

Fountain District Urban Village Master Plan

Public Input Report

July 15, 2009

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II. PURPOSE

The purpose of this report is to summarize the public comments received during and subsequent to the spring 2009 Fountain District Urban Village meetings, to explain the alternatives presented by staff at the May 6th meeting, and to describe the next steps in the planning process.

III. BACKGROUND

The public was invited to attend a series of four public meetings to provide input to the Fountain District Urban Village master planning process. Public notification included the following efforts:

- 1) Invitations were mailed to all property and business owners within 500-feet of the project study area boundaries, and to all Neighborhood Representatives and members of the Mayor's Neighborhood Advisory Commission (**EXHIBIT A**)
- 2) Notices were posted at the several entrances to and at each major intersection in the project study area (**EXHIBIT B**)
- 3) Staff contacted each business and commercial property owner in the project study area by telephone to invite them to the workshops, and met in person with owners interested in learning more about the project
- 4) As available, email addresses were obtained from residents, businesses, and commercial property owners, and prior to each meeting were emailed a reminder by staff

- 5) Notice of the Public Meetings was sent to the Bellingham Herald, Bellingham Neighborhood News, Citizen View, and to the Columbia, Lettered Streets and Cornwall Neighborhood Associations for publication in their newsletters, as well as being posted on the City website (**EXHIBIT C**)

The four meetings focused on the following subjects:

- April 1: Project Introduction, Character, and Boundary Identification
- April 15: Public Realm: Streets, Neighborhood Connections, Public Spaces
- April 22: Development Character: Uses, Design, Scale and Neighborhood Transitions
- May 6: Summary of Public Input and Discussion of Alternatives

Each session was well attended and included neighbors, business owners, property owners, developers, real estate agents, nonprofit organizations and other interested parties. A complete list of attendees is provided in **EXHIBIT D**.

IV. SUMMARY OF COMMENTS

Meeting #1, April 1st: Introduction, Character, and Boundary Identification

The purpose of the first meeting was to introduce the project, provide an overview of the planning process and timeline, and to make the public aware of opportunities to provide input. Staff presented an overview of the area character, reviewed the history of the Fountain District and explained how a preliminary master planning effort had been initiated in 2007 by the Columbia, Cornwall Park and Lettered Streets Neighborhoods.

Staff also presented information about the ten elements of successful urban village design, and explained how the preliminary urban village study area boundaries had been drawn based on a comparison of the existing zoning with the actual current uses, as well as from neighborhood association representatives' input. As part of the workshop exercises, participants were asked to identify the area's strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and constraints, and characteristics they would like to see preserved. They were also asked to provide input on the district planning area boundaries and to identify which areas should be included in the study area. Comments are summarized, below, with the full list of meeting comments provided in **EXHIBIT E**.

Strengths and Weaknesses

Many participants identified one of the primary strengths of the area as the sense of community that has resulted from the numerous long-standing family and locally-owned businesses. Many commented that the area has strong character and history, and that they liked the "funky" and eclectic architectural character along Meridian Street. Many identified that a weakness of some of the newer buildings along Meridian was that their design did not take into account their compatibility with adjacent historic buildings (i.e. "party walls" of new commercial buildings create an imposing blank expanse that is incongruent with nearby residential buildings). The close proximity of amenities such as businesses, schools, parks, downtown and the waterfront were all cited as area strengths, as were the existing mix of uses and diversity of businesses along Meridian and Elm Streets. Participants also identified that the existing grid system provided good connectivity within and between all three neighborhoods, and that the Fountain District already had many qualities of an urban village.

Many identified a major weakness of the area as the lack of safe crossings on Meridian Street, both for pedestrian and bike traffic. Some commented that it is also difficult for cars to cross Meridian. There was an overall consensus that there are not enough crosswalks on Meridian between Broadway and Illinois, and that biking generally felt unsafe on Meridian.

Parking was identified as both a strength and a weakness. Some identified that there was too much parking in the area (i.e. surface parking lots) whereas others commented that in some areas on-street parking opportunities were insufficient to support commercial business needs.

