



AUSTIN DESIGN COMMISSION

October 24, 2011

BART WHATLEY

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RE: Creation of Infrastructure Design Guidelines

Dear Mayor & Members of the City Council,

Thank you for confiding in the Design Commission to study the creation of Design Guidelines for City infrastructure projects. We have taken the time to discuss this with City staff and among the members of the Design Commission and do agree there is a place and need for Infrastructure design guidelines. Fiscal responsibility is important with public projects. Since infrastructure directly affects the public and the built environment, careful planning must be done to ensure that projects do not negatively impinge upon quality of life. Design guidelines for infrastructure projects would provide standards for public expenditures, clarify public values about the built environment, and aid in creating a clear project review path. By bridging the gaps between City staff, the designers, and the stakeholders/public, we may begin to attain an efficient process. For organization of the Guidelines we envision five chapters. The first chapter is Applicability. This would create a clear set of selection criteria for which projects would come before the Commission for review under the new Guidelines. City departments that are affected would be identified, as well as specific project types that do not currently fall under Subchapter E or the 2007 Design Commission Resolution. The project's impact to the quality of urban life or to the quality of life in future areas of density, (specifically focusing upon that which is visible from applicable public areas) would be the primary criteria for establishing which projects would and would not be exempt from review. Categories of projects would be identified to aid in the evaluation. The next chapter is Site Selection. This is extremely important because it is the foundation for how a project impacts the public. This chapter will aid in the departments selection and evaluation of sites. It will discuss the consideration of long range forecast and planning, compatibility challenges, different roadway effects, and possibly other issues. It may conclude with a checklist or possibly some form based graphics to help explain the challenges.

The bulk of the guidelines will most likely be in the next chapter, Design. The goal is clear and predictable guidelines. In creating the guidelines, we recommend drawing upon the values and intents expressed in our Urban Design Guidelines (UDG). These include human character, patterns of density, sustainability, diversity, economic vitality, civic art, character, authenticity, safety, connection with the natural environment, preservation, ecology, future compatibility, and technical requirements. An additional item to incorporate, not in the UDG, is a prioritization of design. In simpler, low impact infrastructure projects, there may a standard toolkit of parts that can be chosen to establish the design elements of the project. On higher impact projects, where there may be an opportunity for the enhancement of the public experience, there may be an opportunity for design excellence rather than just functional acceptance. This chapter could include form based graphics and a checklist.


The next chapter would deal with Stakeholder Identification and Input. A present challenge is that stakeholder input can add significant costs to a project. Consideration

should be given to current process in place to identify what works and what does not, and adapt the processes that work. The goal is to streamline the stakeholder and Design Commission interface with clear guidelines so affected parties are identified and informed about what to expect before discussions even begin, allowing for efficient stakeholder input. With effective design guidelines, this is possible. More complex infrastructure projects may require third party planners/designers, however all parties would be coming to the table from the same understanding of the intent and directions of the Design Guidelines.

Finally, the review process would be discussed. The drive would not be to recreate the current process, but to modify it. Using the guidelines, staff would prepare a background synopsis of the projects. They would then propose what infrastructure projects come to the Design Commission, but also communicate projects that were proposed to not come to the Design Commission. This way the Commission may make requests for presentations on projects that are believed to impinge on quality of life in current or future areas of density. If it is a project that is selected for review, a standard outline of information would be presented to the Commission. With the efficiency of what the guidelines may create, we may begin to reduce the budgets for these infrastructure projects and, additionally, enhance quality of life. With the savings, it may bring opportunities within the project for more public amenities like quality open space or art. If not within the project, there are countless other ways the savings can be appropriated.

The Design Commission greatly appreciates your acknowledgement of the challenges that infrastructure projects create. If it is Council's wish that the Design Commission assist in the development of actual infrastructure guidelines, we would be happy to do so. Thank you very much for this opportunity to study this issue and advise the Council.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Bart Whatley". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Bart" being more prominent.

Bart Whatley
Chair, City of Austin Design Commission