

Summary of Public Comments Received in Joint Commission Process – October 6, 2015 – April 27, 2016

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This document provides a high level summary of the major themes of the public comment received by the Joint Commission from October 6, 2015 through noon on April 27, 2016, including comments submitted by email as well as written and oral comments submitted at Joint Commission meetings and three Joint Commission public hearings.

In all, several hundred pages of comments were received. Many were quite detailed and passionate in their views about the future of Town Center. No summary can do justice to all the input received.

Overview

- Comments were received from 221 individuals.
- The vast majority of comments received were from residents expressing opposition to greater height and density in Town Center.
- The vast majority of comments also included ideas for how Town Center can be improved, including but not limited to: more and better retail—primarily restaurants and services for Islanders; a public plaza; more parking; more public amenities (dozens of ideas were offered, including play areas, street benches, a farmers market mall space, more public transportation, etc.); more landscaping; more affordable housing; more environmentally-friendly construction practices; wider sidewalks; and more attractive construction.
- There was a consistent stream of comments from Town Center property owners and their representatives offering a range of concerns and suggestions regarding proposed code provisions, and ways to promote redevelopment of Town Center.
- Most individuals offered input in multiple areas; many also commented multiple times.
- This summary of public comment is subjective and qualitative.

Process to Develop This Summary

All comments were reviewed and the various ideas within each comment were initially tabulated into seventeen (17) different categories generally correlating with the substantive areas that the Joint Commission was working through. For ease of understanding, in this summary, several of these 17 categories (e.g., *landscaping and streetscapes*, and *stepbacks, massing and facades*) are combined: these areas are closely related in terms of code elements and the commonality of the underlying concerns/issues expressed.

The goal in developing this summary was to **identify and track the major points offered** by each person. Most, but not all, distinct ideas submitted were tabulated: many comments included dozens of ideas, often quite detailed. The vast majority of those commenting offered comments about multiple issues. All comments were reviewed and tabulated, even if they were duplicates. Thus, if a person submitted written and oral comments at the same hearing--or very similar comments several times-- all those comments were tabulated.

Postings on Nextdoor and online survey platforms that were forwarded to the City but not directly submitted to the City by those individual commenters were not included in the tabulation.

Despite two separate mailings to all households on the Island and a variety of other actions to encourage public comment, the number of individuals submitting comments was relatively small – 221 people --, equivalent to less than 1% of the City population.¹ Public comments are a valuable and important part of a public process such as this, and the Joint Commission members frequently referred to these comments in their deliberations.

- Total number of individuals submitting comments (unduplicated count): 221
- Total number of comments submitted: 351
- Number of individuals submitting more than one comment: 60, with a handful commenting more than 5 times each.

In sum, summarizing public comments is a subjective task. The public comment process is not the same as a process to conduct a statistically valid poll in which respondents are randomly selected². This document is a *high level qualitative* overview of the tenor of the public comment received during the Joint Commission process. It is not a quantitative— or statistically valid representation of the views of all Island residents.

Thematic Areas of Comment

Table 1 (below) shows the categories of comment tracked, sorted *into 3 tiers* -- from most to least comments offered (*duplicated* count). The major themes in each category are then summarized in turn. As noted above, some areas tabulated separately have been combined given their similarity/relationship in code.

The level of interest and nature of input on each of these categories remained fairly consistent over the entire course of the Joint Commission process.

¹ The State Office of Financial Management estimates that the City's population in 2015 was 23,480.

² A statistically valid poll of the City's population (with a 5% +/- range of error) would generally require a randomly selected set of between 350 to 450 respondents, with a higher number of respondents required to draw conclusions about subgroups (for example views of seniors versus those with school aged children).

Table 1: Public Comment by Category
<i>Tier 1: Most frequently commented on:</i>
Density
Height
Public Amenities
<i>Tier 2: Middle tier number of comments:</i>
Retail
Parking
Vision
Architectural details
Affordable Housing
Step-backs/Massing/Facades
Streetscapes/Landscaping
Other
<i>Tier 3: Relatively few comments:</i>
Economics of development
Mid-block Connections
Process issues
Setbacks

Height

Height and density were by far the two most popular categories of comment. The vast majority of those commenting on the subject of building height supported heights in Town Center lower than 5 stories or less than allowed by current code. “Alternative C” received several dozen favorable comments. Very few of those commenting supported 5 story or taller heights.

Density

Commenters opposing additional density in Town Center outnumbered those supporting additional density by about 4 to 1. The reasons most frequently mentioned for opposing more density in Town Center were: concerns about school overcrowding and traffic impacts; perception that density will not generate the desired improvements in retail and vibrancy in Town Center; and a perception that more density is not required by the Growth Management Act.

Public Amenities

By “public amenities” is meant a range of things that one would expect to be publicly funded, but could in some cases also be provided in whole or part by developers. Dozens of ideas for public amenities in the Town Center were submitted. The most frequently requested amenities were: more pedestrian friendly development features; parks and open space; and a major public plaza.

Retail

There were dozens of comments submitted supporting more retail development in Town Center. The most frequently mentioned items were: a desire for more diversity and quality in restaurants, and a desire that retail serve needs of Island residents.

Parking

There were dozens of comments about parking, and the vast majority sought additional parking in Town Center. There was no consensus as to where that parking should be – on street, surface lots, behind buildings, underground or in a new central garage location.

Vision

The most frequently mentioned phrases relating to the desired vision of Town Center were: “small town,” “small town feel,” or “village feel.”

Communities cited as positive examples of what Town Center should look like included: University Village, Georgetown D.C., Madison Park, Madrona, Poulsbo, Bainbridge Island, Winslow, La Conner, Edmonds, Medina, Carmel, Kirkland, Whistler Village, Redmond Town Center, and Old Main Street in Bellevue.

Communities sited as negative examples included: Downtown Bellevue, Old Main area of Bellevue, Kirkland, West Seattle, Federal Way, Burien, SeaTac, and Renton.

Architectural Details

Most comments in this category were critical of the look of the larger buildings in Town Center: for example, no charm, boring, dislike of stucco. Many different ideas were proposed as to what would be an improvement, but there was no consensus.

Affordable Housing

This topic received a moderate amount of comment, and most of those commenting favored supporting more affordable housing in the Town Center.

Other

This is a catchall category for comments that did not relate to any of the other categories under consideration by the Joint Commission. For example, opposition or support of MICA (technically outside the Town Center), or a request to update the Luther Burbank Park master plan. By the nature of this category, there were no “themes” registered.

Step-backs/Massing/Facades

Although relatively few people commented on these areas, step-backed building facades were supported by most commenters. However, there were also a number of concerns registered by those owning property in the Town Center as to the construction costs/economic impacts of various proposals, and suggesting that façade modulation or other tools might be more effective.

Streetscapes/Landscaping

There were a modest number of comments in these areas. Commenters favor landscaping requirements in Town Center. The other most frequent comment was a desire for wider sidewalks.

Economics of Development

There were relatively few comments in this area. A preponderance of the comments raised concerns that the code needs to be developed with an understanding about the economics of development in order for the desired results to materialize. Others felt that the focus should be on what residents want.

Mid-block connections

There were relatively few comments on this issue, primarily stating concerns from property owners about the cost/workability/desirability of the proposals under discussion.

Process Issues

There were relatively few comments on the current process. Comments received later in the process tended to be more concerned about whether the Joint Commission would support the public input it was receiving.

Setbacks

A very small number of comments were received on the issue of setbacks, generally favoring setbacks (this may correlate to the desire for wider sidewalks).

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