

Portland residents chime in on design overlay talk

By: Kent Hohlfeld in Scrolling Box February 24, 2017 4:30 pm



Heather Flint Chatto, right, co-founder of Division Design Initiative, points out design features of buildings on Southeast Division Street that the group would like to see incorporated into new developments. Also pictured are, from left, urban planner Patrick Hilton, Linda Nettekoven of the Hosford-Abernethy Neighborhood District Association, and Laurence Qamar, an architect and urban planner. (Sam Tenney/DJC)

The rapid rate of redevelopment in Portland is changing many neighborhoods. Now the process by which projects gain approval is being reassessed, and neighborhood groups are making sure they have their say.

"This is an opportunity to implement recommendations we have been advocating," said Heather Flint Chatto, founder of the **Division Design Initiative**. "What we have been doing is engaging the community in a new way."

The Division Design Initiative was born out of community members' concerns over dramatic changes taking place along Division Street. The group has become one of the most active community voices about redevelopment design in Portland neighborhoods. The city's **Design Overlay Zone Assessment (DOZA)** has given community groups a major opportunity to be heard.

"There is no real planning on the cumulative impact," Chatto said. "Right now, (city officials) don't have the ability to evaluate the context of a project they are overseeing."

Lora Lillard, project manager with the **Portland Bureau of Planning and Sustainability**, said that the community involvement has helped the process.

"I think for me and the staff it is good to see where the temperature is," she said.

The goal of DOZA is to help streamline the process of reviewing designs for new construction in Portland. The city hired **Walker Macy**, a landscape architecture and urban design firm, to help analyze the way the city oversees the design process. The Design Commission evaluates buildings within design overlay zones, which cover about 10 percent of the city.

"We have had a good interactive process," said Mark Hinshaw, a Walker Macy principal who is overseeing the assessment. "We haven't always had agreement, which we wouldn't expect."

The firm in November made preliminary recommendations that included: adjusting the thresholds for design to provide a high level of review for larger projects in the design overlay zones, but a lower level of review for smaller projects; improving public notices; and considering the possibility of increasing the number of design commissions (currently, Portland has just one).

The firm examined how other cities have dealt with many of the same issues that Portland is facing.

"We looked at Seattle, San Francisco, Austin, Denver and Milwaukee," Hinshaw said. "Each has a different approach to it. We also gleaned some aspects from those discussions."

Hinshaw's team reached out to neighborhood groups to get their input. Some expressed concerns over the standards that were being applied in various parts of the city. Other groups were worried about potential projects that wouldn't fit within neighborhood context.

"We had a series of interviews with people in the neighborhoods," Hinshaw said. "They wanted more transparency in terms of when applications were being considered. We need to make the process easier for everyone."

The team also held open houses that allowed the public to see exactly what was being recommended and their opinions. The result is that many of the recommendations have been warmly received by neighborhood associations.

"The consultant has done a great job of incorporating our concerns," Chatto said. "We really appreciated the focus on context. I think the focus on notifications and some particular recommendations were great. It's less about notification and more about context of the adjacent architecture."

The problem often comes in defining context.



Lora Lillard, a project manager with the Portland Bureau of Planning and Sustainability, gives a review of the Design Overlay Zones Assessment during a meeting of the Southeast Uplift Neighborhood Coalitions Land Use and Transportation Committee. (Sam Tenney/DJC)

"What does one mean by context and quality?" Design Commission Chairman David Wark asked during a meeting that included Hinshaw and the planning commission. "It is open to a lot of interpretation."

Another recommendation concerned addressing the public's confusion about the design process. Hinshaw's team recommended changing where the public can find information on applicable design standards and making the standards easier to understand.

"The developers have it figured out," Hinshaw said. "The neighborhoods are kind of at a loss. We need to make it simple, in plain English."

The team recommended that the city issue clear mailings and notices about subjects. The recommendation many wishes expressed by the Division Design Initiative. The group's website has a multipoint recommend the subject.

"People need to know how they can make constructive comments," Hinshaw said. "That kind of information broadcast widely enough."

A recommendation that received more mixed reviews from neighborhood groups was eliminating and reducing review of some small projects. The idea of making it easier to make small additions or alterations to existing properties was applauded. The question of what constitutes a small project was a thornier issue.

"We have made it easy for the big project and not for the small developer," Chatto said. "We treat it as if it fits all."

The consultant's remedy was to allow some projects to be removed from the Design Commission's purview that many residents, small business owners and association officials expressed frustration that just a small change to a building can send them into a design review process that can last months.

"The most contentious recommendation was to remove a whole category of projects where there is just a small addition," Hinshaw said. "A lot of Portland's character comes out of small, idiosyncratic additions. Some of them are oddball, quirky things. Not all of it is great, but let people do it. Don't fuss over it. They are not doing something that will last 100 years."

That recommendation was not welcomed universally. Linda Nettekoven, a member of the Hosford-Abernet Neighborhood District Association, has concerns.

"I am all for things being clear and simple and elegant as possible," she said. "But what it would mean for the Division is that most of the new construction on the street would have no review, and people would have no voice. That part is of concern."

Another recommendation was to add a second design commission.

"A big priority is the support for forming a second design commission now," Chatto said. "There is a big backlog of projects. Many people have suggested one per quadrant. Even having one to two additional commissions would be big."

Overall, the consultants believe that many relatively minor changes to the system could vastly improve both public and private involvement with the process. Final recommendations are expected to be issued by the end of the year. They will then be reviewed by the Design Commission and then the City Council.

Changes would not take effect before 2018.

"It is a system that isn't broken, but it is bent," Hinshaw said. "The system needs to help build good buildings that are good for the area and where people want to be there."

