

Key Points from Planning and Zoning Commission/City Council Meeting June 25, 2020

San Marcos Design Standards and Guidelines Update

This document summarizes key feedback from the joint Planning and Zoning Commission/City Council meeting that was held virtually on the evening of June 25. This meeting followed three initial stakeholder meetings held in April 2020 and a kickoff community online survey available during the month of May. The objective of the initial outreach methods was to understand community member's initial thoughts about recent design in downtown San Marcos. This meeting with the Planning and Zoning Commission/City Council provided an opportunity to update these groups on initial feedback and confirm the project direction moving forward.

Six members of the City Council and eight members of the Planning & Zoning Commission joined Planning and Development Services staff and the consultants in the workshop. The meeting began with a presentation led by the consultant team that reviewed the project background, community input to-date and an introduction to the design contexts. The majority of the presentation focused on a review of the key design topics to be addressed in this project - massing, articulation, building materials, street level design and transitions. After an introduction, analysis of existing content and a review of the proposed updates for each design topic, Council members and Commissioners had a chance to weigh in on the proposed approach. Additional questions followed and provided an opportunity for participants to share ideas for other topics to be covered and considerations for the design contexts.

PART 1: BIG IDEAS

Referencing Historic Character

Throughout this joint workshop, participants emphasized the importance of designing new buildings to incorporate features that are compatible with and reflect the character of historic buildings. While a new building should not copy exact features of historic buildings, the design should be compatible with nearby historic buildings. For instance, a new building, especially near designated historic resources, should be designed to be of a similar height and massing as the neighboring historic buildings, and to reflect traditional floor heights. Details of the new building, however, may be more contemporary in nature. In no case is it appropriate for a new building to simply apply traditional details of a historic building, such as a Victorian cornice, dentils or egg-and-dart patterns.

Encouraging a Mix of Uses Downtown

Activity downtown should not be limited to one use but accommodate many uses including office, residential and commercial spaces. This indicates that a variety of building types and variety in building designs can be expected. Participants noted that in order to ensure the downtown remains a vibrant place for people to live, work and visit, the updated design standards and guidelines should allow for, and promote, a diverse array of building uses.

Design Excellence

The concept of design excellence came up in this meeting as it has in the previous stakeholder meetings. This simply means that while the updated

standards and guidelines will provide clearer direction for new building design downtown, the community hopes that proposed designs go above and beyond rather than just work to meet the minimums outlined in the documents. This can be accomplished by making this a high level design principle, including additional language in the intent statements, and in the tone of the updated standards and guidelines, all of which will let the design community know that a high caliber of design is expected in downtown San Marcos.

Visual Continuity

Participants recognized the importance of creating a sense of continuity that notifies a visitor that they have arrived downtown. This sense of continuity is established in the public realm through a coordinated streetscape and landscape palette, but it is also established through the built environment. While creativity is encouraged, it also means that new buildings should draw upon the design traditions of existing historic buildings to be compatible in the downtown.

Designing for the Pedestrian

A large part of creating an active downtown is designing an environment that is comfortable and enjoyable for pedestrians. This means that pedestrians should have plenty of space to walk, places to sit and things to engage with. Many of the online survey comments emphasized the importance of shade to help with the summer heat, and this sentiment was echoed by the participants in this meeting. They also emphasized the importance of creating outdoor spaces for pedestrians to relax, such as forecourts, that incorporate lighting, shade and seating.

Implementing Appropriate Transitions and Transition Areas

Participants discussed transitions at length and began to recognize the need for a more specific definition for the term. In some cases, a transition refers to a block or several blocks in a part of downtown that has a gradation in scale between two other contexts of different heights. In other cases, the transition refers to a sensitive edge that requires a step down, a landscaped area, an increased distance or another technique to respond to the sensitive edge.

PART 2: KEY DESIGN TOPICS

Massing

Massing refers to the general shape and form, as well as the size, of a building. Building massing is established by the arrangement and proportion of basic building components, including the main building volume, any wall offsets and projections such as porches and arcades, and even the roof and the foundation. The conversation about massing revolved around the need for new buildings to reflect traditional mass and scale of historic buildings downtown. Generally, participants expressed the desire that new buildings maintain the look and feel of the historic downtown. This includes larger buildings that are often built to the street, that typically fill the site and that foster an enjoyable pedestrian experience. While additional requirements, such as parking, change the way massing can be built today, these general massing principles should be continued in new construction. Participants noted that the current standards and guidelines for massing are too high level and additional detail is needed to achieve results for new buildings that are compatible with the existing building fabric downtown.

