



Planning and Community Development City of Bellingham

Design Review Board (DRB) / Historic Preservation Commission (HPC) Staff Report

Project:	Urban Village Design Review Update
Project Location:	Downtown, Waterfront, Old Town, Fairhaven, Fountain, Samish and Barkley urban villages
City Project Manager:	Darby Galligan, Senior Planner. (360) 778-8389 or dgalligan@cob.org

1) Background

New construction and redevelopment projects in the City's urban villages are subject to a variety of design guidelines and regulations ("codes"), depending on the type of project and specifics contained in the respective urban village plan. Several assessments and policies have highlighted the need for an update to clarify, simplify and standardize the urban village design review regulations, guidelines and procedures. These include:

- 2014 City Center Implementation Strategy recommendation to update the City Center Design Guidelines (which apply to projects in downtown and Old Town)
- 2014 design review Kaizen event, which resulted in substantial changes to the process and a recommendation for continuous evaluation and improvement
- 2016 Comprehensive Plan goal and policy language in the Community Design chapter
- 2018 urban village status report recommendation to consolidate the urban village design review codes

The purpose of the project is to clarify, simplify and standardize urban village design review to encourage predictability and support creativity in the design process.

GOALS:

- Meaningful public involvement
- Earlier staff engagement, including Public Works review
- Constructive Design Review Board (DRB) evaluation
- Clear and empowered roles for DRB, HPC and staff
- Easiest process for desired projects
- Clear priorities and hierarchy of guidelines and standards
- Promotion of great design through defined design principles/intents

2) Project Approach

The project began in late 2019 with a review of existing documents related to design review, including but not limited to:

- Bellingham Municipal Code (BMC) 20.25 – Design Review Regulations
- City Center Design Guidelines
- Fairhaven Design Guidelines and Standards
- Urban village subarea plans and regulations
- Policy decisions related to urban village design review (including recent design review staff reports, permits and approved plans)
- Comprehensive Plan goals and policies related to urban village design
- Summaries from prior stakeholder input (Kaizen events, urban village status report, focus groups, etc)

Staff created a matrix outlining the similarities and differences in design review between the various urban villages, noting significant overlap and inconsistencies. The goal was to unify as many of the guidelines and standards as possible, while retaining special considerations or conditions within each urban village.

The City contracted with consulting firm Schemata Workshop, who visited Bellingham in December 2019 to tour the city's urban villages and interview key stakeholders and staff about the current urban village design review process and results. This information was used, along with the staff matrix, to form preliminary observations and next steps.

Early in 2020, a Steering Committee was convened to help establish the framework and goals for the new urban village design review program. The following individuals participated in a series of three workshops and ongoing communications and input about the project:

- **Jan Hayes**, DRB/designer
- **Neil McCarthy**, architect
- **JP Slagle**, engineer
- **Molly McGuire**, landscape architect
- **Ali Taysi**, Planning Commissioner/land use consultant
- **John Mullen**, Barkley Company/Loan Review Board
- **Mike Estes**, Planning Commissioner/downtown resident
- **Barry Dikeman**, Downtown Bellingham Partnership /RAM Construction
- **Terry Brown**, architect, LEED-AP
- **Garrett O'Brien**, Planning Commissioner/developer
- **Collin Fuller**, designer
- **Dave Falk** architect, HPC
- **Michael Lilliquist**, City Council/Fairhaven District

Representatives from the Planning and Public Works Departments also participated in the workshop conversations and activities.

The first workshop was held January 2020 and included an overview of issues, opportunities and activities for the Steering Committee to define roles of the public, applicant and staff in design review, identify what makes good design, and describe what is unique about Bellingham. This feedback led to the creation and testing of draft intent statements, which form the basis for the new standardized urban village design review guidelines. These guidelines were tested and

refined by the Steering Committee and staff throughout the remainder of 2020 and will apply to all projects within the seven urban villages.

The resulting urban village design **guideline document** (Attachment A) includes an appendix for each individual urban village, describing the character of the area and any unique guidelines. These guidelines were pulled from existing documents and were not newly created as part of this project. The appendices also include a map of the urban village identifying pedestrian-oriented streets (also existing), key intersections, and connections which inform additional guidelines that may apply. The Design Review Board will review projects against these guidelines and make a recommendation on which intent statements apply and whether the project is consistent with these guidelines. This document also contains an appendix of historic guidelines applicable to historic buildings.

