

To: Mayor Stephen Buxbaum and the Olympia City Council

From: Jerry Parker - Chair of the Olympia Planning Commission

Subject: Transmittal of the Recommendations of the Olympia Planning Commission for the Update of the Olympia Comprehensive Plan

Date: May 6, 2013

As Chair of the Olympia Planning Commission, it is my role and privilege to transmit to the Olympia City Council the recommendations of the Olympia Planning Commission for revisions to the Olympia Planning Department's draft July Update to the current Olympia Comprehensive Plan. Our specific revisions were tentatively approved by majority votes as we proceeded in our review between July of 2012 and March of 2013. The revisions were approved in their entirety by majority vote of the Commission on March 18, 2013.

The Commission received over 1000 pages of both written and electronic comment from the public. We held held seven hearings between July and October of 2012 at which the public had the opportunity to either summarize or explain previously submitted comment or to submit new comment.

Subsequent to these hearings, staff from the City's Planning Department submitted to the Commission a list of 62 changes between the current Comprehensive Plan and the staff's July draft that the staff identified as "substantive". The Commission selected 26 of these "substantive changes" for its review. Concurrently, individual members of the Commission identified major topics or issues of interest or concern in the July draft, based in part on the written comments submitted on the July draft by the public and by public comment at the seven Commission hearings. Thirty six topics or issues were identified.

The staff did a remarkable job in guiding Commission members thru the often overlapping "substantive changes" selected by the Commission for review and the topics or issues identified separately by the Commission for review. In support of our review, the staff prepared memoranda in response to "information requests" on specific topics of interest or concern submitted by members of the Commission.

A brief summary of major recommendations resulting from our review of both the substantive changes and major topics or issues follows.

1. The Commission recommends that the initial chapter in the July draft, "Olympia's Vision" be separated into two chapters: an Introduction Chapter

and a “Values and Vision” chapter. This latter chapter is composed of values and visions specific to each subsequent chapter in the plan. The visions were developed by Commission to provide a context for the values, goals, and policies in the Update. These vision statements reflect the values, goals, and policies in the Update; they do not constitute the introduction of values, goals, or objectives. The values identified in the July draft were revised and amended to provide a context for the specific goals and policies in each chapter.

2. The Commission recommends that provisions for public participation be expanded to include provision for an action plan that would identify priority actions, based on the involvement of business, neighborhoods, environmental groups, and the public at large and that the action plan undergo annual review by the same groups and by the public at large.

The Commission identified a need to improve the public involvement process and to initiate public involvement earlier in land use decisions. Such improvement should include provisions to assure the public that their opinions and ideas have been received and considered.

3. The Commission recommends the policy in the July draft related to sea level rise be replaced with a new goal and related policies that would change the approach from adaptation to one that requires evaluation of all options and that such evaluation include analysis of costs and funding of such options.
4. The “urban corridors” and the related “transportation corridors” proposed in the July draft was, together with two proposed street connections, the source of the major portion of public comment on the July draft. In response, the Commission proposed several changes to the Future Land Use Map in the July draft.

Two relatively minor changes were recommended in the land use proposed at Kaiser Road and South Bay Road.

The major changes recommended by the Commission concern the delineation of the “urban corridor”. An “Urban Neighborhood” map recommended by the Commission on March 18 removes portions of Harrison Avenue on the Westside, 4th Avenue and State Streets on the Eastside, and Capitol Boulevard from the “urban corridor”. The Commission did not, however, revise the Future Land Use Map in the July draft. The Commission voted to work to reconcile these maps in April and to submit its recommendations to the Council as an attachment to this letter of transmittal.

The Commission did not recommend a change in the definition in the July draft of an “urban corridor” nor in the listing of urban corridors in the July draft. The Commission voted on March 18 to reconcile in subsequent meetings the text in the July draft on “urban corridors” with the map introduced and approved by the Commission on that date and may recommend a future work item to address any inconsistencies between the July draft and the “urban neighborhood” map.

In a meeting subsequent to March 18, the Commission agreed to recommend replacement of the text in the July draft that identified the above “urban corridors” on Harrison, State Street and Fourth Avenue, and Capitol Boulevard with alternative language consistent with the “Urban Neighborhood” map.

