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DRAFT RECOMMENDATION TO ESTABLISH A DESIGN REVIEW COMMITTEE January 19, 2009

The Purpose of Organized Design Review

We have seen numerous projects in the past decade that have significantly exceeded current zoning or have otherwise been controversial in communities. These projects have, in effect, been subject to a 'disorganized' design review, sometimes conducted at the Zoning Board of Adjustment or in meeting halls within specific communities.

The purpose of an organized design review, under the auspices of the City Planning Commission (the Commission), is to conduct reviews that will happen anyway, but now under the supervision of a group of design professionals who are experienced with design and development. The reviews are intended to be a public forum where developers and citizens can discuss projects before they are subject to regulatory action and where principles of design excellence, especially with regard to impact on the public realm, are articulated for the good of the city.

It is hoped and intended that as this design review demonstrates its fairness and worth, this venue replaces the numerous other reviews that characterize the process today. In so doing, the intention is to streamline the review process and make it more predictable and open.

Structure of Design Review

Design review will be through a committee (the Committee) of the Commission and will offer recommendations to the Commission for projects that require Commission advice or approval. The Committee will consist of volunteer members of design professionals, recommended by the Commission and appointed by the Mayor, who will meet monthly to review select projects. This is analogous to the Architectural Committee of the Historical Commission.

The Committee will consist of seven members, one each from the fields of architecture, landscape architecture, urban planning, historic preservation, engineering and development. The seventh appointment will be an individual with experience in civic association development review. A member of the Commission will be the Chair of the Committee and will fill one of the designated positions. The Executive Director (or appointed designee) will advise the Committee but will have no vote.

Projects to be Reviewed

Based on the premise that major projects have major impacts, the Committee will review any residential, commercial or institutional project in need of zoning variance or Council-sponsored ordinance change and that is over 100,000 gross square feet of development or 25 or more residential units. Projects in these use categories that are smaller than the limits above, but that exceed existing zoning limits for density, height or setbacks by 200% or more, will also be reviewed.

The public may also request that the Committee review 'of right' projects. Such projects will be reviewed only with the consent of the developer and the approval of the Committee Chair and the Executive Director. The Committee's report will be advisory to the developer and the community.

Criteria for Review

The Committee's review is intended to evaluate a project for its impact on the public realm. For example, matters such as the walkability of streets, character of the ground level as a contributor to street activity, curbside management, vehicular access and traffic, the form of urban streets and open spaces, light and

air, and relationship to context are of critical importance to the quality of life. The Committee's review is not intended to evaluate the architectural style or compositional aspects of a project outside of their clear impact on the public realm.

Operating Methods

The Development Division of the Commission will continue to be the intake area for all development proposals in the city. The Development Division will advise the Executive Director and the developer as to whether or not the proposed project qualifies for design review. The Executive Director will approve or disapprove the project for design review and will notify the developer within five working days of his/her decision. Such notice will initiate the 45 day review period explained below. Projects that do not qualify for design review will continue to be reviewed internally by Commission staff.

The Committee will meet two weeks prior to all Planning Commission meetings. The Committee Chair will prepare a summary report for the Commission noting the status of all projects currently under review. When a recommendation is ready to be conveyed to the Commission, the Committee Chair will prepare a summary report of the recommendation and present it to the Commission at its regularly scheduled meetings. The summary report will be posted on the Commission's website.

It is anticipated that major projects of the type envisioned here may require at least two separate reviews with the Committee. The first will be for information only, at which time the Committee members and the public can ask questions, offer criticisms and otherwise learn about the project. After a period of design development and further work with Commission staff, the project will be presented again to the Committee for recommendation to the Commission. The Committee may require a project to come back for a third review if significant issues remain unresolved after two reviews.

For projects that require an approved Plan of Development subsequent to the recommendation of the Committee, a determination will be made by the Executive Director as to whether the design as reflected in the Plan of Development documents requires an additional Committee review or is substantially in conformance with the previous recommendation and may be sent directly to the Commission for final approval.

Similar to Commission meetings, the Committee's meetings will be public and advertised. Agendas will be posted online and distributed in advance. The Committee will conduct reviews within 45 days of notification of a project's clearance for review. If the Committee does not act on the project within the 45 day limit, the project will be assumed to be 'recommended for approval, as designed' to the Commission.

Next Steps

The Commission requests your consideration of and comment on this draft document. Please put any thoughts you have in writing (email preferred) and return them to the Commission c/o eva.lopez@phila.gov by February 9, 2009. Please note 'design review' in the subject line.

Based on the comments received, the Commission staff will prepare a final proposal for approval by the Commission at its February meeting. It is hoped that the Committee can be in operation sometime during the Spring of 2009.