing time for all Hearing Officer cases has been reduced by 22%

The processing time for planning cases has been reduced since 2010:

- Conditional Use Permits reduced by 44%
- Minor Conditional Use Permits reduced by 43%
- Minor Variances reduced by 46%
- Hillside Development Permits reduced by 53%
- Historic Preservation Permits (Certificates of Appropriateness) reduced by 34%

The average days to complete building plan check for medium and large projects have been reduced more than 50% since 2010:

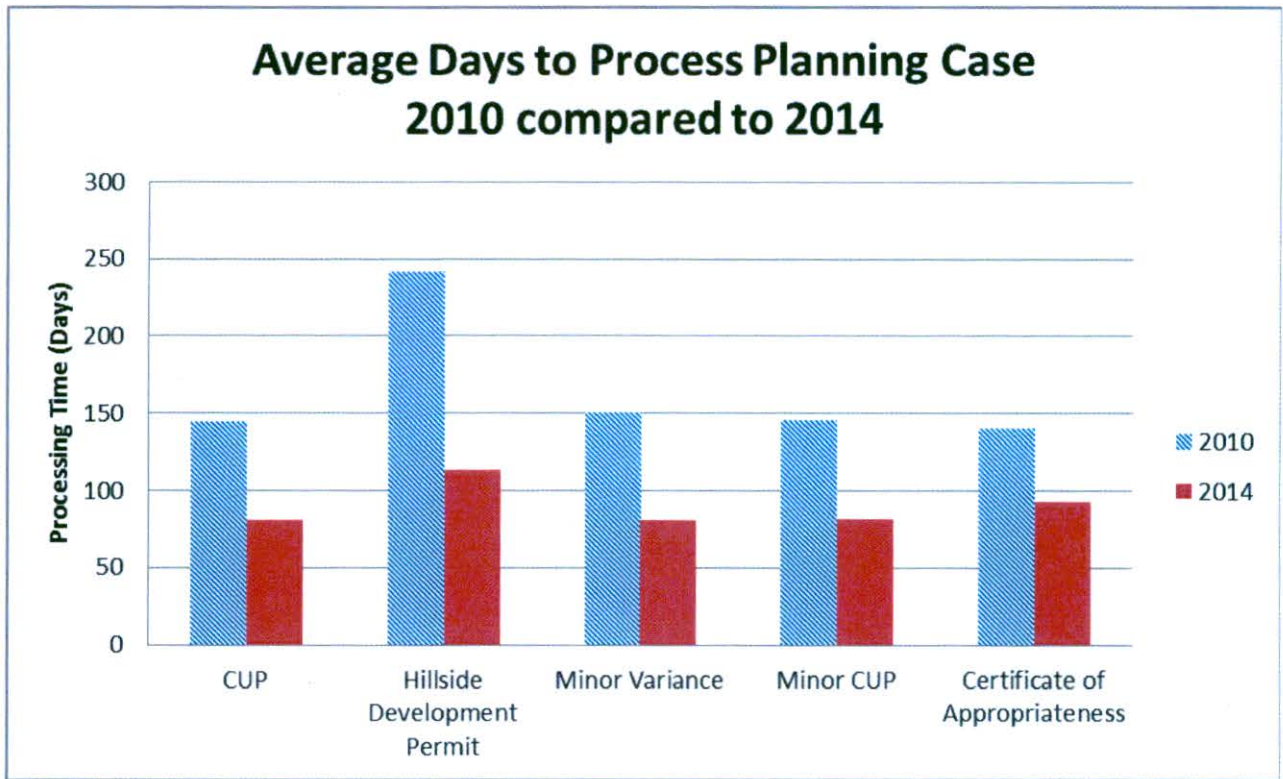


Table 1 – Planning Case Processing Times

