

## DESIGN COMMISSION

September 7, 2013

Vince Bertoni, Planning Director  
Department of Planning & Community Development  
City of Pasadena  
175 North Garfield Avenue  
Pasadena, CA 91101

Re: A Management Study of the Development Review Process prepared by Matrix Consulting Group dated December 2012 ("the Study")

Dear Mr. Bertoni:

The City of Pasadena Design Commission ("the Commission") is appreciative of the opportunity to provide input regarding this Study.

We found the Study to be quite comprehensive, spanning several departments and containing some 278 recommendations. Subsequent to your presentation before us on July 8, 2013, we formed a subcommittee that winnowed the Study's recommendations down to only those recommendations that dealt specifically with the Commission or the City's design review process.

Speaking generally, the Commission is keenly aware of the delicate balance that must be struck in providing a predictable, efficient development process with the need to preserve and enhance our City's historic architecture and unique place. In that regard, the Commission found that the Study appears particularly weighted toward a "streamlining" of the process for development, while not fully accounting for the importance this community places on architectural quality and contextual sensitivity.

Of the specific recommendations we reviewed, several dominant themes stood out, about which we found both concurrence and disagreement, as follows:

**50% Design Commission Review (Recommendation # 63)**

The Study states that "*an applicant is encouraged or required to meet with the design commission not less than four different times including preliminary, concept, 50% design, and 100% or final design*" (see page 195 of the Study). By and large, it has been the

experience of the Commission that the 50% review has been utilized only when an applicant was able to generally demonstrate compliance with the bulk of the findings necessary to pass concept review, but where compliance was not a complete certainty to all members of the Commission without further delineation. Of the projects that have come before us in the past, probably something less than 15% have needed a 50% review step. Since even the authors of the Study were confused as to whether a 50% review was mandatory or not, perhaps it may also be equally bewildering to applicants. *In the interest of creating a greater level of certainty, and the appearance of fewer steps to achieving approval, the Commission believes it would not be of any great detriment to eliminate 50% review from Pasadena's process, retaining preliminary, concept and final as the three reviews in Pasadena's design review process.*

### **Creating Citywide Design Guidelines (30, 62, 63, 64, 65, 66, 67)**

A number of recommendations centered on the creation of "citywide design guidelines." It's not clear from the Study that the authors were aware that the City of Pasadena already has "citywide design principles." These principles are, intentionally, very general and limited in recognition of Pasadena's diverse and quite differentiated neighborhoods. Applying some sort of comprehensive, catch-all type guidelines citywide would be inappropriate. Instead, such detailed requirements are better addressed to the particular needs of each neighborhood through their respective specific plans. Projects not covered within the specific plan limits are more successfully handled through typologically-focused guidelines, such as the City's existing *Design Guidelines for Neighborhood Commercial & Multi-family Districts* and the *City of Gardens Standards*.

The study further recommends that, after the completion of said citywide design guidelines, concept review before the Commission could be eliminated entirely – having the Commission judge only final design – as long as applicants conformed to the new citywide guidelines. Final design traditionally deals with colors, materials and details, so this would leave the massing and morphology of new construction – next to some of Pasadena's most treasured "postcard" places – to an untested document written by an outside consultant who may, or may not, even understand or appreciate Pasadena's uniqueness. *The Commission would neither be in favor of creating any kind comprehensive citywide guidelines nor recommend applicants avoid concept review before the Commission simply because they comply with any such ambitious guidelines.*

### **Evaluating planning staff based on their meeting predetermined cycle times (93)**

The Commission believes that having a predictable and efficient design review process is an asset to the City. Developers should expect certainty of process time (for example, when an application is deemed complete, then it will be heard by such and such date) not certainty of outcome (for example, if an application is submitted by such and such date, then approval will be forthcoming by such and such date). *The Commission concurs with instituting more effective project tracking and greater certainty with regard to appearance times, but would not be in favor of any construct that would reward or penalize staff based on how quickly a particular project passes a particular review that is clearly dependent on the competency of the submittal.*

**Requiring an applicant submit only two reviews: a conceptual design and a final design (63)**

Considerable thought and experience went into formulating preliminary review as part of the design review process. The Commission, as part of our investigations for these comments, had several speakers familiar with the development process in Pasadena provide testimony as to the efficacy of preliminary review on the development process from the applicant's perspective. Their position was that providing applicants with an opportunity to hear how their project meets, or doesn't meet, the City's specific plans and guidelines prior to receiving entitlements was considered particularly valuable. It is the Commission's position that applicants will spend less time seeking concept design approval for having gone through the preliminary review process, ultimately spending less time and resources traversing the entire review undertaking. Further, it has been the Commission's experience that discussion and input at the Preliminary Consultation stage often contributes to achieving superior projects. *Again, the Commission recommends leaving preliminary, concept and final as the three reviews in Pasadena's design review process.*

**Permit cycle time agreements with applicants for high priority projects (104)**

*The Commission is not in favor of any process that would grant special privileges to certain applicants over others which, in the any way, could be construed as discriminating against any particular class of applicants.*