Project Study Area Boundaries

Participants were generally supportive of the proposed urban village study area, although most said that before making any commitments they needed more information about what impacts the district boundaries and changes in zoning might create. There was some suggestion of extending the district boundary down Broadway toward the waterfront, as well as down Girard and Dupont toward downtown (these areas are currently zoned residential multi-family, but the current use of many properties is commercial). Some residents had concerns about Kulshan Street being "trapped" between the arterials of Meridian and Elm, citing concerns that including single family residences in the urban village boundaries might adversely affect their property values and quality of life. Traffic noise and volume were also cited as concerns for nearby residents. Most agreed that the "commercial core" of the district was Meridian Street between Illinois and the Broadway / Girard intersections, with the "heart" of this commercial core being centered around the Fountain Plaza Park -- the point at which all three neighborhoods converge.

Homework Assignment #1: "Evaluate the Connections"

In preparation for Meeting #2, participants were asked to complete a "homework assignment" on their own time. The assignment involved traveling within the district area, on foot or on bike, and identifying the strengths and weaknesses of their routes. The results of this assignment are incorporated into the Meeting #2 summary, below.

Meeting #2, April 15th: The Public Realm - Streets, Connections and Public Spaces

The second meeting focused on improvements to the public realm, which staff explained includes the elements of streetscape design, neighborhood connections (streets, sidewalks and other routes), and public spaces and parks. The main goals of this meeting were to help participants understand the general parameters guiding the improvement of public spaces; to have them identify existing and potential pedestrian, bicycle, and transit connections; and to brainstorm and prioritize features that could be incorporated into the overall streetscape design. Staff gave an overview of the multi-modal connections that currently exist within the study area, and guest speakers emphasized the importance of coordination between the sometime conflicting purposes of bike, pedestrian and automotive (including transit and emergency) vehicles that frequently use the arterials. Additionally, Jason Darling of ReSources gave an overview of the concepts developed during the community-based planning meetings for improvements to Fountain Plaza Park that occurred in 2007-08. Comments from this meeting are summarized, below, with the full list of comments provided in **EXHIBIT F**.

Public Realm

Crosswalks were identified as a high priority need along Meridian, from Broadway to Illinois. Accessing Haggen's from the residential area north of Illinois Street was discussed, and a crosswalk was suggested adjacent to the Haggen's parking lot on Illinois at Peabody Street. Participants also suggested improving bicyclists' safety by diverting bike traffic onto side streets (Kulshan and Peabody or Vallette) as an alternative to adding bike lanes to Meridian Street. The intersection of W. North and Elm Streets was identified as a dangerous crossing for pedestrians, bikes and cars. Many also cited the need to improve the crossings at Monroe and Meridian, especially since it is used daily by children and adolescents walking to school. Also, many commented that within and adjacent to the study area many of the neighborhood streets have discontinuous sidewalks, making pedestrian travel periodically difficult and unsafe.

Many identified that the sidewalks along Meridian are too narrow for comfort and that vacant, unmaintained store fronts gave the area a run-down appearance and combined to create a less than pleasant pedestrian experience. Street trees, low shrubs and other plantings that could act as a buffer between pedestrians and traffic were suggested as improvements. Traffic calming ideas included narrowing a portion of Meridian, or adding bulb-outs at crosswalks.

Fountain Plaza Park

Although the Fountain Plaza Park was identified as an asset to the area it was generally felt that the space was underutilized and unattractive, although the existing tree was identified as a strength by the majority of participants. Most noted that they liked the location of the plaza, that it was a "very nice bus stop," and that they appreciated the large tree. There were several suggestions for improvements to the plaza, at the very least to have a functioning fountain as a water element and to provide improved seating opportunities. Other ideas included adding color to the space using plants, lighting or artwork – especially artwork that is interactive or incorporated into the fountain design.

Many suggestions built upon the concepts developed in the 2007-08 planning meetings, and included the addition of an interactive water feature that masked noise from passing traffic; the creative incorporation of natural elements such as rock formations for sitting, climbing and screening; the use of naturalized landscape design and native plantings that would provide a buffer to traffic but not create a safety hazard by being too dense and obscuring activity in the park; making reference to the historic origins of the park by creating an artistic representation of the early Meridian planked road, adding a dog "watering trough" and / or creating a physical tribute to the three neighborhoods converging at the park.