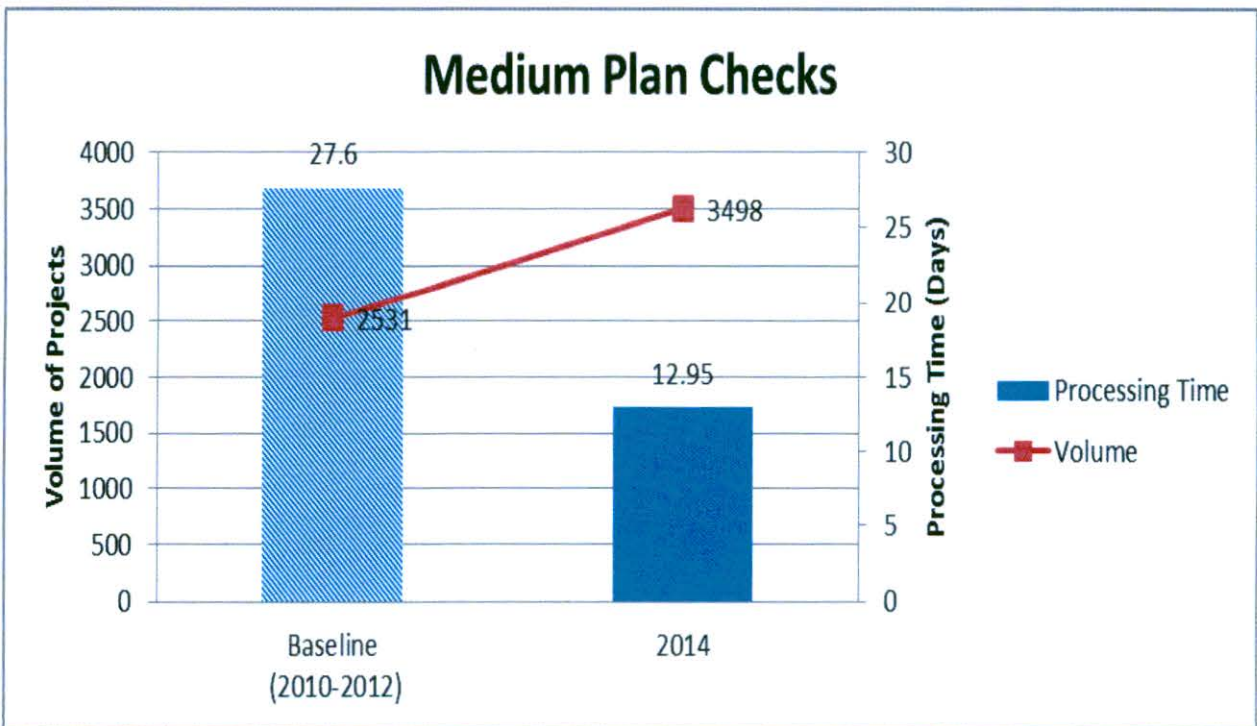


Table 2- Building Plan Check Processing Times: Medium Projects are generally classified as: Tenant Improvements between 3,000 and 10,000 square feet, Single-Family residential additions between 500 and 1,000 square feet outside of Hillside Districts, all residential remodels over 500 square feet (interior only), swimming pools and spas in Hillside Districts, Commercial and Multi-Family additions under 500 square feet, signs requiring Zoning Field



Inspection or Design Review, Retaining Walls, Wireless Communication Facilities and foundation only for new construction.

