

Development Commission  
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**CITY OF ISSAQUAH  
DEVELOPMENT COMMISSION  
MINUTES  
April 5, 2017**

City Hall South  
Council Chambers

135 E. Sunset Way  
Issaquah, WA 98027

**COMMISSIONERS PRESENT**

Richard Sowa, Chair  
Mel Morgan, Jr., Vice Chair  
Michael Brennan  
Randy Harrison  
Raymond Leong  
Kevin Price  
Robert Bakh, Alt.  
Carl Swedberg, Alt.

**STAFF PRESENT**

Lucy Sloman, Land Development Manager  
Keith Niven, Economic and Dev. Serv. Director

**OTHERS PRESENT**

George Crandall, Crandall/Arambula  
Don Arambula, Crandall/Arambula  
Jason Graf, Crandall/Arambula

**CALL TO ORDER**

SOWA, Chair, called the meeting to order at 7:00 PM.

**APPROVAL OF MINUTES**

MOVED BY MORGAN, SECONDED BY BAKH that minutes of the Development Commission meeting on December 7, 2016 be approved as presented. MOTION CARRIED UNANIMOUSLY.

**MORATORIUM WORK PLAN: Architectural Fit and Urban Design**

Don Arambula introduced the members of the consultant team from Crandall/Arambula, 520 SW Yamhill Street, Suite 4, Portland, Oregon 97204. He gave background information about Crandall/Arambula, including recent projects they have undertaken for jurisdictions of about the same size as Issaquah. George Crandall continued the team's presentation with some photos of the firm's past projects, including historic preservation and commercial/retail/housing/parking projects. Arambula described projects the firm is currently working on, including complete streets; transit-oriented development, both locally and nationally; zoning ordinances; and design review process improvements.

He continued his remarks by describing the firm's planning philosophy, which is "*The greatest barrier to high-quality urban revitalization is the lack of predictability.*" He also spoke about the need to have a complete plan; rules that are clear and objective; and a streamlined project approval process. Crandall continued the team's presentation with Portland's experience with revitalization from development during the 1960s and the 1970s to the present. He described how "success" was defined during that revitalization process, and showed photos of how buildings were transformed over time to be in keeping with that definition of success. He also described the "failures/successes" cycle that many downtowns face. He continued by showing photographs of retail, commercial, and parking structures in Portland from the 1990s and 2000s.

Arambula went through a basic project understanding of what the firm is proposing to do for the City of Issaquah, including assessing the existing Central Issaquah Plan (CIP); identifying barriers to success; and recommending subarea plan amendments where necessary. He continued the next step will be to provide a manual of design guidelines, and make suggestions

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about how to apply them. He showed a timeline of the proposed project schedule, from a discussion with Council next Monday to adoption by August 2017.

He said after looking over a wide variety of documents, including the City's planning documents, newspaper articles, market analyses, approved development proposals and staff reports, and watching YouTube videos, the team identified a general concern that development is not occurring as the City and residents envisioned. He continued with some highlights from what they observed and heard during their research, including the following:

- The districts are not unique; development is generic.
- Design of new buildings is not consistent with the character of structures in the older areas of town.
- New development projects have not provided mixed uses as envisioned.
- Gateways are lacking, with no sense of transitions.
- Hillside views should be protected (from what vantage point?).
- The Green Necklace is ill-defined and piecemeal.
- How mixed use should be applied on a district level lacks definition.
- Where is retail/first floor use viable.
- A strategy for street engagement and ground floor entry locations is not clear.
- What is acceptable for building colors and materials needs to be better defined.
- Building style—what is Issaquah-specific.
- Need to specify massing and form/methods to break up buildings vertically and horizontally.
- Front and back of building treatments are not equal.
- Scale is not sympathetic to adjacent buildings.
- Public park amenities are not being developed as part of new buildings.
- District connections and routes are lacking.
- Open space requirements not included as part of every development.
- Should buildings be required to be internally or externally oriented.
- Open space requirements/emphasis in the public realm is not clear.
- No comprehensive strategy for shared use routes, resulting in "routes to nowhere."
- Should street activity emphasis be toward existing streets or new streets.