Some expressed an interest in incorporating community activities into the space, and adding café seating on sidewalks along Monroe. Many groups discussed the pros and cons of potentially closing Monroe Street to expand the plaza, and that the space might be more functional if it functioned as a "peninsula" rather than as an "island" surrounded on all sides by traffic. Business owners adjacent to the park expressed concern over the loss of parking spaces if Monroe Street were closed.

Participants at the second workshop were asked to evaluate the Fountain Plaza Park on their own time -- to think about how the space was used and its relationship to the surrounding neighborhoods and businesses. Comments from the nine responses have been incorporated into the above summary, with the full collection of completed homework assignments being provided in **EXHIBIT G**.

Homework Assignment #1: "Evaluate the Connections"

Twenty-three participants completed the first homework assignment. General comments were that the side streets, such as Peabody and Kulshan, were the favored as north - south routes over Meridian due to their lower amounts and slower speeds of traffic. The majority of participants commented that Meridian Street was the most difficult place to both travel along and to cross. Reasons cited included the speed of traffic along Meridian, narrow sidewalks and a lack of facilities for biking. Accordingly, many suggested that more crosswalks be added, possibly with flashing lights. Many suggested that bike routes through alleys, side streets, or striping lanes on Meridian Street would improve the bikers' experience. Other common suggestions included the addition of street trees and wider sidewalks on Meridian to improve the pedestrian experience. Several noted that maintenance of building facades and the incorporation of mixed-use buildings would also be desirable. Additional areas of concern were other heavily trafficked streets, especially Illinois and Elm. It was noted that Illinois has discontinuous sidewalks which made pedestrian travel difficult, crossing Elm at North Street was difficult and dangerous, and crosswalks should be added to these streets. The full collection of completed assignments is provided in **EXHIBIT H**.

Meeting #3, April 22nd: Development Character: Uses, Design, Scale and Neighborhood Transitions

The purpose of the third meeting was to help participants understand the economic realities of development; to discuss desirable future development regulations including permitted uses, design standards, floor area limits, height, etc.; and to identify areas needing additional study. Staff gave a presentation reviewing how development market forces affect the realities of redevelopment opportunities. Also discussed was the possibility of using infill toolkit options in transition zones.

Participants were asked to identify "commercial core," "commercial transition," and "residential transition" areas within the proposed district boundaries, to discuss what uses and height limits should apply in these areas, and to identify which areas would be appropriate for additional height increases. Comments from this meeting are summarized, below, with the full list of comments provided in **EXHIBIT I**.

Uses and Commercial Core

The commercial core was generally identified as Meridian Street between the Broadway / Girard and Illinois intersections, with the "heart" of the core located around the Fountain Plaza Park intersection. There was some suggestion of expanding the commercial core from Meridian to Elm along Monroe Street. A variety of retail uses and upper-story housing opportunities were suggested as being appropriate in the commercial core, and many commented that there was a need along Meridian for uses that encouraged patrons to "stop and linger." Potential business suggestions included bookstore, bakery, sit-down café, art gallery, ice cream parlor, restaurants, etc. A gathering space or open green space was also suggested as a potential community need. Housing for seniors and more affordable housing along Meridian were also suggested.

Height

Comments regarding allowable building heights along Meridian Street were varied. Several groups recommended lowering heights to one or two stories (currently the zoning allows up to three stories) whereas others were open to considering three to four stories along Meridian. Some commented that buildings could be taller at the corner of Illinois and

Meridian on the Haggens' property, and also at the intersection of Broadway and Meridian near the Fountain Plaza Park. There were discussions of "stepping back" the upper stories of new buildings along the alley between Meridian and Kulshan and Peabody Streets to prevent excessive shadowing and to maintain a sense of privacy for the adjacent residential areas. Some suggested developing design standards and building heights that would preserve views.

Transition Zones

Concern was expressed regarding the single family residences along Kulshan Street adjacent to the commercial core along Meridian Street. Residents from this area expressed several concerns: the anticipated loss of privacy and daylight from the alley between Meridian Street if building heights were increased along Meridian; fear of losing neighborhood character if Kulshan Street were included as a "residential transition zone" thus allowing *Infill Toolkit* housing types; and being "sandwiched" between two commercial areas and the anticipated resulting adverse effects of noise, traffic and parking on the residential areas. Residents on Peabody Street expressed similar concerns: loss of light and privacy, and increased noise, traffic and parking issues. Concern was also expressed regarding anticipated adverse impacts to the historic character of Elm Street if it were zoned "commercial transition," especially where the zone overlapped with a portion of the Eldridge National Historic District.

