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TO: NAIOP Washington
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SUBJECT: Summary Findings of Industry's Perspective on Seattle's Design Review Program

Industry Perspective

ECONorthwest is working with NAIOP to better understand the Seattle Design Review process and how it has performed over recent history. To that end, much of the work has been a data review of the scale and timeliness of the Design Review and Master Use Permit process. To augment the data analysis, ECONorthwest interviewed professionals with Design Review experience, including former design review board members, mixed-use and high-rise developers, and architects for their perspectives on the Design Review and Master Use Permit process. Specifically, these interviews sought their overall assessment of the process with focus in the follow areas:

- Experience with Design Review
- Design Review Process Challenges
- Experience with other Design Review Processes
- Efficacy of Recent Design Review Changes
- Opportunity for Design Review Improvements

List of Interviews

The interviews were conducted with the following individuals listed below. When combined, this group of individuals hold several decades worth of experience developing and designing in the city of Seattle. These individuals were selected because they hold a wide array of development experience from designing, managing, and developing large and small developments such as high-rise towers in downtown to building mixed-use projects in Seattle's neighborhoods. Some of these individuals are also former design review board members who understand the built environment and have volunteered their time to creating a better city.

- **Maria Barrientos** is a real estate developer in the Seattle area and partner of barrientos Ryan real estate development firm.
- **Gabriel Grant** is a principal at Spectrum Development Solutions. Spectrum Development is a for-profit real estate development and advisory company based in Seattle. Gabriel is also a former member of the Downtown Seattle Design Review Board and Historic Seattle Public Development Authority.
- **Brian Runberg** is a principal at Runberg Architecture Group which focuses on residential mixed-use and tower developments.
- **Julia Nagele** is a principal and director of design at Hewitt Architects. Julia holds years of experience designing and managing high-rise and mixed-use developments in Seattle.
- **Matt Roewe** is a principal at Via Architecture. Matt has extensive experience on complex mixed-use, high-rise, commercial, residential and urban development projects. Matt is a

former member of the Seattle Planning Commission and South Lake Union Design Review Board.

- **Myer Harrell** is a principal and director of sustainability at Weber Thompson architecture firm. Myer has several years' experience with high-rise and mixed-use developments in Seattle. He is also a former member of the Southwest Seattle Design Review Board.

Summary of Themes Across Industry Professionals

Several key themes emerged from discussion with industry professionals about their experience with Seattle's design review process including the need to make improvements to the process to help build more housing and jump start the economy during the COVID-19 pandemic. They related to process improvements and creating guidelines to address these issues as summarized below.

Design Review Process Challenges

- **Unclear review discretion** over the design of a project. Stakeholders mentioned continued challenges with the unlimited discretion that the design review board holds over projects which can lead to costly design changes and prolonged review process. Stakeholders mentioned that the city does not clearly outline the extent of discretion that the board members are allowed to express. This has led to inconsistent project input across all design review boards and lack of procedural guidance between the design review board and planner.
- **Board members construction related expertise does not bound their review of projects**. This sometimes leads to the board suggesting impractical design changes in the construction industry and further make the review process more complex. Stakeholders who have experience developing and designing high-rise tower developments often get design suggestions from the review board that are cost prohibitive or structurally impractical to do. This further complicates the review process and add additional review meetings to a project in order for the review board to understand the full scope of the project design.
- **Design review board can sometimes be selective of community feedback and support.** Stakeholders mentioned several instances where community support for a specific project was disregarded by the board. Community organizations that represent a full spectrum of interests and residents are often times not heard in the review process. Stakeholders often experience the board giving more weigh to individual voices rather than community organizations.
- **Meeting notes findings don't capture the full depth of recommendations by the board.** Stakeholders mentioned that often times planners who are taking notes don't always interpret the boards' recommendations accurately. Stakeholders have mentions that this can create confusion in terms of what design suggestions should be considered if the planner meeting notes are regarded as an official document that needs to be addressed by the applicant.

- **The city does not provide expected timelines for different stages and actions in the review process.** Stakeholders are often faced with a lot of ambiguity of how long a specific action in the review process will take. City planners might sometimes disclose to individual applicants how long a specific action might take to review or process; however, it usually takes longer than what the planner estimated. This challenge is most pronoun when scheduling an early design guidance meeting and when an applicant should expects to get back design review meeting notes from a planner.

Experience with other Design Review Boards

- **Other design review processes were found to be easier and clearer to follow.** Stakeholders had some experience with Bellevue's design review process which they said to be less risky than compared to Seattle review process. Bellevue's design review process was said to be easier due to its clear and objective standards.

Efficacy of Recent Design Review Changes

- **The 2018 changes to the design review process have generally improved for smaller sized projects and affordable housing projects**. Stakeholders mentioned that they generally work on medium to large scale projects and have not themselves experienced the benefits of the changes for smaller scale projects and affordable housing projects. Stakeholders did questions weather administrative design review is any faster than full design review due to planners exhorting their design discretion.

Opportunities for Improvements

Although a complete overhaul of the design review process itself is not feasible, stakeholders did provide suggestions for how the design review process could be improved to address the challenges summarized above. The list below summarizes the various opportunities for improvement.

- **Provide better design review board management.** Stakeholders suggested that there should be more clarity and guidance in terms of what is under the scope of purview for the design review board. This could be achieved by having the planner taking a more active role in the meetings and guiding the board on the type of discretion they can provide to projects. Furthermore, formalizing guidelines that outline the board's scope of discretion can help keep comments focused and meetings more efficient.
- **Require board members to have experience in the development and construction industry or provide additional training to board members in this field.**
- **Require only 2 massing studies in the early design guidance.**
- **Require a timeline for when meeting notes should be summarized and given to applicant.** If the timeline is not adhered to by the planner, the applicant can automatically proceed to the next step in the review process with the existing proposed design.
- **Publish estimate timelines for different review phases and actions in design review.**

- **Provide clear guidance on the role of the board and their commitment to uphold the interest of the community rather than their own interests.**