He continued his presentation with an assessment of the CIP in terms of how well it meets the essential plan elements he described earlier. He said the CIP is largely a policy document; there are a lot of words, but no urban design plans to implement the district visions. He gave examples of the generic land use frameworks the CIP lays out for each district rather than giving district-by-district direction. He said the CIP lacks a circulation framework hierarchy. He described the plan for the Green Necklace as being very vague and oriented toward streets, with no civic focal point or plaza for downtown. He characterized the CIP itself as being "anemic" and not strong enough.

He continued to describe the difficulties of translating policies into development standards without a strong design framework. He described how the lack of a design framework is resulting in generic mixed-use development standards that poorly articulate the various districts.

He continued the team's assessment of next steps, including what the firm is proposing to provide. That would include reviewing both the (prescriptive) development standards and design standards. He introduced some ideas of how the City's existing standards could be strengthened by (1) clarifying what disruptive elements, such as colors and materials, should be

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prohibited, and (2) establishing performance standards. He explained the difference between development standards and design standards. He said the idea is to try to define the community in ways that can't be codified, because you can't codify everything, and gave examples of the elements that the firm would include in a design manual, such as form, massing, scale, connections, material, transitions, colors, materials, and so on. He showed an example of the format the manual would take. He continued with a description of an important design manual evaluation tool, namely a checklist for developers. He ended his presentation by noting that the firm will be back to meet with the Development Commission again on May 24.

### **Commissioner Discussion**

HARRISON expressed his appreciation for the consultant's presentation. He referred to a tour for Commissioners of development in Mercer Island and Bellevue some years ago, where he overheard one observer remark that Issaquah has a distinct advantage over many other Northwest towns, namely that it is a pre-car town. In other words, it has a town center that was developed before cars, which makes it pretty unique. In addition, he continued, Issaquah has the advantage of being surrounded by creeks, streams, hillsides, salmon, and other environmental amenities. In City surveys of its citizens, he continued, Issaquah residents always put the City's proximity to nature and the environment at, or very near, the top of what is most valued. So as we go forward, he concluded, those values need to be reflected and acknowledged. They are what give Issaquah an advantage over other cities and towns, he added.

BRENNAN said he was interested in the consultant's perceptions of where gaps exist in the CIP. He said he feels the vision of transformation reflected in the CIP is strong, but where we are struggling is in the implementation of that vision in the codes and standards. He said it is a difficult balancing act to determine how much regulation to plug into the standards and where to allow flexibility. The development community is looking for certainty and predictability, he continued, but they also want flexibility. He said we are relatively early in the CIP implementation phase. It is probably good that the City is pausing now to examine where we are having challenges based on the lack of specificity we are able to give developers on some of these projects. He said retooling the standards and guidelines will be an interesting part of this effort.

BRENNAN continued his comments about some of the consultant's comments about ground-level retail. He said it seems that retail needs adequate density to work, and density takes time to develop, so how do you make retail work while waiting for density. Arambula and Crandall replied we often hear that "this plan is ahead of the market," but that can be a refuge for just doing nothing. There is never or rarely enough density for retail to thrive from local neighbors alone; you need adequate drive-by traffic. From our experience, Arambula continued, retail in a city of this size needs 5,000 to 15,000 trips per day in front of that retail for it to thrive. The bigger strategy is asking why would you put retail there. It won't work to just have retail scattered around; retail likes to be clustered, as doing so creates a kind of energy. You need a concentration of retail, although it doesn't have to be big. Crandall said it is very difficult to get the size of retail right, and cities all around the country are finding themselves in trouble because online traffic is changing retail. You have to be very disciplined, he said. The consultants spoke about how the Atlas Apartments location, for example, is not a good location for retail. He continued one of the problems with the CIP is that it does not have a framework for saying where retail should go. Crandall referred to the firm's work with Milwaukee, Wisconsin and the role of predictability in successful urban planning.