**Rotating staff between Zoning, Design and Historic Preservation and Community Planning (217)**

Pasadena has a legacy of great buildings, from all periods of its history, requiring knowledgeable Design and Historic Preservation staff who can work with applicants to foster innovative, high-quality architecture while protecting historic resources. Individuals of such caliber possess advanced degrees and professional recognition and would likely show little interest in work outside their area of expertise. Plus, Pasadena cannot afford a learning curve in this area! Institution of such musical chair policies in the past has led to the loss of irreplaceable talent with national recognition in the field. *The Commission does not support interdepartmental rotation of principal planners.*

**Eliminate other commission's representation on the Design Commission (257, 258)**

The charge of the Commission is not just the review of architectural projects and master plans, but also includes recommendations to the City Council and the City Manager regarding specific plans, amendments to the master street tree plan, general plan updates, etc. It is the opinion of the Commission that having representation from the other commissions – arts, planning, transportation and historic preservation – is particularly useful in informing both other Commissioners and applicants about overall processes and goals within our City. Such representation is also an acknowledgement of the importance of having informed commissioners, especially given our City's level of community participation.

Contrary to assertions found within the Study, the Commission has found no proffering of ill-informed expertise by any of the other Commission's representatives. Nonetheless,

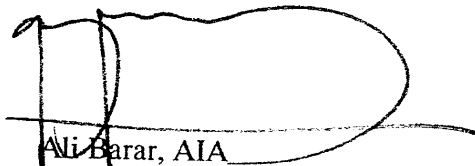
having architects present is important for the Commission's work. The requisite travel of practicing professionals necessitates some absenteeism; therefore, any diminution in the current number of architects would put added strain on those who are already volunteers, and may discourage the recruitment of quality candidates in the future. *The Commission finds the current representation necessary, ingenious, particularly useful, and reflective of our unique participatory community, and we would not concur with the recommendation to change the composition and number of its current membership.*

**Facilitated retreats between various commissions and between the Commission and City Council (247, 249, 250, 254)**

An understanding of citywide goals and objectives is useful in administering the specific business of each commission and also provides important feedback. Again, it appears the authors of the Study missed the beauty of the Commission's current composition, where the interaction of representatives from various commissions occurs on at least a bi-monthly basis at the Commission hearing. Furthermore, in a community as small and as closely connected as Pasadena some fraternization already occurs, providing additional opportunities for such cross-pollination of ideas, etc., among commissions. In an era of tight resources, perhaps formalizing these interactions should really be optional based on current budgets. *The Commission would not be opposed to the implementation of such retreats.*

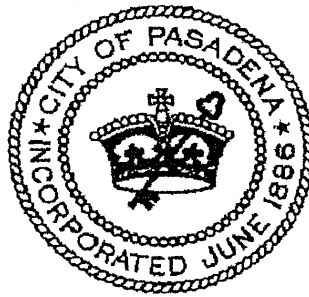
Again, I would like to convey on behalf of the Commission our thanks for your time in presenting the Study to us and for affording us this opportunity to comment on these issues that are so important to our City.

Sincerely,



Ali Barar, AIA  
Chair, City of Pasadena Design Commission

xc. Mayor  
Council Members  
City Manager  
Design Commissioners



## DESIGN COMMISSION

December 26, 2013

David Reyes, Deputy Director of Planning  
Department of Planning & Community Development  
City of Pasadena  
175 North Garfield Avenue  
Pasadena, CA 91101

RE: Staff Memorandum, December 17, 2013:  
Design Commission / Historic Preservation Commission Compositions as a Result  
of the Settlement in the Case of Pasadenans for a Livable City & Pasadena Heritage  
vs. City of Pasadena.

Dear Mr. Reyes:

The City of Pasadena Design Commission ("DC") is appreciative of the staff's time and effort in preparing the memorandum.

We generally concur with the analysis of responsibilities for both DC and the Historic Preservation Commission ("HPC") and share the opinion about the problems posed by having both commissions reviewing the same project. The DC agrees that HPC's expertise in Pasadena's residential architectural history and unique neighborhood development patterns is a critical strength of the HPC and should be maintained.

It should be noted that when the Playhouse Plaza project was heard, several DC members--with historic preservation experience--were forced to recuse themselves for conflictive interest or pre-disclosed bias.

At our December 17, 2013 hearing, a suggestion was made to revise the makeup of the DC to include a member with specific historic preservation expertise. This position would be in addition to the representative from HPC. Establishing proper qualifications for such a position proved elusive, running the gamut from having an appreciation for historic resources to possessing distinctive education, training and professional membership in a nationally recognized preservation organization.

Given the type of projects that come before the DC, possessing an understanding of how complex buildings can be manipulated to be sympathetic with their context is already an overarching requirement. Design professionals are unique in having this understanding, while simultaneously, at least being conversant in historic preservation issues. The HPC representative, owing to the requirements of that Commission, may or may not have a professional background in the subject. That being the case, any modification to DC membership that replaces an architect, and his or her attendant expertise, in order to seat a non-architect with supposedly greater historical "sensitivity" would not be supportive of the DC's primary charge.

*Nevertheless, we still believe that the DC could benefit from modifying the current composition to reserve one position for an architect or other professional (such as an urban designer, planner or historian) with relevant degrees and demonstrable experience (as opposed to mere interest) in historic preservation.*

We are cognizant of the special nature of Pasadena's review process and appreciate this opportunity to assist in establishing the best composition for the City's commissions.

Please contact me if you require any clarification or have further requests.

Sincerely,

Ali Barar, Chair  
Pasadena Design Commission

Xc: Design Commission