

Key Points from Focus Group Kickoff Meetings - April 2020

San Marcos Design Standards and Guidelines Update

This document summarizes key feedback from the kickoff Focus Group meetings held virtually on April 15th and 16th. After a short presentation of the project background and objectives, each group discussed a series of questions regarding strengths of and issues raised by recent development, the downtown design contexts, and the existing standards and guidelines documents. Historic preservation questions and questions regarding the public realm were addressed by the appropriate groups. Note that all questions focused on downtown San Marcos, defined by the design contexts map and stretching from I-35 to the University. The kickoff Focus Group meetings were held with the following groups:

- Heritage Preservation Commission and Heritage Association
- Main Street Advisory Board and Downtown Design Task Force
- Downtown Association Board

PART 1: THE BIG IDEAS

Design Excellence

Promoting excellence in design is a key objective. That is, projects should do more than simply meeting the minimums required by the standards.

- * This can be expressed in intent statements in the standards and in the tone of the language used in the standards and guidelines themselves.

Sense of Place

Maintaining the distinct identity that is associated with downtown is important. This sets San Marcos apart from other communities in the region.

Factors that contribute to a sense of place are:

- Small scale buildings and their components, including storefronts, entries, signs and architectural details, that contribute to a changing scene as one walks along a downtown street
- The eclectic mix of architectural styles and building details
- The variety of businesses and other uses found downtown, especially those that are one-of-a-kind and convey the personality of the owners
- Street edges that invite pedestrian activity, with storefronts, seating areas and product displays
- Iconic landmarks and views that help orient people in the downtown

Four-sided Design

Projects are experienced from all sides and their designs should reflect this. It is especially important where a new project abuts a sensitive edge and along an alley.

- * This is a concept that can be addressed in the design standards and guidelines. It may include:
 - » Considering how varied massing is expressed throughout a project, not only along the street frontage
 - » Addressing ground level design in alleys
 - » Promoting creative use of outdoor spaces to activate the street

Visual Continuity

Establishing a sense of continuity throughout downtown is important. To a degree, this is best established in the public realm, with a coordinated streetscape palette. However, new buildings also can contribute to this, by drawing upon design traditions. This does not mean that new buildings should copy historic styles, but rather learn from them.

* This concept could be expanded on in the design guidelines.

Balancing Old and New

A new building should fit with the old, while expressing its own time. “Fitting in” does not require that a new building copy a historic style. As an example, designing a building that is a full block in width and three stories tall, which is then capped with a Victorian cornice would not achieve this objective. On the other hand, a new building that simply contrasts with its context in the interest of standing out also will not fit. A new building should have sufficient features in common with design traditions to fit in without being imitative.

* This concept could be expanded upon in the design guidelines.

Responding to “context” is important.

A new project should respond to its context. Context may be considered at three levels of perception:

1. Nearby properties, especially those in the immediate block
2. The specific Design Context, which is an officially designated sub-area of the downtown
3. The character of downtown as a whole

* This concept is introduced in the Design Principles in the current Design Guidelines and could be expanded upon.

PART 2: MORE DETAILED OBSERVATIONS

Recent trends in development downtown

1. A decline in street level retail occupancy, which is a concern
 - » Consider other alternative uses.
 - » Also consider other alternative street level designs that activate the street.
2. Small scale adaptive reuse projects are occurring.
 - » These often have uses that activate the street (such as outdoor dining areas).
 - » They engage with the public realm (with landscaping on the site as well as providing seating areas).
 - » They are in scale with traditional character of downtown San Marcos.
 - » They typically are locally owned.
3. New mixed-use and residential projects are occurring.
 - » Many feel that these projects are out of scale and out of context.
 - » Some of these projects are more successful than others.
 - » Opinions vary about which ones are successful, and to what degree.

Understanding “change”

It is important to understand that downtown will continue to change, as infill and adaptive reuse projects continue. While there are genuine concerns about the compatibility of some recent developments, some negative reactions may simply be to the pace of change.

Variation in massing

Recent large-scale projects appear massive, even though they follow the design standards for varied massing. Those standards require some variation in building form, with the intent of dividing a project into modules that individually appear smaller in scale.

- This may be, in part, that the principles for varied massing are not well defined.
- Providing more detail in the standards about the interaction of different techniques to achieve variation in massing could help.

Articulation of facades

A concept related to varied massing is the use of articulation methods to visually divide a large wall surface into smaller modules.

- * This could be expanded upon in the design standards and guidelines.

Transitions

There is much discussion about the concept of transitions, and how this applies to compatibility. An improvement project in the downtown should provide an appropriate transition along a sensitive edge. (This is addressed in the current design standards, but could be expanded upon.) A transition may be considered in these ways:

1. A sub-area that serves as a transition from a higher density area to one of lower density. This may include changes in uses, and the scale and intensity of buildings. Only one of the existing Design Contexts is of this type, the Residential Transition Context.
2. A Transition along the edge of an individual property where it abuts a more sensitive edge. This may occur along the edges of a historic district or an individual landmark building.

Engaging with the public realm

Assuring that projects actively engage the public realm is important. This may occur with active facades but also with outdoor spaces, including plazas and courtyards.

- * The standards could be updated to more aggressively encourage creating outdoor spaces that are accessible by the public.

Greening downtown

Expanding the tree canopy is important. While this is a key element of the public realm, promoting outdoor spaces with trees in development projects also would help to achieve this objective.

- * The standards could be updated to more aggressively encourage creating outdoor spaces that are planted with trees to provide shade.

Impacts on historic resources

New development should be respectful of abutting historic resources.

- * The code addresses this, but could be expanded upon.

Parking

The need to provide parking is a major impact on the character of development downtown. It influences the drive to assemble parcels in order to provide efficient parking designs.

- * This should be considered in updating the standards.

Building Materials

A key method of fitting with the character of downtown is to use materials that appear similar to those used traditionally.

- While state law limits regulating material choice, using similar materials may be encouraged as a method of meeting requirements for façade articulation.

Adaptive Reuse

Many of the recent projects that are considered assets are smaller ones that involved the adaptive reuse of existing buildings.

- * The degree to which the design standards and guidelines facilitate adaptive reuse should be considered.