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MORGAN said we have been hearing more about the visions for each district over the last few months, and asked from your viewpoint, is there a need to get very specific on each district, or just on a subset of them. Crandall spoke in favor being as specific as possible. He said the team doesn't have all the information it needs yet to be definitive now, but we will be looking at each district, what is there now, and making recommendations for what we think would be appropriate in each. He responded to HARRISON's earlier comment about Issaquah being a "pre-car town" and its unique environmental amenities, and said he definitely agrees that those features are important for Issaquah to maintain. If you can relate to the strength and history of a community, he said, the guidelines and standards to implement development that reflects that history will resonate with the public. Arambula used Pickering Barn as an example, and said one approach would have been to say that is a focal point for that neighborhood, and not allow any buildings taller than the distinctive, red Pickering Barn. Crandall said you don't want to do anything that degrades or erodes your unique environment. This is an attractive place for developers, he continued, and you should be able to say no to development that doesn't get you where you want to go. There will always be another developer right behind them who will. He said we have looked at the City's growth targets, and another question to be posed is why do you want to make this community bigger. Arambula gave examples from the firm's experience with architectural standards in Santa Fe. He concluded development needs to be viable but developers should play by the community's rules and keep the community authentic.

LEONG gave his perspective on the Development Commission's experience reviewing the Gateway project, and noted the end result was not what was expected. He also referred to a time many years ago when the City didn't have clear standards for developers, and when developers' proposals were rejected the City was sued for not being clear enough, which led to establishment of the Development Commission. He said he doesn't see how creating a list of what we don't want will work, as the list will be quite long, and is interested to hear more from the consultants on that. He also asked clarifying questions about the consultant's comments that the City's downtown lacks a civic focal point or plaza, and said in his view such a point exists just outside the community center. HARRISON noted that is located in Olde Town, not central Issaquah. Arambula gave examples of how a civic focal point functions in a community, specifically as a place to have a rally, put up a community Christmas tree, as a well-recognized meeting spot, and so on.

SOWA said he likes the notion of the current CIP being aspirational rather than prescriptive. He said he also favors having the consultants look at standards for each district that are site-specific. That kind of framework would be helpful to the Development Commission, he continued. Frequently the Commission has found that the specifics of proposed projects fall within the code and so can't be successfully argued against.

PRICE agreed that development guidelines and standards in a manual format would be a real asset and tool, but the tool also needs to include a mechanism for process. Will the manual speak to process as well, he asked. He gave details of his experience on the City of Seattle Design Review Board and the training that board members received, as well as the opportunity to really pause during a project review and talk freely among themselves. Crandall said yes, we have thoughts about process as well as experience with training. Arambula gave examples of how training could be done. He said improving predictability will make that process better for both developers and the Development Commission and Council. Crandall added architects and developers will also sometimes pay no attention to written design guidelines, checklists, and standards, and gave examples. You need guidelines that are defensible and easy to understand, so you can stop projects that don't fit as well as approve ones that do.

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HARRISON said he understands that this is not in the Commission's purview, but the single biggest issue for residents in this town is traffic. He said citizens will want to know whether, and how, these changes will help improve traffic. Arambula said the team can't give you all the answers, but we can make recommended changes that will push the City toward giving people choices in addition to driving. One approach is to focus on reducing the length and frequency of residents' car trips, for example. Crandall noted traffic, along with growth and climate change, are posing challenges for communities all across the country. He said there is widespread interest in pedestrian-friendly networks, protected bikeways, and transit across many cities, which if done right, can eliminate 50 percent of the traffic on the road. HARRISON noted plans for Sound Transit light rail in ST-3 will bring thousands of commuters to Issaquah from nearby communities. Arambula described how Redmond planned for a "boomerang" approach that brings commuters into and out of the city center to access the Redmond Transit Center as an example of how planning can help manage traffic from transit. HARRISON said people are already asking where the Issaquah light rail station will be sited. Crandall said we will have thoughts to share with you on that. Jason Graf said it's impossible to build your way out of growth, and gave some thoughts about planning for local circulators to connect districts and securing a better connection over I-90. LEONG said he agrees that transportation is outside the purview of the Commission, but the message to Council should be that the biggest problem for residents in the City is traffic.