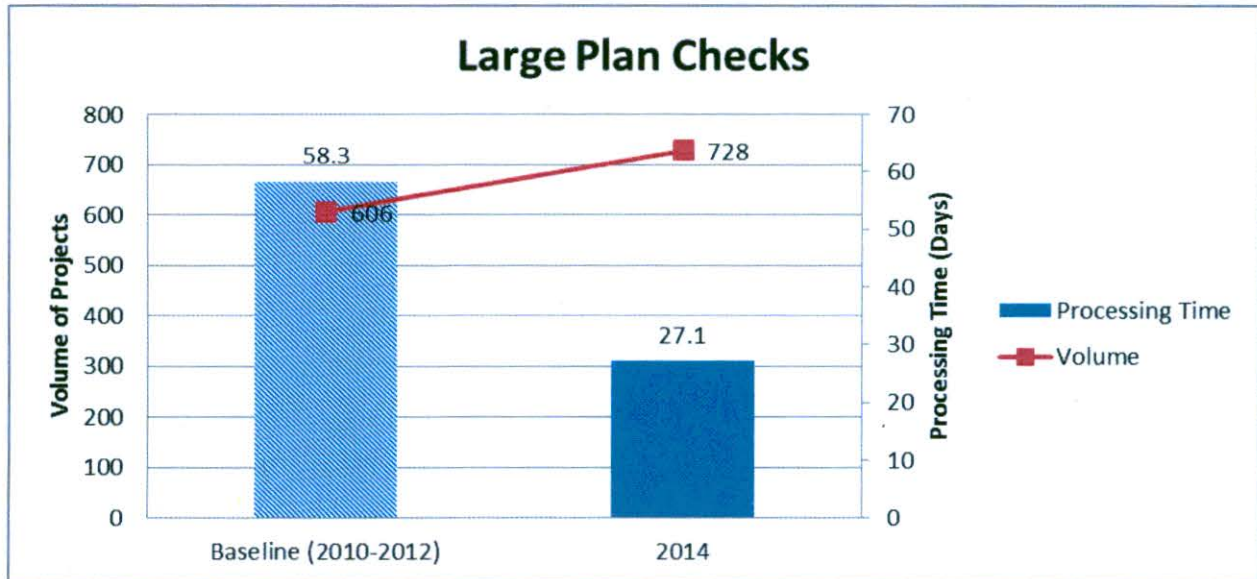


Table 3- Building Plan Check Processing Times: Large Projects are generally classified as Tenant Improvements over 10,000 s.f., Commercial and Multi-Family additions over 500 s.f., all new construction of single-family residential structures, Duplexes, Multi-Family, Commercial, Mixed-Use, Industrial or Institutional projects, all single-family additions over 1,000 s.f, seismic retrofit, all grading.

Importantly, these improvements have been implemented while volumes continue to increase as a result of economic recovery.

