



AIA Southwest Washington

January 10, 2012

Mr. Brian Boudet
South Downtown Subarea Plan
Community and Economic Department
747 Market Street, Room 1036
Tacoma, WA 98402

Dear Brian:

Re: Comments Regarding South Downtown Subarea Plan Project
From: AIA Southwest Washington Committee on Community Advocacy

The AIA Southwest Washington Committee on Community Advocacy, on behalf of our Chapter membership, supports efforts to create a common vision for the future of the South Downtown districts and neighborhoods. A number of chapter members attended the recent Scoping meeting held on December 15, 2011. This letter is intended to provide the City and the Planning Team with principle and value-based comments directly related to the South Downtown Subarea Plan and its overall relationship towards future citywide master planning and development efforts.

The mission of our committee, which falls within the broader structure of AIA, is to *“advocate for principles of livability and sustainability within the communities of our chapter”*. We seek to provide a trusted voice regarding design within the communities of our chapter, generally advocating within the framework of AIA’s “10 Principles for Livable Communities”. We have structured our comments within this 10 principle framework. Our comments are by no means exhaustive, and we encourage the City and the Planning Team to develop a criteria and goals-based framework of its own, built from the voices of the community, clearly articulating the principles and values upon which future planning decisions will be based.

GENERAL COMMENTS REGARDING PROCESS

We heard from several participants that the time scheduled between the initial project introduction meeting and the scoping meeting was very short, and that the timing during the holidays diminished the potential attendance of stakeholders. We recommend that the City extend the time frame for public comments, and that even greater transparency be promoted to ensure all stakeholders have ample time and ability to engage with the planning process.

SPECIFIC COMMENTS WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF AIA’S LIVABLE COMMUNITIES PRINCIPLES

1. **Design on a Human Scale:** Compact, pedestrian-friendly communities allow residents to walk to shops, services, cultural resources and jobs, while reducing traffic congestion, encouraging public transit participation and, thus, benefiting human health and awareness of one’s surroundings.
 - The areas included in the South Downtown Subarea boundary present a variety of challenges and opportunities. While the overall physical area is relatively compact, (negotiable walking distances), the linkages between districts must be enhanced for the pedestrian.
 - Such an undertaking as this Subarea plan must consider the lengthy timeframes that will be needed to realize significant development build-out. Small and medium scale development projects that take advantage of existing building stock must be promoted, “priming the pump” for more ambitious developments.



2. **Provide Choices:** Livable communities are rich in variety, providing a mix of housing, shopping, recreation, transportation, entertainment and employment. Variety creates lively neighborhoods and accommodates residents in different stages of life.
 - Housing: Providing a variety of housing choices is essential to creating a vibrant and sustainable downtown community. The most interesting and active neighborhoods are those that embrace a mix of income levels, ethnicities and ages. Live-Work lofts and flats developed in the existing building stock should be a priority – focusing on achievable projects that infuse people into the districts, particularly after hours.
 - Mixed Use: Nodes of pedestrian activity should be encouraged throughout the districts, resulting from a variety of available services, businesses and practical open space. Particular attention should be paid to the edges and transition points and accessible linkages between districts.
 - There must be a strong focus on linkages between the various districts/neighborhoods, including connections to the Foss Waterway. Ensure that other work already completed, (such as the recent work completed for the Foss Waterway), is understood and incorporated into the Subarea planning.
3. **Encourage Mixed-Use Development:** Integrating different land uses and varied building types creates vibrant, pedestrian friendly and diverse communities.
 - The districts contained within the South Downtown Subarea provide multiple opportunities to create mixed-use and “multi-use” developments, allowing and encouraging non-traditional business enterprises to co-exist, such as light manufacturing and other “clean” industrial uses mixed with residential and entertainment uses.
 - The variety of existing industrial buildings throughout the South Downtown boundaries provide for a wide palette of potential mixed-use enterprises. The Subarea plan should provide prospective developers with the necessary tools and information to consider how a variety of uses can be compatible within compact blocks.
4. **Preserve Urban Centers:** Restoring, revitalizing and infilling urban centers takes advantage of existing streets, services and buildings, helping to avoid the need for new infrastructure.
 - The districts within the Dome and Brewery Districts possess significant and unique historical character. The Existing Conditions Survey will be a highly valuable tool, and must be articulate in defining the structures of each district, particularly character-defining attributes.
 - The unfortunate severance of the Dome District from the Brewery District as a result of the Sounder Train crossing must be considered and overcome, promoting a sense of continuity between these areas. This continuity must also consider linkages to other nearby districts and neighborhoods such as McKinley, McCarver, and the South Tacoma Way and Center Street Business areas.
5. **Vary Transportation Options:** Giving people the option of walking, biking and using public transit, in addition to driving, reduces traffic congestion, reduces pollution and promotes physical activity.
 - The adopted South Downtown Subarea already boasts a variety of transportation options. As a truly urban environment, vehicles and people can co-exist, but with an emphasis on caring for the pedestrian by providing safe corridors that further encourage the use of public transit. Parallel



