

ANNUAL REPORT TO THE CITY COUNCIL DESIGN REVIEW COMMISSION

TO: City Council
FROM: Ray Nelson, Chairperson - Design Review Commission
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SUBJECT: Annual Report of the Design Review Commission
DATE: December 31, 2007

SUMMARY: As requested, the following is the annual report of the Design Review Commission (DRC). The following format corresponds to the discussion items requested in the City Resolution No. 201-07 dated August 16, 2000.

DISCUSSION:

1. *Progress on Goals:*

The attached table lists the number of Design Review applications that have been processed from January 10, 2007 through December 12, 2007. The Design Review Commission (DRC) provided design assistance to: 26 residential applications, 20 commercial applications, 5 industrial applications, 3 City/Public projects, and 11 preliminary review applications. The DRC conducted a total of 21 meetings in the past year – 20 regular meetings and 1 special joint study session with the City Council on June 26, 2007. This includes a special study session for the draft Design Manual that was conducted on November 28, 2007. In addition, Commissioners attended approximately 4 workshops to broaden their knowledge of their role.

The goals of the DRC are established through policies in the Arcata General Plan 2020 (GP2020) and in the Land Use and Development Guide (LUDG) Section 4-0202. These goals are summarized as follows: to promote the orderly and harmonious development of the City; to promote the stability of land values and investments; to enhance the desirability of residences in the City; to promote visual environments of high aesthetic quality; to maximize the benefits of the natural assets of the community including access to solar energy; to protect scenic areas; to consider Arcata's unique architectural and natural setting; and to prevent excessive and unsightly grading of hillsides. DRC has taken the direction of the City Council, given at a joint study session on June 26, 2007, and applied the standards of LUDG, and GP2020 policies to each project under their review.

The DRC's responsibility is to consider these goals and numerous design aspects when reviewing projects. It is a complex, multi-faceted, and in-depth review process that is generally completed in less than two weeks. It involves making site visits, and studying site plans, building plans, elevations, landscape plans, building colors, building materials, lighting, and signage. DRC also considers neighboring uses, pedestrian, bicycle and traffic circulation, solar access, energy efficiency, safety, natural resources, and heritage resources when applicable. Furthermore, each project is reviewed for compliance with other federal, state and local regulations, such as the California Environmental Quality Act. After careful consideration of these issues, DRC makes recommendations, giving the applicant suggestions for design improvement, or requiring specific modifications. In all cases, DRC's decisions are made with the careful consideration of the visual aesthetics of the City, the applicant's needs, and fulfilling the goals outlined in LUDG and GP2020.

2. *How Community/Citizen needs are being met:*

The DRC is concerned with meeting the needs of the community as a whole as well as the individual needs of each applicant. It should be recognized that much of the “quality of life,” for which the City is widely recognized, is the result of DRC’s implementation of the design considerations included in the LUDG and GP2020. Building design, landscaping, and the integration of these components into existing and newly developing neighborhoods is the challenge that DRC has addressed over the years. With the review of each project, their goal is to improve the project that is before them, and enhance the surrounding neighborhood.

On an individual basis, the DRC works directly with the applicant at each meeting. DRC receives input and comments from the applicant and public members, considers project needs and constraints, and balances these constraints in relation to requested modifications. DRC is careful not to create undue hardship to the applicant but instead strives to work with each applicant to fulfill the goals as stated in the LUDG and GP2020, assist the applicant in identifying project improvements, and accommodate specific applicant concerns and needs.

In some cases the applicant is resistant to the quasi-judicial and discretionary role DRC has in reviewing private and public projects. Project applicants may find the process an additional step that adds time delays and costs to their projects. However, DRC often receives positive feedback from project applicants and citizens when they realize their input has helped to make their project better. Positive comments from adjacent property owners are also made; often times Design Review is the only opportunity for these neighbors to comment on projects that affect their immediate neighborhood. In addition, professional architects and designers often refer projects to DRC for preliminary review to obtain design considerations. Individually, the DRC probably plays the biggest role on how Arcata looks visually. It is often a fine line between meeting the interests of the applicant, immediate neighbors, and the community at large.

In 2007, all the projects were approved (or continued as of the date of this report). None of the Commission’s actions was appealed. One DRC project was withdrawn by the applicant. In 2007, several Bloomfield area residents requested that the DRC consider investigating possible designation of the Greenview (Bloomfield Acres) neighborhood as a Neighborhood Conservation Area (NCA). This was prompted by resident concerns that additions in the neighborhood adversely affected the integrity of the neighborhood.

DRC will consider 2008 Design Awards for projects that exemplified the design goals of the City of Arcata. DRC understands it is important publicly to recognize property owners, design specialists and contractors for their roles in creating a livable and vibrant community.

3. *How the responsibilities of the Commission are being fulfilled:*

DRC’s membership is informed, creative, and committed, and brings specific interests and knowledge to each project. The City Council appointed two Design Review Commissioners; one in February 2006, and a second Commissioner in November 2007.

