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SUBJECT: Urban Design Studio
DATE: May 8, 2019

PRESENTATION TYPE:
Informational Briefing

SUMMARY:

On May 8, 2019, the Infrastructure, Planning, and Sustainability (IPS) Committee will review and provide feedback on the Urban Design Studio in this preliminary stage of implementation. Staff will provide an overview of the proposed project scope and will request Committee input on selecting criteria by which to narrow down the focus area for this phase of work.

BACKGROUND:

The City of Tacoma has studied the idea of developing a comprehensive design review program to enhance the quality of the built environment throughout the City. The City currently operates two narrowly focused design review systems, one for historic districts and buildings, and the other for the Foss Waterway redevelopment area. Throughout the *One Tacoma* Comprehensive Plan and Tacoma 2025, policy guidance highlights design review as an opportunity to help create unique places, promote innovation and quality, and imbue public space with features and amenities that promote the health and vitality of residents and visitors. Over the last few years, the concept of a broader Urban Design Studio that would build and administer a citywide design review program, as well as visually communicate zoning and development to City staff and residents has evolved. The City Council provided resources to initiate this program and the Urban Design Studio was established in 2018.

The focus of the Urban Design Studio is to work with the community, development partners, and other departments and agencies to advance the design quality of places citywide. The program's mission is to build upon Tacoma's unique setting and history, special character and changing population, to elevate the quality of public and private spaces and create a more vibrant, livable, walkable, and sustainable city. The program will oversee a design review process and will work to translate visions and ideas into policy and objectives that result in guidelines and projects, with the intention of forwarding community-supported design.

ISSUE:

Staff seeks guidance in determining an appropriate approach to identifying significant projects to focus on. Through the process of selecting a consultant and negotiating the scope of the project it has become clear there are areas that will need to be clarified in order to facilitate effectively accomplishing project outcomes. These outcomes will fall into two categories. Some deliverables (operations manuals, code modifications, etc.) will be implemented comprehensively. Others (design guidelines, design review, etc.) will need to be focused for this phase on significant projects (as discussed below) while anticipating eventual inclusion of additional focus areas for subsequent projects.



Staff have identified five potential strategies that could be used to parse out a subset of projects to focus on in this initial phase of work. These are:

1. Public Projects
2. Projects in Neighborhood Centers
3. Projects on Pedestrian Corridors
4. Projects in Zone Transitions (MUC to Residential, etc.)
5. Projects in Mixed Use Centers

In determining this first subset of projects to focus on, it is important to consider the following:

- Is there a vision in place? The implementation of design guidelines will be most effective if it is the implementation of an existing vision that has been identified (in the Comprehensive Plan or elsewhere).
- Are there areas where current code is preventing good design? Ideally through code flexibility, incentives, etc., a better outcome than what is possible under current regulation can be achieved.
- How many projects need review versus need design guidelines?

SUMMARY OF PLANNING COMMISSION DISCUSSION:

The Planning Commission was given an overview of the proposed project scope at their April 3, 2019 meeting, and they provided recommendations that are included in this briefing. No formal action was requested by staff as there are still steps to be taken before a decision is made. These include:

- Meeting with the IPS Committee.
- Meeting with the Technical Advisory Committee: this is an advisory committee comprised of city staff from a range of departments to provide feedback throughout the current scope of work.
- Meeting with the Project Advisory Group: this is an advisory group comprised of stakeholders (community members from across the city, Planning Commission, Design Community, Development Community, Landmarks, Environment, and Affordable Housing).
- A second Planning Commission meeting to review the findings from this series of engagements.

The Planning Commission was supportive of the five strategies identified by staff. A number of ideas were offered on how to combine these strategies, however it was agreed the presented strategies captured the important challenges facing design review in the City of Tacoma and the specifics could be ironed out through the above review process. It was further agreed that single-family and industrial zones should not be the focus at this point.

ALTERNATIVES:

The IPS Committee could direct that modifications be made to the Planning Commission's recommendations and/or to the strategies proposed by staff.

FISCAL IMPACT:

This is an information briefing only. There is no fiscal impact.

ATTACHMENTS:

Planning Commission Discussion Outline
Project Summary and Timeline