parking in lieu of angled parking on streets, and protection of the 2-way street grid should be promoted.

- Develop a detailed transportation and parking strategy that considers approaches/arrivals of vehicles to and through the districts.
 - Develop a clear way-finding system that connects downtown with South Downtown, and further interconnects the South Downtown areas to each other, enhancing pedestrian and biking modes of transportation and greater city continuity.
6. **Create Vibrant Public Spaces:** Citizens need welcoming, well-defined public places to stimulate face-to-face interaction, collectively celebrate and mourn, encourage civic participation, admire public art and gather for public events.
- Within the boundaries of the adopted South Downtown Area are several opportunities to establish gathering places. Priority should be given to creating nodes of public spaces that connect groupings of structures and provide transition and linkage points as the various neighborhoods and districts interlock.
7. **Create Neighborhood Identity:** A sense of “Place” gives neighborhoods unique character, enhances the walking environment, and creates pride in the community.
- The planning area boundaries selected for the Subarea plan encompass several distinct districts and neighborhoods. The Dome District, Brewery District, and Foss Waterway each have established as well as emerging identities, and each has been the subject of extensive previous study. Care must be taken to ensure that the unique characteristics and attributes of each district are not undermined by a “one-size-fits-all” approach.
 - Priority should be given to reusing and redeveloping existing building stock. (See Principle Item 4 – Preserve Urban Centers). Encourage and incentivize adaptive re-use of the empty and or underutilized building stock to attract businesses and promote development.
8. **Protect Environmental Resources:** A well-designed balance of nature and development preserves natural systems, protects waterways from pollution, reduces air pollution, and protects property values.
- The adopted boundaries of the Subarea contain and intersect with some the Tacoma’s most important natural systems within the urban center including the Foss Waterway and the B Street gulch. Any development must respect, enhance, and embrace these natural assets.
 - Stormwater management strategies should be considered district-wide, creatively incorporating natural drainage strategies that enhance the urban environment. Raingardens should not be the primary strategy if the outcome creates the look and feel of a mall or suburban environment. A mix of strategies that incorporate open space, landscaped edges, and the “nooks & crannies” of urban spaces can be successful. Other sub-surface strategies are likely inevitable to preserve the urban context.
9. **Conserve Landscapes:** Open space, farms and wildlife habitat are essential for environmental, recreational, and cultural reasons.
- This particular principle is intended to curb urban sprawl, and is inherently promoted as a result of urban infill investment in Tacoma’s downtown districts.



- Further, we support the intent of the Transfer of Development Rights program, which helps to protect our rural areas and wildlife habitats by focusing development in our urban cores.
- Emphasis should be placed on creating urban green space, which is vital to vibrant, desirable urban neighborhoods. As density increases in this area, (a primary goal of the plan), green space must already be established and protected, connecting and being connected by a growing mix of housing and business enterprises.

10. Design Matters: Design excellence reflects healthy, successful and confident communities.

- The Subarea plan must articulate and convey to the community at large, and to prospective developers, through goal-based descriptions and imagery, design that respects the existing character of the districts in scale, materiality, color, texture, and other attributes, building on the established urban fabric while also looking to the future.
- Acceptance of mediocre or poorly executed design and construction does not inspire people and diminishes the potential of future investment. The Subarea plan should be bold in articulating expectations of quality and excellence in design.
- Contemporary expressions for new structures should be encouraged, but must carefully and respectfully acknowledge existing massing and detailing, and establish a sense of permanence and quality.

In summary, AIASWW is wholly in support of efforts to create a common vision and Subarea Plan for the South Downtown Area. We look forward to continued opportunities to engage and be a partner with the City. Please contact Randy Cook, Chair, or Ko Wibowo, AIASWW President, with any questions.

Thank you,

AIA Southwest Washington Committee on Community Advocacy

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