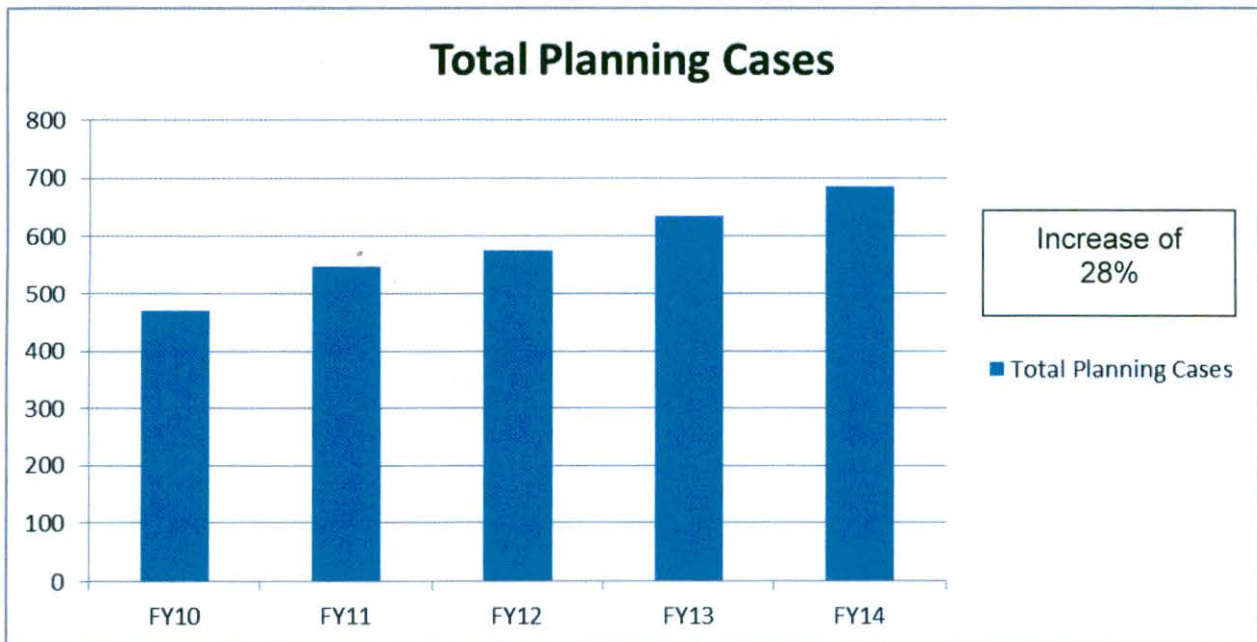


Table 4 – Total Planning cases received 2010 through September 30, 2014

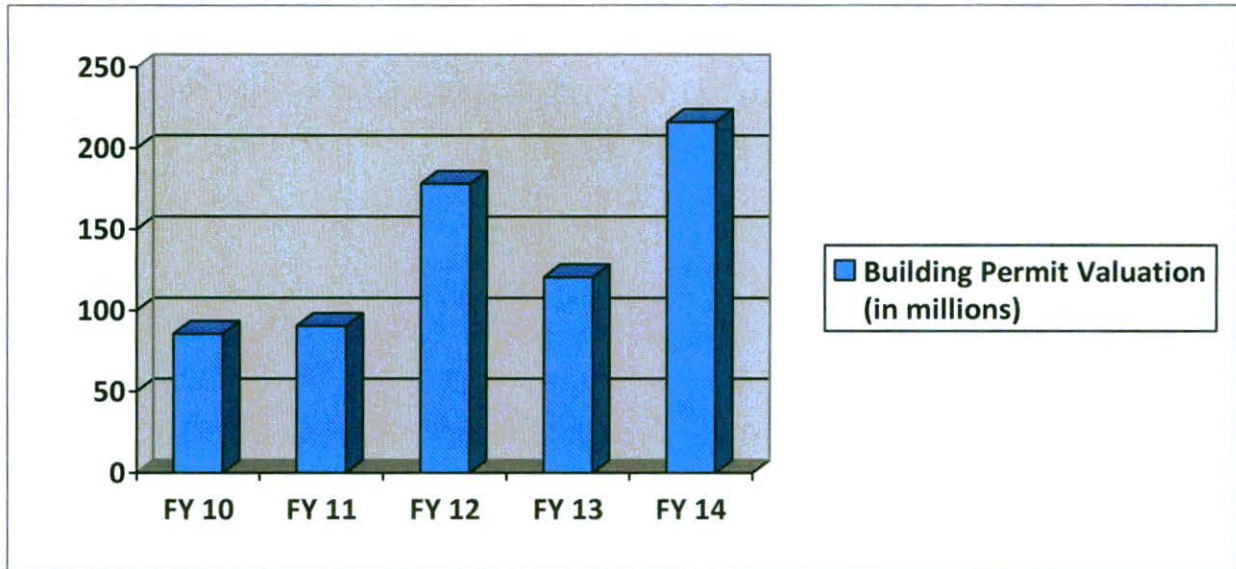


Table 5- Total Building Permit Valuation over last five Fiscal Years.

- The total valuation of Building permits has increased by 212% (Building permits are measured by valuation because the higher the valuation, the more complex the permit).

The efforts to bring greater efficiency to the Development Review Process are ongoing and in the near future staff anticipates further improvements including implementation of concierge service wherein a case-manager would be assigned to assist projects through the entirety of the process; replacement of the old land-management system with a new system including enhanced capabilities to support more on-line and in-field operations; and introduction of a Permit Technician classification to handle many of the routine functions within the Permit Center at an *express* window. Staff will continue to inform the City Council and public of these improvements through various media including the City Manager's weekly newsletter.