Along with the guidelines document, **standards** (Attachment B) that apply equally within urban villages were aligned and relocated to a single section of the Bellingham Municipal Code. All design standards for a specific urban village have been relocated to their respective development regulations. These were previously located in a variety of documents and code sections, depending on the urban village. Standards must be met for each project unless a departure is granted (based on hardship or other extenuating circumstances). The Design Review Board will review and make recommendations on any departures.

The Steering Committee and staff also evaluated the current urban village design review **process** (Attachment C). Several changes are recommended to create a more meaningful and efficient review:

- Clarifying that a pre-design meeting is required at an early stage of design (similar to some current pre-application meetings).
- Moving the neighborhood meeting prior to the Early Design Guidance meeting to create an opportunity to introduce the project, gather feedback from the community prior to the design of the building, and test the inputs being used to create the design.
- Incorporating review from other departments earlier in the process.

3) Meeting Purpose / Discussion Outline

Staff is requesting review of all packet materials, with emphasis on the following issues:

A. URBAN VILLAGE DESIGN GUIDELINES

- a. Do these guidelines cover the primary issues intended to be addressed by the urban village design review process?
- b. Is the intended use of the document and applicability of the intent statements and guidelines clear?

B. URBAN VILLAGE REGULATIONS

- a. Should these regulations be required of all urban village projects, with the opportunity for departure based on the adopted criteria? Should any be converted into recommended guidelines?
- b. Are there any regulations that should be clarified, changed, removed or added?
 - i. Defining decks, balconies and porches. Projections above awnings and general size limitations.

- ii. Discussion of mechanical equipment screening: should these be guidelines, standards or a combination? From which vantage point(s) should screening be required?

C. URBAN VILLAGE PROCESS

- a. Consolidation of urban village design review under the design review board (DRB). Currently, design review projects for both historic and new buildings within Fairhaven are reviewed by the HPC. Staff is proposing to integrate historic preservation experts into the DRB so that this perspective and analysis may be provided consistently for all urban village design review projects. All new development, including in Fairhaven, would be reviewed by this newly integrated DRB. The HPC would continue to review historic buildings in urban villages listed on the Local Historic Register under the process established in BMC 17.90 and guide other historic preservation-related activities. Are the respective boards in support of this recommendation?
- b. Are the exemption thresholds appropriate? Administrative v. DRB review
- c. Is the revised process more predictable for the applicant and public? Will it result in more efficient and meaningful review and feedback?
 - i. Optional or required pre-application meeting
 - ii. Move the neighborhood meeting earlier in the process
 - iii. Emphasis on early design guidance v. final review
 - iv. Process for DRB input on final review: notice + optional meeting
- d. Are the roles of the public, staff and DRB clear?
- e. What additional training or resources would be helpful to implement this process?

4) Next Steps

AUGUST:	DRB/HPC recommendation Steering Committee update and review
SEPTEMBER:	SEPA notice/public comment period
OCTOBER:	Planning Commission public comment period and hearing Possible work session(s) and recommendation to Council
SEPTEMBER-NOV:	Testing and review of proposed changes
DECEMBER:	City Council public comment period and hearing Possible work session(s) and final decision/adoption
2023:	Staff, board and applicant training Publication of training and updated application materials Switchover to new process

LIST OF ATTACHMENTS

ATTACHMENT A: Urban Village Design Guidelines (subject to interpretation/various applicability based on site conditions)

Urban Village Design Guidelines: Intent statements apply to all urban village projects. The guidelines are a set of recommendations for how to apply design principles to meet these intents.

Urban Village Appendices: apply uniquely to each urban village

Historic Guidelines: Resource document with recommended guidelines applicable to historic buildings (those 50 years or older) in all urban villages. This document was created by consolidating redundancies and highlighting best practices within the Fairhaven Design Standards, City Center Design Standards, and other existing historic guidelines.

ATTACHMENT B: Urban Village Standards/Development Regulations (code requirements for all projects or justification for departure required):

Urban Village Design Standards (BMC 20.25.070): All urban village projects

Development Regulations: Development regulations for each individual urban village. Design standards have been relocated/consolidated within these code sections:

Barkley – under development

Downtown - BMC 20.37.520-530

Fairhaven - BMC 20.37.320-330

Fountain - BMC 20.37.230

Old Town - BMC 20.35.070 (*new code section title: BMC 20.37.670*)

Samish Way - BMC 20.370

Waterfront - BMC 20.25.080 (*repealed and relocated to BMC 20.37.430*)

Waterfront - BMC 20.37.430

ATTACHMENT C: Urban Village Design Review Process Flowchart

Illustration of the proposed revisions to the urban village design review process. These will include updated application materials and web-based resources.

Design Review Applicability (BMC 20.25.20)

Design Review Board (BMC 2.55)