



**RECOMMENDATIONS FOR
THE CITY OF TACOMA
DEVELOPMENT STANDARDS FOR MIXED USE CENTERS AND
PROPOSED DESIGN REVIEW PROGRAM
PRESENTED BY
AIA SOUTHWEST WASHINGTON CHAPTER OF
THE AMERICAN INSTITUTE OF ARCHITECTS (AIASWW)**

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“Cities are an immense laboratory of trial and error, failure and success, in city building and city design”.
Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*

INTRODUCTION

This is a vitally important time in the history of the City of Tacoma. The choices we make today regarding the quality and livability of our city will dramatically influence the progress we make on the many challenging issues we face as a community. Whether social, economic, or environmental issues are at stake, our urban fabric either contributes to desirable outcomes or perpetuates undesirable outcomes. As The City of Tacoma currently looks to make improvements to the City’s urban and building design codes, including the possible implementation of a “design review” process, the Southwest Washington Chapter of the American Institute of Architects (AIASWW), through its Board of Directors, respectfully submits the statements and recommendations contained herein. This document outlines recommendations that are intended to assist the City in defining and articulating desired characteristics and qualities of urban development, and addresses our position regarding various regulatory processes.

We have attempted in this document to clearly state both broad, and at times specific, goals for the City to consider with respect to future quality of Tacoma, particularly its urban centers. The statements contained herein are not entirely original, and in fact draw from respected and successful urbanists and the established principles of good urban design. There is no “silver bullet” to suddenly fix Tacoma’s urban centers. However, there must be persistent effort and effective civic leadership to embark on a new course for a better urbanism. It is our sincere desire that the City Planning Commission, the Building and Land Use Department, and ultimately the City Council, consider the statements and information provided in this document as being instrumental to Tacoma’s future as a truly great city.

SUMMARY OF AIASWW RECOMMENDATIONS

Mixed Use Center Zoning & Design Standards

In short, AIASWW Supports:

- Changes to the Comprehensive Plan that embrace and promote principles of urban design that will establish a new vision for a walkable, livable and sustainable City.
- The elimination of city-required off-street parking in the mixed-use urban centers, allowing the market to dictate parking strategies, thereby allowing our urban centers to perform the vital roles of providing appropriate density (through infilling), and creating pedestrian-oriented “village” environments.
- Changes to height limitations in the core areas of Mixed Use Centers to allow additional floor space, thereby creating more options for better urban design responses.
- A city-led public input process where members of AIASWW would participate voluntarily in forums designed to dialogue with citizens within each of the neighborhood districts. There are many AIA members who are willing to partner with the City in listening to the community, and helping to convey and portray to citizens within each area, possibilities for better urban environments, and establishing common ground for the development of cohesive community visions.

Vision: The AIASWW Chapter believes that the City of Tacoma must establish a *new vision* for the development of its urban centers that not only promotes, but insists on creating communities that are truly “livable”, “walkable”, and “sustainable”; a vision that inspires and attracts high quality development and is articulate in qualitatively defining what is wanted and desired by the community at large, and within neighborhoods. We advocate for the City to embrace and adopt principles of urban design that are well documented and successful. These principles, described later in this document, must provide a framework within which the City will be able to better define intended outcomes while creating more predictable, less complicated land use development codes.

Comprehensive Plan: We are aware of generalized goals described in the City’s Comprehensive Plan. The very purpose of the Comprehensive Plan states that it is to *“translate the values and goals of the citizens of Tacoma into a framework for decisions on growth, land use, and public facilities and services. The Comprehensive Plan expresses a long-range vision of how the citizens want their community to look and function in the future”*. In fact, the Comprehensive Plan already states many of the goals promoted by AIA for mixed use urban centers. (See Section VI – Mixed Use Centers” last amended 12-11-07). Rather than focusing solely on the appearance of buildings, (a direction that a design review process would seem to be headed), we advocate an approach that is first focused on the fabric and basis of the community as a “place” for human living and activity, and create development standards that boldly support that vision.

Community Process: This approach requires the City to actively seek community involvement to better define and articulate community development goals. While principles of successful urban design are transcendent, and would generally apply city-wide, each district or urban center possesses its own uniqueness and circumstances. Each area, already well-defined in the city’s Comprehensive Plan and already structured with active neighborhood councils, should be engaged in a process of understanding how their districts and neighborhoods can improve to create quality urban environments, and where broader city and regional goals (IE improved transportation systems, decreased carbon emissions, etc) are realized through better planning and development.

Over the years, the City has facilitated several successful community-based forums in an effort to gather public input. Projects such as planning for the future development of the Thea Foss Waterway (leading to the creation of the Foss Waterway Development Authority) and the *“Your City - Your Vision”* process that sought community input on public safety (eventually leading to the development of the new police campus and substations) are both

success stories. Another recent example is the community-based workshop process conducted on the Hilltop, (led by an architect who was hired by a local church) that engaged the local citizens as well as representatives from the City's planning, public works and utilities departments. The process was very successful in helping to create a common language among residents and the beginnings of a shared vision for the MLK corridor. This success must be repeated throughout the city, working through the neighborhood councils.