In general, many participants expressed the need for a better understanding of how the changes to the zoning in the commercial core would affect the adjacent residential areas, how the commercial transition area zoning might adversely affect the historic homes and character along Elm Street, and how the *Infill Toolkit* housing types might adversely affect property values and the quality of life for current residents.

Meeting #4, May 6th: Summary of Public Input and Discussion of Alternatives

The purpose of the fourth and final meeting was to present participants with a summary of preliminary findings and recommendations culminating from the three previous meetings, to discuss alternatives and explain the next steps in the process. Staff goals for the meeting were to ensure that participants understood the background and rationale for the proposed urban village boundaries and the commercial core and transition areas; that the public comment up to that point had been accurately represented; and to determine whether additional public meetings would be needed.

Staff presented a summary of the input that had been gathered at the three previous meetings and the alternatives that had been developed as a result of this input. Staff emphasized that the alternatives would be used as a baseline for study and were not a final product – that the alternatives would evolve based on additional public input, further study and staff analysis. To most effectively address participants' questions, the audience was invited to meet in smaller groups with expert staff, who presented information about the Preliminary Draft Boundary Alternative, the Multi-modal Connections Alternatives and the suggested *Infill Toolkit* housing types proposed for the district. Information about the alternatives presented by staff are summarized below.

PUBLIC REALM

Staff presented three Street Standard Alternatives for Meridian Street. The first alternative illustrated Meridian with a wider sidewalk but no bike lanes. Under this alternative, bike

routes would be redirected off of Meridian and onto Kulshan, Peabody and/or Vallette Streets. The second alternative proposed bike lanes on Meridian with the requirement that new development be set back five feet from the property line to allow for wider sidewalks and street trees. The third alternative illustrated a "Sharrow" lane on Meridian. A Sharrow is a wider lane of traffic that has a stamped path for bicycles. Bicycles share the lane with traffic and are positioned outside of the "door zone" of parked cars. This alternative also included the requirement for new buildings to be set back five feet from the property line to allow for wider sidewalks and street trees. Diagrams for the three Street Standard Alternatives are provided in **EXHIBIT J**.

PROJECT BOUNDARY

The Preliminary Draft Project Boundary presented at the fourth meeting was relatively the same as that which was presented at the first meeting. The commercial core was recommended as the Meridian Street corridor, and included the Haggens' site and the Broadway / Girard intersection. Areas extending beyond the proposed project boundary along Elm, Broadway, Girard and Dupont Streets were identified as potential future corridor study areas, but were not included in the proposed district boundaries. The Preliminary Draft Fountain District Urban Village boundaries and zones are provided in **EXHIBIT K**.

CORE AND TRANSITION AREAS

The preliminary recommendation for the Fountain District commercial core would allow a variety of commercial uses, as currently exist, and would encourage upper story residential uses. **The commercial core** is generally defined as the area having the highest concentration of employment and housing, direct access to transit, allowing a wide range of land uses including retail, office, residential, recreation, public facilities, etc., and emphasizing the pedestrian environment.

Height limits were recommended to remain limited to a lower-scaled three-story building form for most of the core, with study of up to four stories provided that upper floors are set back from alleys. A potential five story height limit will be studied for the corner of Illinois and Meridian at the Haggens' property, and at key locations near the heart of the commercial core at Meridian and Broadway. Commercial uses with noise and vehicular impacts would be discouraged.

Preliminary design recommendations for the commercial core would employ the City's Urban Village Design Standards and design review process and would require ground floor pedestrian-oriented commercial uses along Meridian. Special attention would be given to create design standards that provide stepped-back upper stories on the alley between the commercial and residential zones to maintain daylight and privacy. Additional areas for further study include special design recommendations for adaptive reuse of houses for commercial businesses, and setbacks for widened and enhanced pedestrian ways.

