

URBAN DESIGN REVIEW FRAMEWORK UPDATE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Administration is undertaking work to improve the urban design review process at The City of Calgary through improvements to both internal design review practices and to the design decision aspects of the application process. Objectives have been determined and internal improvements to the design review process have been identified and implementation is underway. As well, extensive research on best practice examples for urban design review in use in other North American cities has been conducted. The last step in this process is to consult with those involved in the internal and external design and application review processes, including Calgary Planning Commission, the Urban Design Review Panel, the development industry, and community stakeholders. A cross-representative working group will be established to assist with this phase. Recommended changes will be brought forward to Council by 2017 March.

ADMINISTRATION RECOMMENDATION(S)

That, in regard to urban design review improvements, the Standing Policy Committee on Planning & Urban Development recommend that Council:

1. Receive this report for information; and
2. Direct Administration to report back to Council, by 2017 March, through the SPC on Planning & Urban Development, with an update on the process changes initiated, and recommendations to further improve urban design outcomes.

RECOMMENDATION OF THE SPC ON PLANNING AND URBAN DEVELOPMENT, DATED 2016 MAY 06:

That Council:

1. Receive this report for information; and
2. Direct Administration to **consult with interested stakeholders** and report back to Council, by 2017 March, through the SPC on Planning & Urban Development, with an update on the process changes initiated, and recommendations to further improve urban design outcomes.

PREVIOUS COUNCIL DIRECTION / POLICY

On 2015 July 27, Council referred Report PUD2015-0453 to Administration for further consultation with interested stakeholders and with members of the Next City Advisory Committee, to return to Council through the SPC on Planning and Urban Development no later than Q2 2016.

BACKGROUND

Great urban design is a critical component in the creation of a healthy, vibrant, and attractive city. It is best achieved through the coordination of all related disciplines, including planning, architecture, transportation planning, engineering and landscape design. Safe, comfortable and interesting places are created through the successful design of the complex relationship between streets, buildings, and the spaces between them, which responds to use, context and climate. This intentional arrangement, shaping, detailing and utilization of buildings and public

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spaces are required to ensure sustained animation and vitality. Therefore, urban design is a fundamental part of Calgary's Municipal Development Plan (MDP).

To improve urban design outcomes, Administration presented recommendations to Council in 2015 July with regard to a revised model for design decision making that proposed to streamline the process and reduce redundancy. The recommendations included incorporating additional urban design expertise on the Calgary Planning Commission. No decisions were made at that time and it was recommended that broader research and engagement be undertaken to inform the best approach.

Recognizing the importance of excellence in urban design, The City of Calgary (The City) has two specific sources for urban design advice that are applied during the application process. The external Urban Design Review Panel (UDRP) was created in 2003 to review selected development applications and provide advisory urban design comments that are included in the report to the Calgary Planning Commission (CPC). The City also has an internal team of urban design specialists who review applications, participate in meetings with applicants, and work with development planners to address issues. Questions have been asked about the effectiveness of this arrangement and how it could be improved to achieve better outcomes.

To achieve the MDP objective of *Urban Design Excellence*, urban design efforts must be coordinated and considered early when improvements can be identified and changes made with a minimum of wasted time, effort and expense. There are currently some instances when this early design discussion and expert review does not occur, instead happening later in the project development when decisions about site design, building orientation, form, and design details have already been made.

In addition to early design direction, the certainty of high quality urban design outcomes is greatly enhanced when there is role clarity regarding design review of development applications and it is prioritized appropriately. The urban design expertise within Administration and the experts on the external UDRP are in place to fulfill this role, however they operate independently of one another, and without a clear role in the decision making. As both the internal and external urban design experts are advisory to the process, other aspects of the development may take priority and the quality of the design may be diminished. The result can be inconsistency, delay, confusion and inefficiency. As well, decision-making bodies need to feel confident that they are consistently receiving the complete, coordinated design review information necessary to make an informed assessment.

In 2015 July, Administration proposed changes to CPC to ensure that the Commission includes experienced design professionals to strengthen their authority in the decision-making process. While Council expressed a desire for increased consultation and engagement before supporting proposed changes, Council members were supportive of the aim to ensure that urban design input occurs at the right time, with the right people and with the appropriate priority. Council referred the proposal back to Administration with the direction to consult with the Next City Advisory Committee. Administration met with the Next City Advisory Committee on 2015 September 08 and 2016 April 08 to discuss options and to receive advice on engagement with

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stakeholders. The Committee asked Administration to provide an update report to the 2016 May 06 meeting of the SPC on Planning and Urban Development.

INVESTIGATION: ALTERNATIVES AND ANALYSIS

Two key initiatives have been undertaken to investigate ways to further improve the design review process:

1. Improvements to Internal Processes

- Improvements to internal urban design review processes by establishing application circulation criteria, with an emphasis on ensuring that early design guidance occurs on key project types or sites. More consistent reporting and early circulation is occurring and will continue to be discussed for all relevant project types.
- Exploration of ways to introduce collaboration between the internal and external urban design experts to improve efficiency, reduce redundancy and create one voice on design matters. Implementation is dependent on the results of the stakeholder engagement.
- Outreach to internal and external users of Urban Design Services, sharing how the available skills are best used in the process to achieve the desired outcomes.