Articulation

Articulation is the design of a building wall to provide visual interest, reduce mass and establish a sense of human scale. This may include variations in wall surfaces, changes in materials and differences in fenestration patterns, as well as other design techniques. The topic of massing led directly into the importance of articulating new buildings to be compatible with existing buildings, and that this should be done in a thoughtful way. In other words, simply attaching a couple forms of articulation and detail to a large building mass does not mean it is compatible with an historic building. Instead, articulation techniques should draw upon those seen traditionally. These include horizontal and vertical moldings that divide a facade into smaller components that are in scale with older buildings. They also include organizing the facade to have a “base,” “middle,” and “cap.” Participants noted that new graphics are also needed in this section to help illustrate the importance of this concept.

Building Materials

Participants recognized that due to the recent statewide legislation of H.B. No. 2439, providing standards on materials is difficult. However, they do still hope to provide guidance on how to appropriately apply materials in a way that reflect the traditional scale of stone, brick and other materials used on historic buildings. Considering ways to disincentivize certain materials is also something the councilors and commissioners are interested in looking into. Overall, they would like materials used on new buildings to reflect those of historic buildings.

Street Level Design

Designing the street level of new buildings to engage pedestrians is key. For new buildings that incorporate glass at the street level, participants liked the idea of requiring a base, appropriate amount of glass, and framing all to invoke the traditional storefront of historic buildings downtown. Participants recognized that not all buildings incorporate glass at the street level based on the building use, but blank walls should not be allowed. Instead, they liked the suggestion of providing a series of options for activating the street level including the use of murals, landscaping, wall art, or display cases. Additionally, councilors and commissioners hope to promote the use of deep canopies and awnings at the street level to provide shade that will, in turn, assist in creating a more active street level.

Transitions

Transitions, as mentioned in Part 1, were a key topic of discussion in the joint workshop. The participants voiced their concern for single-family residential properties adjacent to the design contexts that feel or will feel the effects of development within the downtown design contexts especially in terms of privacy. In order to alleviate these effects on residential areas, councilors and commissioners want to incorporate a series of options for affectively transitioning from a commercial, higher density area to a residential area. These strategies include requiring a height step down, incorporating greater distance from the building, using landscaping and being more specific about the locations where balconies and decks are appropriate. Participants noted that they would prefer these transition strategies be incorporated into the standards rather than the guidelines so enforcing them is as easy as possible.

Another type of transition discussed spans a larger area, where a series of blocks serve to transition in scale between a commercial or mixed use area and a residential area. While one such area already exists in the design contexts - the

Residential/Transition Area - it is possible that other areas will be edges within the existing contexts.

PART 3: DESIGN CONTEXTS

Design Context Boundaries

The downtown is divided into a series of five (5) design contexts, each with defined boundaries. The design standards apply differently in each of these contexts. At the beginning of the design context discussion, staff clarified the origin of the current design context boundaries and their relationship to the Downtown Master Plan boundaries and the underlying zoning. Participants in this meeting, similar to the previous outreach opportunities, recognized the need for some small potential boundary changes focused on individual parcels at the edges of some design contexts. In general, however, they came to the consensus that these boundaries are correct as currently drawn. Councilors and commissioners also expressed their concerns about expanding the boundaries any further and inadvertently expanding the definition of downtown.

Design Context Names and Vision

While participants seemed comfortable with the boundaries as is, discussion focused more on the need to reexamine the names and overall vision for each of the design contexts. For instance, the idea of the transitory nature of the “Residential/Transition Edge” being applied to the current “Approach” design context resonated with the participants, who are concerned about the lack of protection of the residential neighborhoods on either side of the “Approach” context. Participants also discussed the vision for each of the contexts especially in regards to appropriate density. For some contexts, like the University Edge and the northeast corner of the Transit Oriented Development design contexts, participants agreed that an increase in density is appropriate. For other contexts, such as the Residential/Transition Edge and the Downtown, they noted that an increase in density would be inappropriate. Re-examining the names for each of the design contexts is also something the councilors and commissioners would like to do in this process in order to ensure the name accurately reflects the vision and the geographical area the context represents.