



City of Tacoma

City Council Action Memorandum

TO: Elizabeth A. Pauli, City Manager
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COPY: City Council and City Clerk
SUBJECT: Ordinance – Urban Design Project Review – April 30, 2024
DATE: April 15, 2024

SUMMARY AND PURPOSE:

An ordinance amending Title 13 of the Municipal Code, relating to the Land Use Regulatory Code, by amending various chapters, to create an Urban Design Project Review permit, establish an Urban Design Board, and amend certain development and design standards of mixed-use and downtown zoning districts.

SPONSOR:

Council Member Walker

BACKGROUND:

Project Initiation and Development:

The Design Review Analysis Manual was completed in 2016. This document identified the key components and options for establishing a design review program. The City Council initiated the development of a design review program with budget approval in 2017. Between 2018 and 2021, project staff, with consultant support worked with a Project Advisory Group (PAG) to develop an Interim Summary Report and draft guidance documents.

Through 2022 and 2023, project staff worked with the PAG, in coordination with the Planning Commission and the City Council Infrastructure, Planning, and Sustainability (IPS) Committee, to refine the previous draft documents and develop the proposed Urban Design Project Review (UDPR) program.

Key Objectives of the Proposal

To implement the One Tacoma Comprehensive Plan's growth and urban form policies, the proposal has been developed to equitably and explicitly support urban design considerations of walkability, active transportation, transit use, climate resilience, pedestrian orientation, context-responsiveness, and cultural expression. This approach responds to Tacoma's unique needs and priorities, building on best practices from other jurisdictions. Notably, the proposal is neither focused on architectural style nor structured to unnecessarily emphasize aesthetic details that have hampered other design review programs.

This proposal will implement One Tacoma Comprehensive Plan goals and policies to improve design outcomes and support innovative urban design within the city's designated Growth Centers. The UDPR package includes:

- Creating a new UDPR permit process. This program is focused on medium to large-scale projects in downtown and designated mixed-use centers (a map of these areas can be found in the Recommendation Brief linked below).
- Creating a City-Council appointed Urban Design Board (UDB). Board members will reflect a mix of professional experience, community interests related to urban design, and geographic diversity and will assist in review of the largest, most significant projects.
- Draft a UDPR Manual to provide clear and objective design guidance for new projects subject to UDPR (this can be found at the [project webpage](#)).



- Code amendments of standards related to development and building design within downtown and mixed-use center zoning districts.

UDPR Public Review:

The UDPR package was released by the Planning Commission for public review on July 19, 2023, and a public hearing was held on August 16, 2023. The Planning Commission recommended approval to the City Council on October 18, 2023.

The IPS Committee recommended approval of the UDPR package on February 28, 2024, without changes to the Commission recommendation. The City Council will hold a public hearing and collect public testimony on April 23, 2024.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT/ CUSTOMER RESEARCH:

This proposal, particularly the UDPR program, will implement One Tacoma Comprehensive Plan goals and policies related to the improvement of design within the built environment. All aspects of this project are limited to the designated mixed-use centers located throughout the City and where most of the City's future growth is planned. These areas include six neighborhood centers, eight crossroads centers, and the Tacoma Mall and downtown regional growth centers.

The PAG's membership reflected a range of industry and community interests most likely to be directly affected by the proposed UDPR program and were instrumental in the project's development. This group included architects, urban design professionals, affordable housing organizations, market-rate developers, and engaged community members.

Staff also engaged with the Tacoma community through an online open house/survey, particularly to guide program priorities.

In-person events and online presentations created opportunities for discussion with various stakeholder groups such as neighborhood councils and neighborhood planning groups, business districts, PAG, and other subject matter experts.

2025 STRATEGIC PRIORITIES:

Equity and Accessibility:

The proposed UDPR program will apply to all 16 designated mixed-use centers citywide. While the City currently employs a set of development and design standards across the City, it appears developments within lower opportunity areas do not always receive the care and attention that those located in higher opportunity areas of the City receive. These disparate outcomes can sometimes be attributed to areas having a higher concentration of people that are positioned to advocate for higher quality and more thoughtful designs while other parts of the City might have fewer people who are able to prioritize such matters. To some extent, the UDPR program seeks to address these types of disparities generally by providing guidance toward meeting key urban design objectives. This is further supported through the requirement of seating at least two UDB members from City Council Districts that have higher concentrations of lower opportunity areas.