2. Best Practices Research

- A “best practice” review of over thirty North American cities and synthesis into a number of proposed models by which to better achieve the objectives. The review of these models with stakeholders, including CPC, UDRP, and development industry and community representatives will occur as part of the proposed stakeholder engagement. (see Attachment, Urban Design Review Processes and Practices: Lessons From Other Jurisdictions)
- Identification, through this research, of a number of common themes:
 - Most cities have both an internal urban design team and an external peer review panel.
 - In most cases, the external panel is advisory to staff, not to a separate decision-making body.
 - The internal urban design team most often manages and collaborates with the external panel in addressing specific issues and concerns.
 - Most internal and external expert groups are positioned to provide review and comment early in the application process before major design decisions have been made.

Administration’s research on urban design review processes in other cities shows that most follow similar models. One of the areas where these models differ from one another is in the treatment of the decision-making body, in terms of its composition, focus and authority. Also, most models connect the internal and external urban design review bodies in order to provide early input and co-ordinated advice. In Calgary, the internal urban design team and the external

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UDRP operate independently. This can result in duplication of effort and a lack of clarity as to the source of recommendations at the time of decision.

From the work completed to date three primary objectives for a successful urban design review process have been identified. The process should:

1. Provide for design input at the most effective points in the review process.
2. Make the best use of local design expertise.
3. Support informed decision-making.

Administration proposes the following timeline for the next steps in the process:

- May 2016: Formation of a working group including industry and internal stakeholders to inform the engagement process.
- June to October 2016: Consultation with internal and external stakeholders.
- November 2016: Consultation with the Next City Advisory Committee.
- March 2017: Report back to Council through the SPC on Planning and Urban Development with recommended solutions.
- On-going: Further implementation of internal improvements to the review process.

In summary, continuing to implement internal changes will improve the timing and coordination of design input. Utilizing the lessons learned from the best practice research will provide a framework for the stakeholder engagement and will ultimately lead to developing solutions for better clarifying urban design decision making roles. Achieving timely and effective design review as a result of this process will optimize available expertise and guide better outcomes for urban design.

Stakeholder Engagement, Research and Communication

Administration is developing communication and engagement plans to meaningfully involve affected stakeholders. Those plans will be initiated in 2016 May and will include opportunities for engagement and for reporting back to stakeholders, and will be completed this fall.

Strategic Alignment

The Municipal Development Plan (MDP) promotes site and building design that contributes to high quality living environments and attractive, walkable, diverse neighbourhoods and communities (MDP 2.4.2) and coherent and collaborative design of streets, building interfaces and public spaces (MDP 2.4.3).

Urban design objectives are also prominent in the Calgary Transportation Plan, the Centre City Plan, the Complete Streets Policy and the Urban Design Framework.

The Urban Design Review Framework project aligns with Action Plan 2015-2018 by aiming to improve transparency and understanding of the planning system; implement improvements to application processes; ensure early integration of urban design and public realm design into all aspects of the planning process and develop stakeholder relationships to achieve positive outcomes.

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Social, Environmental, Economic (External)

Social

Making decisions on urban design at the right point in the process and with the best use of internal and external design expertise creates a more transparent process for all stakeholders. Involvement of stakeholders in a discussion of the options for a new decision-making framework will help to ensure that it meets the needs of citizens and customers. An urban design review process that involves the right expertise at the right points of the development approval process with the right information will help result in improved urban design for Calgary.

Environmental

No implications identified.

Economic (External)

Improving the decision-making on urban design will result in greater transparency and a improved clarity and more logical application approval. Greater certainty will result in increased confidence on the part of industry. Consistent early discussion of significant design issues will avoid costly changes and additional time spent later in the process. Involvement of stakeholders will help to determine the best way to achieve improvements to the review process.

Financial Capacity

Current and Future Operating Budget

Engagement of internal and external stakeholders and internal process improvements will be part of the Calgary Growth Strategies' operating budget and completed through internal resources.

Current and Future Capital Budget:

No implications identified.

Risk Assessment

Changes to the way The City makes urban design decisions could risk opposition from development and building industry and community stakeholders. Meaningful engagement on improvements to the urban design decision making process will help to ensure that the process meets the objectives of design input at the most effective point in the process, makes best use of local design expertise and informed design decision making while meeting the objectives of industry and citizens.

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REASON(S) FOR RECOMMENDATION(S):

In response to Council's previous direction, Administration has conducted best practices research, investigated ways to improve the internal process, has begun implementing changes, and has met with the Next City Advisory Committee. The information gathered has been used to identify key objectives and to formulate a range of models for improving urban design outcomes. The last phase of this work is to engage with internal and external experts, the development industry and community stakeholder to develop solutions for further improving the urban design review process, including clarifying decision making roles.

Recommendations will be brought forward to Council by March 2017 that will result in better urban design outcomes.

ATTACHMENT(S)

Urban Design Review Processes and Practices: Lessons from Other Jurisdictions