

NOTES FROM PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT SESSION - INTERIM DESIGN REVIEW EXEMPTION PROPOSAL

Presentation, Comments and Q&A, August 20, 2024

Gordon Clowers presented a PowerPoint overview of the interim Design Review Exemption proposal to members of Seattle's design review boards. All board members were invited; approximately 9-10 were in attendance.

Gordon described the basis of the proposal as recommended by the Downtown Activation Plan (see www.downtownisyou.com). And, shared the details about the affected area, 3-year interim timeframe, status of the proposal, and affected types of development.

Links:

- See the PowerPoint presentation (attached), and at the webpage listed below.
- See the webpage for this proposal at: [Design Review Exemption for Downtown & Center City - What & Why - SDCI | seattle.gov](#)
- See the proposal contents being considered by the City Council at: [SEATTLE CITY COUNCIL - Record No: CB 120824 \(legistar.com\)](#). Council Bill 120824.

Affected locations: Downtown, Uptown, South Lake Union, First Hill Urban Centers, and a portion of the Greater Duwamish Manufacturing and Industrial Center between 4th Ave. S and Interstate 5, north of S. Royal Brougham Way. (See map.)

Affected development types: Residential development, hotel development, mixed-use development with at least 50% floor area in residential or hotel uses; or development of “research and development laboratory” uses.

Process improvements: The proposal would allow for quicker project review times; and some development proposals would proceed directly to building permit review (with a land use regulatory review step still occurring). These would not be appealable to the Hearing Examiner. But, some developments benefiting from design review exemption would still be “Type II” appealable projects depending on whether they require SEPA review or not.

The proposal would have SDCI staff review and consider deviations from code requirements, for most design requirements that are evaluated for departures in the Design Review process.

The proposal would extend standard public notice requirements to development proposals only undergoing building permit review. This would consist of: a large white sign, publication in the Land Use Information Bulletin, comment period, and circulation of mailed notice in the immediate vicinity of project sites.

Discussion and Questions

1. An initial question helped clarify that this interim exemption proposal is different than the design review reform actions that will be proposed at a later date that are prompted by State legislation in 2023. Those other proposals are still being formulated at this time.
2. Question: Would the proposal lead to a loss in ability to nominate and consider landmark status for existing buildings? This relates to situations where new development could affect older buildings that could be demolished.

Response: This design review exemption proposal does not have any effect on landmark nominating practices or codes. The City's Title 25 landmark codes address City thresholds for flagging properties for review, and other agreements between SDCI and DON are not affected. Applicants are still advised to pursue landmark board reviews for existing buildings that could qualify as landmarks, and City staff can flag properties for this review.

3. Question: Might this exemption cause existing development proposals currently under design review to opt out of those processes, and follow the new proposed review pathway at SDCI?

Response: Gordon acknowledged there is potential for that to occur; or for other projects that already completed design review to also pursue this pathway, in order to change design conditions. However, another thing to note is: if development proposals do pursue this, they could lose their vesting to prior Code requirements, which might have other code-related and cost implications.

4. Question: What is the reasoning for selecting this particular affected area? Who made the choices?

Response: Gordon noted that the Mayor's Office selected the proposal area. This relates to the revitalization objectives noted in the Downtown Activation Plan. This looks to stimulate development projects that might not otherwise happen, and bring more new residents and employees into Downtown and the other adjacent core Urban Center areas. These are meant to help activate and rejuvenate the quality of the residential neighborhoods, shopping and employment centers, to help restore some of the good qualities that have diminished in recent years.

5. Question: Seeking to understand what the non-residential use types included in the proposal are.

Response: Other than hotels, the use category of "Laboratory, research and development" is included in the proposal, typically hosting high-tech businesses. See Section 23.84A.024 of the Land Use Code; these developments may include laboratory and office spaces.

6. Question: What is the status and timing of this proposal?

Response: The proposal is at the City Council Land Use Committee, and the first meeting on it will occur on September 4, and will include a public hearing.