Civic Engagement: High Opportunity

- Increase the percentage of residents who believe they are able to have a positive impact on the community and express trust in the public institutions in Tacoma.
- Elected officials, boards, commissions, and volunteer leadership will reflect the diversity of the Tacoma community.



The UDPR program will establish a new public entitlement review process subject to either administrative approval or through a City Council-appointed UDB. Both review processes provide new, early public notice and opportunities for community input, including one public meeting for UDB-level reviews. Additionally, the UDB will consist of seven community members representing a range of professional and lived experience relevant to the program’s urban design priorities with required geographic representation

Livability: High Opportunity

- Increase positive public perception of safety and overall quality of life.
- Increase the number of Complete Compact Communities/ 20-Minute Neighborhoods throughout the city.

Many of the UDPR program’s urban design priorities directly align with and support several of the livability indicators. These include reduction in carbon emissions, open space conditions, sustainability, urban tree canopy, abundant housing for all income levels, access to safe transportation choices, and safety-minded public spaces.

ALTERNATIVES:

Alternative(s)	Positive Impact(s)	Negative Impact(s)
1. Deny the entire proposal	New construction would continue to not be subject to any required discretionary permitting processes. Developers and designers familiar with current building development and design standards would not need to adjust to new standards.	New projects would not reflect these enhanced design guidelines and would not enjoy the increased flexibility to meet design and project objectives. Certain aspects of building design would continue to be reliant on market forces and uneven design quality would continue to be experienced. Deviation from development and design standards would continue to require variance requests. Current development and design standards would be retained and disparities between mixed-use and downtown zones would remain. The community would continue to have limited visibility and engagement on large projects in growth centers.
2. Deny the UDPR proposal element but approve the development and design standards amendments	New construction would continue to not be subject to any required discretionary permitting processes.	Certain aspects of building design would continue to be reliant on market forces and uneven design quality would



		continue to be experienced. Deviation from development and design standards would continue to require variance requests.
3. Approve the UDPR proposal element but deny the development and design standards amendments	Developers and designers familiar with current building development and design standards would not need to adjust to new standards.	Current development and design standards would be retained and disparities between mixed-use and downtown zones would remain.

EVALUATION AND FOLLOW UP:

If the legislation is adopted, Planning and Development Services staff and the UDB will provide a report to the City Council annually. At a minimum, the report would summarize the number of UDPR permits processed and any other useful data, such as review times/level of service, geographic distribution of applications, or other information upon request.

The proposed amendment to TMC 13.19, in creating the UDB, specifies an Annual Report to City Council as a regular responsibility of the UDB Chair.

STAFF/SPONSOR RECOMMENDATION:

The IPS Committee and the Planning Commission have recommended adoption of the UDPR program and associated code amendments.

Staff recommend conducting the first reading of ordinance on April 30, 2024, followed by final reading on May 7, 2024.

Staff recommend the mixed-use and downtown zoning development and design standards amendments go into effect 30 days following final reading on June 6, 2024.

Staff recommend the UDPR-related amendments go into effect on January 1, 2025. This timeline allows staff to continue to develop the necessary permitting technology and appointment of UDB members, expected to take place in October 2024. To streamline the program roll-out, staff intend to be available to conduct required pre-application meetings with potential applicants in the months prior to the effective date.

FISCAL IMPACT:

No significant fiscal impact is expected from this proposal. Existing Planning and Development Services staff, for which the City Council already appropriated necessary resources, will support the UDPR program. A small portion of program costs, such as public notices and UDB meeting facilitation will be partially supported through the collection of new UDPR permit fees, which will come to the City Council as part of a regular fee code update scheduled for later this year.

Are the expenditures and revenues planned and budgeted in this biennium's current budget?

YES

THE UDPR program will be supported by existing Planning and Development Services staff and no additional funding is requested. New regular program operations are expected to be minimal and will be supported through permit fees.



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Are there financial costs or other impacts of not implementing the legislation?

No

Will the legislation have an ongoing/recurring fiscal impact?

YES

Will the legislation change the City's FTE/personnel counts?

No

Current staff capacity was considered in developing the scope of the UDPR program proposal, including the limited geographies and requirement thresholds, and no additional staff is expected to support the UDPR program as presented.

<https://www.cityoftacoma.org/cms/one.aspx?portalId=169&pageId=154789>