Design Review

In short, AIASWW supports:

- Quality design, but opposes a design review committee approach to achieving quality development. This includes imposing requirements for specific materials and building form such as “building modulation” or “open space” requirements. If qualitative requirements are sufficiently stipulated, and characteristic examples are provided, developers can then understand what is expected and can work creatively to attain the desired outcomes. This may result in an occasional bland or underwhelming building, but the urban fabric will be in tact. Further, as the bar is set high by good development, it tends to attract better development and property values increase.
- The development of a companion document to the quantitative zoning code requirements that would address the *quality* of urban development that is desired. Such a “Qualitative Characteristics” document would provide characteristic imagery (photographs of selected examples) that serve to visually portray successful, desirable urban environments. This approach provides individual communities with the ability to articulate what they want and like, while providing developers with greater understanding of what is expected of their projects.
- Administrative design review that focuses on a project's ability to positively contribute to the urban fabric, with each project providing a “building block” towards the vision of connected, pedestrian-friendly, livable environments. Further, a process involving community input (not necessarily approval) should be considered for new project in mixed use centers as a condition of permit issuance.

AIASWW opposes the institution of a formalized design review process, whereby individual projects are subject to design oversight by a separate design review committee. Instead, we favor changes and improvements to the City's zoning regulations that seek to inspire and articulate desired qualities and characteristics of urban centers in support of articulated City goals and visions as noted above.

We have reviewed the recently-developed “*Analysis of Design Review Options for the City of Tacoma*” prepared by the city's consultant, Makers. Referring to page 22, we note that “most participants” in the stakeholder input process indicated that “the time is right for some form of design review process in Tacoma”. It is not difficult to understand why citizens may feel this way, as so much of our city has either fallen into varying stages of decay, or have generally become undesirable urban environments (IE not pedestrian-friendly places or the result of poor quality developments). We believe that, given the opportunity to better understand how our urban environments could look and function, and the tremendous economic, social, and environmental benefits that could be realized with better urban design (not just building design), the focus would shift to broader urban design issues and the need to establish neighborhoods and centers that invite the pedestrian to engage in civic life. Individual buildings then actually become secondary to the quality and success of the urban spaces they frame.

Buildings should be “Good Citizens”. Successful urban design focuses substantially on the pedestrian, while still accommodating the vehicle. Streets and sidewalks become more like outdoor rooms, encouraging street level activity and a more vibrant, livable neighborhood. In such neighborhoods, buildings are placed up to the sidewalks, visually transparent to commercial activities (good for business!) and provide a sense of enclosure. Coupled with good sidewalk and tree placement design, such environments become far more about the urban space than the buildings themselves.

DESIRABLE URBAN QUALITIES AND CHARACTERISTICS

The Tacoma City Council and interested stakeholder groups throughout the City have repeatedly expressed, in a variety of ways, a strong desire for mixed use centers (and the neighborhoods that surround and abut these centers) to be more *“livable”*, *“walkable”*, and *“sustainable”*. These terms have emerged in recent years to describe the qualities desired by citizens for their communities throughout the country.

These urban qualities, when successfully executed, will contribute to and support myriad community and regional goals. For instance, mixed use centers that promote greater walkability, encouraging less vehicle dependence, will significantly contribute to the Governor’s Climate Action Team Report goals and Tacoma Mayor Barsma’s Green Ribbon Climate Action Task Force goals, each of which strive to meaningfully reduce carbon emissions. Encouraging citizens to drive less (a goal of the City’s Task Force) has a limited chance of success without providing denser, walkable communities. Further, such sustainable qualities directly support the City’s commitment to “Vision 2020” (adopted in the Comprehensive Plan) which advocates for the creation of more *“compact communities that offer housing, shopping, work and transportation choices and that reduce the need for automobile travel”*.

The characteristics of such urban qualities include, among other things, communities and neighborhoods that:

- Are pedestrian friendly (walkable), promoting human activity at street level, and a more vibrant civic life;
- Are environmentally sustainable, in support of national, state and local goals aimed at reducing carbon emissions and positively affecting climate change;
- Encourage natural surveillance, building better neighbors and reducing crime;
- Promote economic success;
- Encourage and incorporate affordable housing among market rate housing developments;
- Encourage building design that is creatively and appropriately integrated with the surrounding neighborhood, whether or not the design solution relies on traditional cues, or contemporary solutions;
- Utilize development standards that are understandable and predictable, benefitting both the citizens and developers;
- Encourages housing density to further the goals of the Growth Management Act;
- Reduce traffic congestion;
- Increase physical activity among citizens through the rediscovery of walking to activities.