BRENNAN asked for details about the scope of work in the moratorium. Keith Niven recapped the six areas to be addressed during the moratorium, noting that Crandall/Arambula has been tasked with addressing two of them: architectural guidelines and urban design. He gave some background on transportation and traffic issues the City is facing, and said there is no silver bullet that will solve all the City's transportation and growth issues, and that the answers are likely to be slow and expensive.

HARRISON said his understanding is that the City has already met about 70 percent of its Growth Management Act mandated housing target. Niven confirmed that is probably close to the right number. He gave more information about the topics that will be included at the Council's meeting next Monday, including a presentation by Crandall/Arambula, vertical mixed-use, green building issues, and a discussion about growth. He said in negotiations with the County for the 2006-2031 time period, the City agreed to take 5,750 housing units by 2031. The City will hit that number in 2018 based on current projections, so we are 12 or 13 years ahead of the planned target. That indicates the desirability of living in Issaquah, he continued, but it also means we have been growing pretty fast. Sloman recommended that Commissioners and other interested parties watch or attend the Council meeting on Monday, as the City's status as a Regional Growth Center will also be discussed.

Arambula displayed a slide of sample design manual guidelines and described how growth will inform architectural decisions, giving examples. Crandall spoke about the possibility of deciding to eliminate all surface parking lots on future projects. MORGAN asked for the consultants' thoughts on the potential for much taller buildings in the CIP. To date, he continued, he has heard comments about the color and design of buildings such as Atlas, but not many comments about building height. Crandall said trying to limit building height is very difficult, and you have to be thoughtful. Some communities cap building heights because they have decided doing so is essential to protect character. Arambula said buildings can also use towers in conjunction with shorter buildings. He spoke of the importance of building design over building height, and also said the team's research indicated that people really value hillside views from Issaquah. BRENNAN asked is building height addressed in the CIP. Niven replied the team has the ability to address all aspects of urban design, so addressing floor to area ratio (FAR) in their

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recommendations is fair game. He added it may be difficult to take away something in the future from a developer that was allowed in the past three or four years, but that problem will have to be faced then.

HARRISON said the need for predictability and clarity was a key message he heard from the consultants. He said the consultant has also indicated that, once better clarity is achieved, developers should play by the City's rules. He asked for clarification that the City would face litigation from a developer if it prohibited something that was allowed several years ago. Niven replied no. The CIP has a provision for a density bonus now, for example, and if it was eliminated for future development it might be a hard decision to make but it would not be prohibited. He continued the consultants are not necessarily recommending changing the CIP; they have been asked to clean up and make the plan more efficient, and to look at where gaps exist. He said he would also like to add that everything from this process will go to Council for deliberation and approval. The goal is predictability, which will benefit both developers and the City, he stated.

BRENNAN said light rail will have a huge impact on the plan, and even though 2040 is a ways off, it is not really that far away to start planning. He said as feedback to the consultants, he thinks helpful clarification would include defining what buildings would look like in each district; interfaces between districts; more definition about the types of approved building materials to be used, such as stone and natural-looking materials; roof configuration; defining a standard based on the scale of buildings; and approaches to the interface between the natural and built environment, especially along the Green Necklace and the trails.

MORGAN gave his perspective on how eliminating the Development Commission's Community Conferences for proposed projects has reduced the opportunity to give feedback to developers earlier rather than later in the design process. Other Commissioners agreed.

HARRISON noted that recently Issaquah was named Best Suburb in the West (Sunset Magazine) and the second-best town/city in the country for recreation (Outdoor Magazine), which attracts people to want to live here. The challenge is to have a City well-known for its special qualities also remain a good place to live.

SOWA thanked the consultants for a great presentation. He said the CIP and design standards were well-intentioned, and people are working hard on the City's behalf, but the consultant team's help is needed and welcomed.

#### **PUBLIC COMMENT**

None.

#### **OTHER BUSINESS/ANNOUNCEMENTS/ADJOURNMENT**

With no further business to conduct, SOWA adjourned the meeting at 9:00 PM.

Respectfully submitted,

Susan Lowe  
Recording Secretary

*(Note: Alternate Members participated in, but did not vote on, decisions at tonight's meeting as there was a quorum of Regular Members present.)*