Audit Report

Boards and Commissions Audit: Design Commission

April 26, 2011

Austin City Council

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Date: April 26, 2011

To: Mayor and Council

From: Kenneth J. Mory, City Auditor

Subject: Boards and Commissions Audit: Design Commission

I am pleased to present this audit report on the Design Commission. This audit is part of our office's ongoing review of the Boards and Commissions as required by Section 2-1-8 of the City Code.

We found that the Design Commission is generally in compliance with the tested City Code and bylaws requirements and that the staff liaison is providing support as required. The risks identified in our audit work had either already been mitigated or did not have significant or material exceptions.

We appreciate the cooperation and assistance we received from the Design Commission, the Planning and Development Review Department, and the Office of the City Clerk during this audit.

cc: City Manager
Assistant City Managers
City Clerk
Planning and Development Review Department Director
Chair of the Design Commission
Public Information Officer

BACKGROUND

The Architectural Excellence Commission was created in 1986. The name was changed to the Design Commission in 1987. In 2005, the Commission was charged with promoting good urban design. Currently, the Commission is charged with the following responsibilities:

- offer policy recommendations regarding specific issues of urban design;
- participate in developing design guidelines;
- unless otherwise directed by the city council, for projects that require the approval of the Planning Commission or the Zoning and Platting Commission:
    - review a project only after a formal request by the project sponsor or applicant;
    - complete the review before the respective Planning or Zoning and Platting Commission takes final action;
- provide citizen education and outreach regarding quality urban design;
- provide a venue for citizen input on the design and development of the urban environment;
- maintain liaison relationships with city staff and other boards and commissions; and
- perform other activities as directed by the city council.

OBJECTIVES, SCOPE, AND METHODOLOGY

The Design Commission Audit was conducted as part of the Office of City Auditor's FY11 Service Plan, as presented to the Council's Audit and Finance Committee.

Objectives
Our audit objectives were to:

- Determine whether the Commission is operating in compliance with City Code, Commission bylaws, and other applicable policies, and
- Determine whether staff and executive liaisons are providing support services to the Commission on a timely basis and as prescribed by applicable City Code provisions and policies.

Scope
The audit focused on Design Commission operations between February 2010 and January 2011.

Methodology
To accomplish our audit objectives, we performed the following steps:

- Interviewed key staff, including staff liaison, executive liaison, and Office of the City Clerk staff;
- Surveyed Design Commission members;

- Reviewed documentation including agendas, minutes, agenda back-ups, Design Commission correspondence, sign-in sheets, committee and task group lists, and staff procedures for compliance with City Code; and
- Observed Design Commission meetings (in person and on video).

We conducted this performance audit in accordance with Generally Accepted Government Auditing Standards (GAGAS). Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

AUDIT RESULTS

The Design Commission is generally in compliance with the tested City Code and bylaws requirements and the staff liaison is providing support as required.

FINDING 1: The risks identified in our audit work had either already been mitigated or did not have significant exceptions.

The Boards & Commissions Risk Assessment performed by the Office of the City Auditor in 2010 identified the following risks for the Design Commission:

- Discrepancies between agendas and minutes
- Large number of subcommittees and subcommittee meetings
- Potential mission creep
- Non-attendance by executive liaison
- Lack of quorum (particularly at special called meetings)
- Potential communication problems between Commission members, staff, and Council members

In this audit, we found that the first two risks have already been mitigated, while the remaining risks did not have significant or material exceptions. Committees were reduced from nine to two, and the eight task forces were converted to six working groups (which do not require minutes or staff support.)

We did notice that though there are no set criteria for boards and commissions to follow in communicating with City Council, the Design Commission has established a regular process for communicating their recommendations.

Additionally, all members of the Design Commission were highly satisfied with the staff liaison's performance.

Because we identified no ongoing risks, we have issued no recommendations.