Successful cities are comprised of neighborhoods that have many activities within walking distance of residential areas, making it possible for community and civic life to thrive. This is the very essence of American cities where cohesiveness and diversity are celebrated to let democracy thrive. Conversely, when neighborhoods become isolated and poorly planned, civic community life is compromised, and in many ways becomes less livable. Cities that rely on the automobile as the predominant means to reach activities tend to have a reduced sense of community, and in an age of increasing poor air quality and ever-increasing energy costs (both financial and environmental), cities can no longer afford to develop in the same way.

PRINCIPLES OF LIVABLE COMMUNITIES

AIASWW supports processes and development standards that work to achieve desirable urban qualities and characteristics. These and other such “livability” principles are promoted in AIA National’s 2005 publication *“Livability 101 – What Makes a Community Livable?”* (see attached document). This publication *“seeks to strengthen the relationship of citizens and architects by sharing a common vocabulary to create a sustainable framework for building more livable communities”*.

Among the many resources and recommendations provided in Livability 101 are the following *“10 Principles for Livable Communities”* promoted by the AIA:

1. Design on a Human Scale
2. Provide Choices
3. Encourage Mixed-Use Development
4. Preserve Urban Centers
5. Vary Transportation Options
6. Build Vibrant Public Spaces
7. Create a Neighborhood Identity
8. Protect Environment Resources
9. Conserve Landscape
10. Design Matters

These principles of urban design are in support of the many urban theories, research and implemented projects associated with such prominent urbanists as Jane Jacobs, William White, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, Andres Duany, Peter Calthorpe, and many others.

TACOMA’S CURRENT DEVELOPMENT STANDARDS RELATED TO PARKING AND HEIGHT

Many of Tacoma’s building and zoning codes are antiquated and tend to promote one story, low density buildings with large parking lots that discourage pedestrian activity, contradicting the goals adopted in the Comprehensive Plan. Predictably, this development approach became the predominant form of building in Tacoma’s commercial centers over the past 50 years. The results of this approach have done little to provide what would be considered livable, and certainly not walkable.

Parking

A discussion about parking within mixed use urban centers, in the context of promoting greater livability, must begin with a discussion of walkability. Any city that is attempting to seriously reduce carbon emissions (as the City of Tacoma desires) must make a commitment to densifying urban centers such that people have increased choices for living, working, shopping, worshipping, and playing within walking distance. Many of Tacoma’s neighborhoods and mixed use centers are relatively flat, and are highly conducive to becoming walkable places.

The current parking codes make the construction of walkable, pedestrian-friendly neighborhoods almost impossible, and the inclusion of affordable market rate housing difficult. Tacoma’s zoning codes force each building to be separated by large parking lots. The associated weak, poorly-designed landscaping buffers discourage pedestrian activity. A walkable neighborhood must be built on a pedestrian scale with many functions within close distance of each other such as housing, commercial and retail. Tacoma’s car-centric, suburban off-street parking requirements have forced commercial developments to be spread out over large areas, with uses separated by large parking lots and a continued reliance on the automobile.

A well-designed urban street also accommodates vehicles, preferably in parallel fashion, while encouraging and protecting pedestrian activity. The street parking in an otherwise walkable urban center will tend to provide for a large number of the destination drivers, while businesses thrive on pedestrians who live and work within a short distance. (typically ¼ to half mile from the core). A community may also determine that some type of structured parking is necessary (depending upon the nature of the neighborhood and the density being sought) and develop strategies to work with multiple property owners in an LID for such as structure. Well-designed surface lots, while a viable short term strategy, would ultimately be reduced or eliminated over time by proper urban infill.

For private developers seeking to be part of a truly urban community, parking should be built pursuant to market demand for the uses intended. Developers of quality projects must demonstrate to their financiers that adequate

parking has been provided. Many cities have actually placed a cap on the number of parking spaces that can be built, a truly sustainable approach. Along with necessary, yet modest height increases, Tacoma should take the step of removing the minimum parking requirement and let the market demand determine the amount of parking to be built. Access should be via side streets and alleys within the mixed use centers.

Height

Building heights in mixed use centers, particularly the core area of those centers, should be raised to at least 65 feet, stepping down to 45' at residential edges, encouraging in-fill, appropriate density, and providing the developing community with options for creating financially feasible projects. Height could be considered by individual communities if developers provide additional amenities. (Similar to the current FAR system).

CONCLUSIONS

AIASWW cares about the future of the City of Tacoma, and we are committed to contributing towards goals of better urbanism. A new vision for Tacoma, to become a truly walkable, livable and sustainable city, can be achieved and progress made project by project to stitch the urban fabric back together. We are hopeful that the City Council, City Manager, Planning Commission, the Department of Community and Economic Development, and the Neighborhood Councils will carefully consider the statements and ideas presented in this paper and the attached "Livability 101" document. We look forward to being a part of such change.