The Commission’s current membership has a balance of experience and interests: one long-standing member has an interest in historical preservation, another long-standing member has an interest in architecture and vast experience in landscape design as a landscape supervisor at a large public institution, and one is a community member with an interest in design. One member, appointed in 2006, is a former Arcata Energy Committee member with experience in solar siting and project design. The most recently appointed member is an architect and contractor, with expertise in architecture and community design. Of the

standing members, each member provides valuable input in their area of interest, as well as thoughtful input in the general design, efficiency, and safety features of each project.

DRC is still concerned about how the role Design Review is being defined (or not) in the Draft Land Use Code (DLUC). The term *Design Review Authority* is used throughout the document without any clear indication of who or what that body is (discretionary or advisory), for example. In addition, the DRC is interested in knowing how the proposed Historic and Design Review Authority will function.

Several Commissioners have attended workshops to expand their expertise and understanding of the quasi-judicial role they have. The following is a list of workshops attended by some or all of the Commissioners: Maintaining Neighborhood Character webcast; Plan-It-Green Energy and Design conference; Landscape Design/Stormwater workshop, and; CEQA and Historical Resources workshop. Ethics training pursuant to AB 1234 is required for all new members. The Commission recommends the City pursue annual training opportunities including California Environmental Quality Act environmental review processes.

4. *The effectiveness of the policies and procedures:*

At this time the internal procedures are operating effectively and efficiently, however DRC is always evaluating the process and looking at ways to increase efficiency and transparency. DRC typically meets twice a month on the second and fourth Wednesday for regular meetings. City staff receives applications a minimum of 12 calendar days prior to the DRC meeting. The applications are reviewed for completeness and conformance with the LUDG and GP2020. Between 3-5 days prior to the meeting the agendas and packets are sent to the Commissioners, applicants and agents. During the meeting, DRC receives input from the applicant and other community members. Some meetings have had up to six items requiring review; and some have lasted several hours. In response to length of the meetings and the types of projects submitted, DRC continues to use the *Consent Agenda* to assist in expediting reviews for simple and direct project issues. In addition, to expedite review, DRC uses a sub-committee to review minor landscaping proposals.

Projects are occasionally continued at the request of the applicant or DRC to allow revisions that reflect the standards of LUDG and GP2020. Project approval is effective after a 10 working day appeal period. Staff then prepares the Minutes and Action Notices, which clearly state the conditions of approval and other relevant information. This process typically has a rapid turnaround time and is repeated every two weeks.

DRC strives to ensure compliance with the standards and policies of adopted regulations and to meet the goals of the community, while realizing that all actions taken are appealable to the Council. However, DRC recognizes the challenges of the community and staff in applying the policies of two General Plans (1985 General Plan for Coastal Zone areas; and GP2020 for inland areas) and a zoning ordinance that does not necessarily reflect these policies.

The GP2020 expanded the role of DRC by requiring review of all structures proposed for demolition. As such, staff developed handouts to assist applicants with application material when they propose to demolish a structure.

DRC looks forward to the completion of the DLUC and the Coastal Commissions adoption of the new zoning ordinance and GP2020. DRC is revisiting the Design Manual to assist the community members in design considerations for development in Arcata. DRC is considering

revisions to the current administrative draft Design Manual, but are hindered by the lack of an adopted (D)LUC and adequate staffing. Although staffing levels have improved with the hiring of the part-time Planning Technician, the Council should consider allocating for a full time position and possible consulting funds to assist in the completion of the Design Manual.

4. Recommendations:

At the joint study session the Council indicated a desire to exempt solar panel installations from the Design Review process. However, DRC believes the City should have some input regarding placement of panels and general panel appearance. DRC is as committed to the community's interest in alternative energy options. DRC feels that design concepts should not be viewed as limiting opportunities, but rather as a means to provide the applicants advice about the PV systems. DRC can provide effective advice regarding the placement of panels so they are arranged in the most pleasing way possible without limiting their effectiveness. DRC also believes parameters or design standards can be established to exempt DRC reviews on certain types of installations.

Color was also an item the Council was interested in removing from DRC review authority. DRC believes color selections allow the applicant to consider options that are compatible with the neighborhood and the proposed development. Staff and the DRC cannot recall a project that was denied based on an applicant's color selection. Often times DRC makes recommendations for the applicant to consider. DRC does not desire to become the color cops, rather provide feedback and options in their color selection. The DRC feels that in some circumstances it is certainly desirable to maintain review authority over a buildings color. As an example structures located near natural resource areas or historic structures/ districts may warrant special considerations.

The DRC has the following recommendations:

1. Study session with the Council.
2. Complete the review of the Draft Land Use Code.
3. After adoption of the Draft Land Use Code, complete the Design Manual.
4. Recommend clarifications from the Council on Neighborhood Conservation Areas and heritage (historic) resource preservation.
5. To Continue and to expand training opportunities.
6. Clarify the regulatory and procedural relationships with other existing and future advisory bodies and the Council.
7. Encourage ways to expedite review of all projects including streamlining the entire review process.
8. Continue to acknowledge exemplary projects through the Design Award program.
9. Request the Historical Sites Society of Arcata update their list of heritage resources.
10. Create a Noteworthy Structures List and a Noteworthy Arcata Historic Landscape Sites List.
11. Encourage City projects to utilize Preliminary Design Review to obtain design considerations before they are formalized.