### ***Design Review Process***

During the preparation of the consultant's report on the Development Review Process, the City's Design Review Process was singled out during many of the stakeholder interviews as an area where improvements should be focused. Generally, comments related to the number of times projects were required to be reviewed by the Design Commission, the number of steps (currently there are four steps: Preliminary Consultation, Concept Review, an "optional" 50% Concept Review and Final Review) and the length of time associated with the process, as well as the extent to which the Commission modifies projects.

In comparing Pasadena to other like communities (e.g., Glendale, Santa Monica and Burbank) the study does support the notion that Pasadena's design review process is more involved than that of comparable cities.

In order to address these issues, without sacrificing the qualitative aspect of the Design Review Process, staff is recommending that the City Council approve the following actions:

1. Elimination of the “optional” 50% Concept Review. By focusing more clearly on a three step process which includes: Preliminary consultation to discuss concepts and address potential issues, Concept Review to address specific design elements and Final Review to ensure compliance with the design elements and review finishes, the process is anticipated to be more focused. The 50% Concept Review invites the temptation to leave matters unresolved at Concept Review which can add significantly to the overall length of the process and leave matters unresolved for an extended period of time.
2. Modify the make-up of the Design Commission, by reducing the number of members to seven from the current nine, by eliminating the appointees from the Arts and Culture Commission and Transportation Advisory Commission. Reducing the total number of commissioners is expected to provide more clear and concise direction to applicants without losing the diversity of experience to thoroughly evaluate a project.
3. Establish specific qualifications for the members of the Commission:
  - Two commissioners with a background in Architecture (Mayor appointed).
  - One commissioner with a background in Historic Preservation (Mayor Appointed).
  - One commissioner with a background in Landscape Architecture (Mayor Appointed).
  - One commissioner that is a community member at-large (Mayor Appointed).
  - One commissioner that is a representative of the Planning Commission
  - One commissioner that is a representative of the Historic Preservation Commission

During presentations to various City Commissions regarding the results of the Development Review Study, staff discussed the idea of modifying the Design Review Process and the make-up of the Design Commission with the Planning Commission and the Design Commission. Neither Commission was supportive of reducing the number of Commission members; however the Planning Commission suggested changes to the qualifications of membership by eliminating the appointee from the Arts and Culture Commission and replacing the seat with an additional Mayoral appointee having expertise in historic preservation. Furthermore, the Planning Commission felt that one other Mayoral appointee should have expertise in historic preservation. The Design Commission recognized that the Commission could benefit from ensuring certain disciplines with experience in historic preservation are represented on the Commission (Attachments A & B are correspondence from the Design Commission related to this topic).

The Design Commission did support the elimination of the 50% Concept Review. The Planning Commission did not comment on that suggestion.



Should the City Council wish to implement these changes, an amendment to Title 2 of the Municipal Code would be required to revise the membership of the Design Commission. As it relates to the elimination of the 50% Concept Review, this would involve an amendment to Title 17 of the Code (Zoning Code) which would necessitate review by the Planning Commission.

**COUNCIL POLICY CONSIDERATION:**

The ongoing effort to improve the City's development review process is consistent with and furthers the City Council's Strategic Plan Goal to support and promote the quality of life and the local economy.

**ENVIRONMENTAL ANALYSIS:**

The proposed action, review and recommendation on proposed changes to the development review process is exempt from CEQA. State CEQA Guidelines Section 15061 (b) (3), states that CEQA only applies to projects that may have an effect on the environment.

**FISCAL IMPACT:**

There is no fiscal impact as a result of the City Council's review and recommendation on the proposed changes to the development review process.

Respectfully submitted,

  
VINCENT P. BERTONI, AICP  
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Approved by:

  
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Attachment: A – Letter from Design Commission dated September 7, 2013

Attachment: B – Letter from the Design Commission dated December 26, 2013