

Bethesda Downtown Plan Design Guidelines

Stakeholder Working Group Notes

5.22.2017

The following notes reflect input from meetings with several Bethesda Downtown stakeholder groups listed below. Note: These were initial comments reacting to staff's overview of the guidelines, and the groups will continue to provide more detailed feedback throughout the process.

- **5.15.2017** CBAR Meeting
- **5.16.2017** NAIOP Meeting
- **5.19.2017** Joint Meeting of the Bethesda Chamber of Commerce and the Woodmont Triangle Advisory Group (WTAG)

CBAR Meeting

5.15.2017

- **Sidewalk Width, Pedestrian Through Zone and Outdoor Dining:**
 - Required pedestrian clear pathway should be larger than 6ft on heavily trafficked streets and should aim for 8-10 ft min.
 - Because bikes can also be used on sidewalks, the pedestrian through zone should be wider. May need to address where bikes should be allowed on sidewalks in the Bicycle Master Plan.
 - Applicants should not receive credit for public use space if they will have outdoor dining in that space.
 - Dining tables in the planting zone should be discouraged to prevent waiters from crossing and blocking pedestrian movement.
 - Enforcement of clear pedestrian pathways needs to be improved.

- **Servicing, Access and Parking:**
 - Strong language should be included in the guidelines to prevent loading and conflicts in travel lanes.
 - All deliveries should happen within the building service area.
 - Pull-over space for car share pick-ups should be considered with new development.
 - A delivery management plan should be required with site plan application.
 - Trash areas should be screened and separated from the pedestrian pathway. Dumpsters should not block sidewalks.

- **Cantilevering:**
 - Building cantilevers over the sidewalk should be addressed in the guidelines because they inhibit the growth of street trees and are imposing over the sidewalk environment.

- **Building Step-backs and Open Space on properties not owned by Applicant:**
 - Adjacent low-scale buildings that the applicant does not own should not count towards their step-back guideline.
 - Open spaces on adjacent land not owned or provided by the applicant should not count towards meeting guidelines or requirements.

NAIOP Meeting

5.16.2017

Policy and How to Use the guidelines:

- How do the guidelines become policy and what is the relationship to the other plan documents? *Review of all Site Plan applications will determine if a project **substantially conforms** with the Sector Plan recommendations and approved Design Guidelines, See the Zoning Ordinance Section 7.3.4 Site Plan. The guidelines are approved by the Planning Board and may be updated as necessary.*
- Where are the compatibility development standards in the zoning ordinance? *Section 4.1.8 Compatibility Requirements*

Street Types:

- What flexibility will there be to change the street classifications at the time of application? *This is the best time to review the proposed street type classifications and recommend revisions before approval of the guidelines.*
- How will corners and transitions between street types be addressed? *Architects are expected to creatively mediate between the scales of different street types.*
- How far may canopies and cantilevers extend into the sidewalk zones? *This is outlined in the zoning ordinance.*
- What is the relationship between the recommended sidewalk zones build-to line and the right-of-way/property line? *The build-to line is measured from the street curb. Because property line location varies, this maintains a consistent perceived sidewalk width for pedestrians. In some cases greater setbacks from the property line may be required to achieve the recommended sidewalk width.*

Building Form:

- Constrained sites, particularly small lots, will have difficulty meeting all of the guidelines and will make less of an impact on the public realm so there should be more flexibility to find alternate solutions to meet the intent of the guidelines.
- Is there a limit to how much private common area a property owner should provide on the podium or upper floors because these spaces may remove people from the public spaces at the street and deactivate them? *The guidelines encourage upper floor terraces and outdoor spaces to help meet green cover requirements, provide an amenity for users and to help modulate buildings and break up massing. However, there is no specific guideline for the amount of common area, this is to be determined by each property owner based on feasibility and market analysis.*
- Are building form guidelines intended to address massing and not architectural style? *Yes, the guidelines focus on building massing and impacts on the public realm. We do not want to place too many constraints on architectural expression and variation.*

- **Base**
 - Varying base height is difficult from a design, construction and cost perspective. Are there other ways to articulate the base that would be acceptable? *Yes, there are several ways to articulate the building base, which include but are not limited to variation in material and color, and plane changes on the façade.*

