

DAG proposal to establish a Design Review Committee to advise the City Planning Commission

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Dear Colleagues:

The Design Advocacy Group welcomes the proposal to establish a Design Review Committee to advise the City Planning Commission. In the DAG Reform Agenda of 2006 we called for the establishment of a “Civic Design Review Commission” as one element of a program to encourage better design in Philadelphia. Many of our other recommendations have already been implemented by the present administration, and we are glad to see design review join this number.

There is strong community interest in promoting excellent design in the public realm, and this creates a favorable setting for informed public discussion. We are pleased that the Design Review Committee, whose role is advisory, will be challenged to establish its legitimacy through the quality of its contribution to this public dialogue.

The proposal that you have published has been discussed by the DAG steering committee and circulated among the membership for comment. Drawing from those discussions, we urge the Commission to consider these matters as it moves ahead:

1 – Procedural Efficiency. It is essential that the important work of design review be introduced within a streamlined and clearly mapped out oversight system for development projects. Duplicative and slow procedures must be eliminated. Those who demand good design and those who advance the economic growth of the city are essential allies, and the new procedures must not be allowed to turn them into adversaries. Effective management of this process will require adequate staffing.

2- Committee Membership. In order to insure that the discussion of design takes place at a sophisticated level and that it not be tainted by idiosyncrasy or personalization, it is essential that the committee comprise a large community of design professionals of the highest caliber, each possessing a demonstrated understanding of architecture and

urban design. In recognition of the preponderance of architectural projects under its purview, the committee should also be enlarged to include more than one architect.

3- Design Guidelines. Excellence in architecture and urban design may take many forms, and the Commission must recognize that good design cannot be legislated. It must refrain from trying to define good taste. However, it is probably desirable to promulgate some form of urban design guidelines, setting forth the interests and objectives of the Commission in order to guide applicants and establish an objective framework for the process.

4- Inter-agency Conflict Avoidance. Clear procedures are needed to avoid conflict with the city's other design review authorities, including the Historical Commission, the Redevelopment Authority, and the Art Commission. In most instances, one of the interested agencies should be assigned the primary responsibility for conducting design review.

5- Jurisdiction. While we do not believe that all projects must be subject to design review, the process should not be limited to projects larger than 100,000 square feet and those that require a zoning variance. Design review must be extended to a variety of highly impactful projects, even if they are relatively small and being built "by right," such as those located on corners and other prominent sites.

6- Further Consultation and Implementation. More public discussion will be required as the Commission develops design guidelines and the procedures under which the Design Review Committee will operate.

We shall be glad to join the Commission in promoting the public discussion of this important initiative now, as it is implemented, and in the years ahead.

With good wishes for the advancement of this important work.

Sincerely,

Joanne Aitken,
AIAChair