Residential transition zones were proposed for the areas to the east and west of the Commercial Core in portions of the Columbia, Cornwall Park, and Lettered Streets Neighborhoods. Residential Transition Zones are generally defined as those areas immediately adjacent to commercial areas. These areas may be appropriate for a mix of additional residential housing types outlined in the *Infill Toolkit*. Recommended types for study include the small and smaller lots homes, carriage houses, detached Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs) and duplexes – in addition to the current single family homes in Columbia and the single family and duplex homes in Cornwall Park. Higher intensity infill toolkit types, such as triplex and townhomes were not recommended. The proposed *Infill*

Toolkit housing types are designed to allow compatible, quality infill housing types in existing and historic neighborhoods. Further study and discussion with affected property owners will be completed to determine the appropriateness of incorporating these forms into the Kulshan Street single family area.

Commercial transition zones are proposed for the southwest corner of the district study area along the Whatcom Transit Authority (WTA) "Go-Line" on Elm Street, on the area of Broadway between Clinton and extending just beyond Farragut Street, in three additional spots north of Illinois and for several parcels near the Fountain Plaza Park. The commercial transition zone is generally defined as having a lower concentration of commercial uses, and an avoidance of uses that increase noise and vehicular impacts. The preliminary boundary recommendation supports the current land use pattern by allowing appropriate residential and commercial uses along Elm and Broadway (i.e. similar to the offices and salons making use of existing residential buildings).

Proposed zoning under this definition would allow for a mix of uses – both residential and commercial – but would have special design standards and selective allowable uses that would be determined by additional public input. A two to three story building form would be studied for most of the commercial transition area along Elm and Monroe Streets, with up to four stories being studied in areas along Broadway. Adoption of appropriate *Infill Toolkit* housing types and the development of neighborhood-appropriate design standards are key to the zoning process in order to protect the historic character of housing and the adjacent Eldridge National Historic District, and to discourage demolition of existing buildings. Two to three story height limits may be appropriate to lessen the impact on the adjacent residential areas and to reinforce the character that exists today.

To summarize, the commercial transition zones will be studied further in order to develop design standards that when implemented will reinforce the historic character through adaptive re-use of existing buildings as well as that of new construction.

Public comments from the Meeting #4 are provided in **EXHIBIT L**.

Written comments submitted to staff throughout the course of the public input process are provided in **EXHIBIT M**.

V. CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS

Over the summer, staff will work to complete feasibility studies of the three proposed street standard and development alternatives; to survey and analyze existing on-street parking capacity and deficiencies; and to contract for the completion of an historic resource survey within the Preliminary Draft Fountain District Urban Village boundaries.

Once the feasibility, analysis and survey information is compiled, additional “focus group” meetings will be held in the fall of 2009. These will be held in response to the request from residential and commercial property and business owners that more specific information about the nature of and impacts resulting from the proposed commercial core, commercial transition, and the residential transition zones be provided. An additional focus group will meet over the summer to study the existing and potential uses of the Fountain Plaza Park.

The parking study will provide baseline information about the existing public and private parking capacity on Meridian, Elm, Broadway, and cross streets. Staff will use this baseline information to work with property and business owners to determine where areas of concern exist, and to anticipate issues that may arise as a result of changes to the existing zoning.

Information gathered in the historic resource reconnaissance survey will be used to inform the creation of additional design guidelines to augment the Urban Village Design Standards in the areas identified by the public as having high historic integrity, character and public value. Information from this survey will be presented as part of a design guideline development charrette which will be held as part of the focus group for the residential transition and commercial transition zones.

Additionally, focus groups will be held by staff for neighbors on Kulshan, Peabody and Vallette to determine which *Infill Toolkit* housing types, if any, may be appropriate for the residential transition zones. Types under consideration for these areas are the Small and Smaller Lot; Carriage House; Detached Accessory Dwelling Unit (ADU); and Duplex. Allowable heights, block sizes, design standards and parking requirements in the commercial core zone will also be studied further and will be addressed in the residential transition zone focus groups.

Once complete, information from the focus group meetings will be summarized and added as amendment to this Public Input Report. The results of the additional studies and public meetings will further refine and guide draft master plan and development regulations for the Fountain District Urban Village, which will be presented for additional public comment prior to review by the Planning Commission and City Council.