

Agenda Report

THROUGH: BUSINESS ENTERPRISE COMMITTEE

TO: CITY COUNCIL **DATE: September 13, 1999**
FROM: CITY MANAGER
SUBJECT: DESIGN REVIEW ALONG MAJOR CORRIDORS.

RECOMMENDATION:

It is recommended that the City Council:

1. Find that the absence of design review along major street corridors for small and mid-sized commercial projects limits opportunities to protect the visual character of major streets and intersections and public and private initiatives to upgrade these areas;
2. Find that extending design review along major corridors in the City would advance policies and objectives in the Comprehensive General Plan, notably "preservation of the character and scale of Pasadena" (objective 5), promotion of "well-designed, accessible and human-scaled residential and commercial areas" (objective 14), and improvement of the "quality of environment" (objective 18);
3. Find that the General Plan also encourages "architectural and design excellence" (Policy 5.5) and enhancement of major public streets and "gateways" into the City (Policy 5.10);
4. Based on these findings, recommend that the City Council initiate review of amendments to the municipal code to extend the existing levels of design review along major corridors, "gateways" into the City, and key intersections adjacent to the Foothill Freeway from 25,000 square feet of new construction to 5,000 square feet;
5. Refer these proposed amendments to the Planning Commission for review, recommendation, and public comment.

Background.

At two recent meetings, the Business Enterprise Committee (BEC) discussed the inability of the City to require changes to the site plan and architectural design of two new retail projects on E. Colorado Boulevard. These projects, though in highly visible locations, are exempt from design review both by location (outside the Central District) and by gross floor area (less than 25,000 square feet of new

construction). The Committee subsequently agreed that this exemption could lead, over time, to an increasing number of poorly designed commercial buildings—with over-scaled features, blank walls facing streets, and inferior building materials—along major streets where there are growing commitments of public and private resources. To protect these investments and to elevate the visual character and image of the City, the Committee asked the staff, at its meeting on August 18, to return with a proposal to extend design review to these major corridors and “gateways” of the City.

Existing Thresholds for Design Review.

Within the Central District, the code authorizes extensive design review of signs, alterations, and new construction. Outside the Central District, however, the thresholds for design review are more selective. Presently, the City conducts design review for:

- New residential construction of 3 or more units;
- New construction in excess of 25,000 square feet;
- Mini-malls; service stations and car wash facilities (new construction and substantial rehabilitation);
- Most projects in areas with master development plans and planned developments;
- Limited reviews in the N. Lake Specific Plan area;
- Wireless communication antenna arrays;
- City-sponsored projects (advisory to the City Council);
- Properties in landmark districts;
- Designated landmarks and works of Greene & Greene; and
- Buildings over 50 years old that qualify for landmark designation (significant changes only).

Omitted from this regulatory framework are two categories of projects likely to appear along major corridors and in major intersections: **new commercial buildings with less than 25,000 square feet** of floor area and **exterior rehabilitations of existing commercial buildings** (of any size). Changes to these design thresholds have been proposed for some areas with specific plans.

Public Purpose.

Any new City ordinance must be based on serving some public purpose or intent. In this instance, as noted in the recommendation, the General Plan emphasizes the public benefit of enhancing the aesthetic character of the City. It specifically addresses the importance of “development that creates and enhances positive spatial attributes of major public streets...cityscape and mountain sight lines, and important ‘gateways’ into the City” (Policy 5.10). The proposed reconfiguration of design review would support these objectives. It would also promote public safety through site plan reviews, both on-site and off-site, to improve traffic

circulation and pedestrian activity. It would better integrate new construction with public improvements and strengthen visual continuity and identity along corridors by promoting contextual new design. The added level of design review would also allow create in more locations a positive, attractive environment for private investment and economic development. It would bring more regulation of signs and ensure that new construction is respectful in scale, materials, and detailing with any nearby historic structures. Finally, the code amendment would fully engage the City in efforts to improve the visual character of major “gateway” sites, most of which lack distinction.

Extent of Additional Design Review.

Because the proposed code amendment increases demands on planning resources, and imposes delays and costs on developers, a major issue is determining the extent to which design review will be required in these areas. At this stage, the staff is reviewing a proposal to lower the existing design threshold from 25,000 square feet of new construction to 5,000 square feet.

Some unresolved questions at this time include the extent of review on a parcel. The staff recommends that design review concentrate on the site design and the architectural design of principal elevations facing streets. The amount of regulation for secondary elevations, other structures on a site, and deep parcels still needs to be considered further. Updated and more descriptive guidelines for use throughout the City will be available to assist with these reviews as part of the ongoing work on the zoning code, General Plan, and specific plans for the Central District, Fair Oaks-Orange Grove, and East Pasadena.

To manage the additional caseload and to minimize the delay for applicants, the staff recommends that this added tier of design review be limited to the planning director. Decisions could be appealed to the Design Commission. No changes are proposed to the Council’s authority to call for review of decisions on an application for design approval.

Targeted Geographic Areas.

Among the major corridors that would qualify for extended design review are: E. Colorado Boulevard; Walnut Street; Foothill Boulevard; N. Fair Oaks Avenue; S. Arroyo Parkway; Lake Avenue; and Orange Grove Boulevard. Alternatively, the design thresholds could extend to some or all of the principal mobility corridors listed in the General Plan (p. 21), to major corridors in areas with specific plans, and to several of the key intersections of north-south streets bordering the Foothill Freeway. The staff would need to conduct more field inspections to develop a more comprehensive list for presentation to the Design Commission, Planning Commission, and City Council.

HOUSING IMPACT.

The proposed amendments would not affect the supply or production of housing. The zoning code (P.M.C. Ch. 17.24) already has development and design regulatory provisions for multi-family housing of three or more units.

WORKLOAD IMPACT.

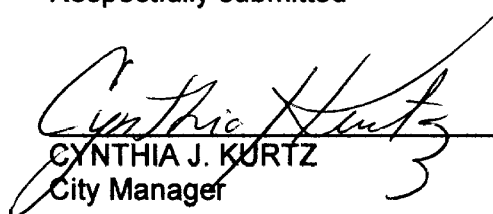
The additional workload of site plan and design review of new construction between 5,000 s.f. and 25,000 s.f. should be manageable if the staff conducts the reviews (and only appeals are presented to the Design Commission and City Council). Most of the construction activity along major corridors is likely to occur in the seven areas with specific plans, where in some cases design review has already been extended even beyond the recommendations in this report. Expedited procedures to conduct these reviews—and improved design guidelines—might also reduce the workload on the staff.

Between January and August 1999, the City issued building permits for only four new commercial projects that would receive design review under the proposed regulation. Conceivably, therefore, the annual caseload might amount to only ten applications. In that event, the existing staff should be able to manage the workload and avoid delaying reviews of applications for design and historic preservation approvals and projects in plan check.

FISCAL IMPACT.

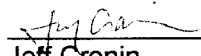
To recover the cost of conducting additional reviews, the City would need to amend the General Fee Schedule and adopt new fees. These fees would be based on the range of professional services for design review: pre-application meetings with applicants; site inspections; discussions with applicants and other staff; decision letters; filing; and plan check.

Respectfully submitted



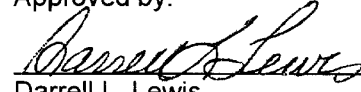
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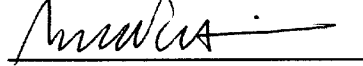
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