- **Tower**
 - What shadow studies and analysis has the department conducted on the effect of tower step backs? *The department has created 3D visualizations, researched similar step-back guidelines from other jurisdictions in our region and looked at buildings with step-backs to analyze the impact of step-backs on the public realm.*

- **Top**
 - What buildings are expected to have a special top? *Buildings in prominent locations including those with the highest heights, adjacent to major parks and those that terminate major axes/view corridors.*
 - There should be an encouragement to integrate high performance design into the form of the tower top (energy generation, passive heating and cooling, etc.)

Public Parking:

- With the council recommendation for all of the PLD lots along the Eastern Greenway to become green spaces, how will public parking be addressed? *With any plan to replace PLD lots, parking replacement will have to be addressed.*
- Is there an opportunity to incentivize applicants to offer replacement parking for the spaces that be lost on the greenway? *This may be an opportunity for public benefit points for a major public facility if the replacement is in close proximity to the original PLD lot.*

Joint Meeting of the Bethesda Chamber of Commerce and the Woodmont Triangle Advisory Group (WTAG)

5.19.2017

How to Use the Guidelines

- The design guidelines need to be flexible because there may be unintended consequences of prescriptive guidelines as seen from previous plans.
- The guidelines are more important now because they are a mandate with the new zoning ordinance and should be written in terms of goals and vision and not standards (words not numbers).
- Many attractive buildings do not meet the guidelines, like 7770 Norfolk. Recently constructed buildings should be studied to see which meet the guidelines recommended and which do not.
- There is not a one-size-fits-all standard and buildings should be treated differently in different contexts. Not all buildings require a step-back “wedding cake” approach.
- The Planning Board should have the opportunity to deviate from the guidelines.
- Language in the guidelines should be carefully considered “may” vs. “shall” vs. “should”

Design Advisory Panel

- What is the anticipated date for formation? *The panel will be established through the Bethesda Overlay Zone Zoning Text Amendment.*
- Who appoints the members, and will there be professional members? *The Planning board will appoint members, and this will include 5 members: professional architects, developers, and citizens as well as the Planning Director and Senior Urban Designer in the Director’s Office.*
- What authority will the panel have? *The panel will be advisory, but their recommendations will be given great weight.*
- The panel review needs to be early in the process around concept plan because otherwise it will be difficult to make changes.
- The design panel review process should not delay the overall development review process.
- How has the design review panel worked in Alexandria? What have been the challenges for developers?

Building Form Guidelines

- Restrictions on maximum floor plate are not recommended. A typical commercial floorplate is approx. 25,000sf and these guidelines should not restrict the potential for viable commercial development in Bethesda.
- Vancouver has very restrictive requirements for point towers and also some of the highest housing costs.
- Step-backs often create some of the worst buildings, as evidenced by buildings in New York required to do step-backs.
- Tower separation creates a suburban character and does not acknowledge the difference for midblock buildings that may be infeasible if they need to provide separation on both sides.
- Not everyone likes some building designs, it is difficult to dictate to architects that they must design a building that will appeal to all stakeholders. There is potential for the result to be generic building design.
- Sometimes numbers help architects to guide design.

- Corners between different street types should be carefully considered. How do street types meet?
- Small sites are constrained and will be most penalized by guidelines. We do not want to only encourage large parcel assemblage in an infill context like Bethesda.
- Guidelines should perhaps adjust proportionally to the size of the property.
- Limiting floorplates will restrict rooftop size at a time when rooftop space is one of the most important amenities in multi-family buildings.
- In order to create an urban environment, we should embrace the continuous street wall.
- Should allow at-risk windows on the property line, this prevents blank walls but allows development more space on constrained sites.

Parks and Open Space Guidelines

- Do not over-design open spaces, simpler is better.

Site Design

- Difficult to achieve green cover requirements because of soil volume needed over underground parking.

Review Process

- There may be too many review steps: concept plan, sketch plan, preliminary plan and site plan.
- Concept plan comments should be given before DRC. Comments from all agencies should also be broad and not address detailed dimensions.