The Commission did not address inconsistencies between the “Neighborhood Map” approved on March 18 and the map of “Transportation Corridors” (Appendix H to the Transportation Chapter). This, like the inconsistency between the “Neighborhood Map” and the Future Land Use Map was addressed in subsequent meetings of the Commission and .....may recommend a future work item to address any remaining inconsistencies in these two maps.

In a closely related action, the Commission recommended a new goal and several related policies related to “urban neighborhoods”. One policy defines “high density” neighborhoods and identifies the siting of three such neighborhoods. Two related policies disallow medium or high density development in existing low density neighborhoods with the exception of medium density “Neighborhood Centers” designed to serve the adjacent neighborhood.

A fourth policy for “urban neighborhoods” recommends the establishment of eight “gateways” long major streets and the creation of unified streetscapes on these streets.

5. In response to testimony urging support for urban agriculture, the Commission is proposing a new goal and eleven new policies to provide increase specificity and focus. Likewise, provisions in the July draft for increased “urban green space” have been strengthened and expanded.
6. Policies in the July draft regarding “Views and Heights” were replaced by a new goal and five new policies. The policies provide for a public process using the recently acquired digital software to identify “important” views and observation points and to preserve such views from building heights. It also recommends establishment of an absolute maximum building height.

7. The Commission recommended extensive changes in the transportation chapter. However, nearly all of these changes were clarifications or refinements in language.

(On 3/18, the Commission approved the following paragraph for inclusion in this transmittal letter.)

*Thera Black, the Senior Transportation Planner at Thurston Regional Planning Council (TRPC), provided extensive feedback for improving the July Draft of the Transportation section. Ms. Black has specific relevant expertise in land use and transportation planning in our area. It was difficult for OPC to address all of her suggestions and integrate them into a batch of edits that would be easy to deliberate upon. Therefore, OPC recommended that City Transportation staff review all of Ms. Black's suggested edits for potential inclusion in the draft to go to Council.*

(On 3/18, the Commission approved the following paragraph for inclusion in this transmittal letter.)

*Climate Change was not addressed in the Transportation section. When Climate Change is addressed in the rest of the draft Plan, it is usually in terms of adapting to it. Olympia's role in preventing or slowing climate change, is rarely, if ever addressed. Adequate treatment of Climate Change would not be limited to naming the connections between providing alternatives to driving alone, but would include the idea of Climate Change influencing whether or not we fund certain Transportation projects. That is, because budgeting involves opportunity costs, Climate Change must become part of our cost-benefit analysis for all capital spending, not just for transportation*

One set of recommended changes in the transportation chapter responded to what was either the first or second largest number of public comments submitted on the July draft: connectivity. The Commission made changes in the criteria for the evaluation of proposed connections to assure a fuller involvement by neighborhood residents.

Based on the extensive public comment, the Commission recommended emphasized additional emphasis on the provision in the July draft that the proposed connections of Decatur Street and of 16 Avenue was contingent on the results of Phase 2 of the Olympia West Access study.

For the same reason, it recommended that the provision for a future connection between Kaiser Road and Park Drive be limited to access for bicycles, pedestrians, and emergency vehicles.

8. The Commission accepted the suggestion in the July draft that a Downtown Master Plan be developed and that it be adopted by the Council separately

from the Comprehensive Plan. The scope of the proposed plan was not changed from the July draft.

At the meeting of the full Commission on March 18, the following two items were approved for inclusion in this transmittal letter. First, the Committee adopted the following provision regarding graphics in the July draft.

*The graphic sketches in the July draft fail to effectively convey the development concepts to which they are intended to relate. These sketches may, in fact, create a response among readers opposite to that intended. The Planning Commission, therefore, requests that all graphic sketches in the July draft be removed. If feasible within the current restraints of budget and schedule, revised sketches of a more professional nature should be developed. If this is not possible, consideration should be given to selective use of the sketches in the current (1994) Comprehensive Plan.*

Second, the Commission recommended that it request the Council to direct the Commission to consider a code amendment to change the hearing body on rezones from Hearing Examiner to the Planning Commission

The Council should note that a significant number of the “substantive changes” identified by the staff in the July draft that were selected for review by the Commission, were, upon review, approved without revision. However, a difference exists among the current five Commission members regarding those sections of the July draft that were not selected for review by the Commission. One viewpoint holds that in approving the changes made by the Commission on March 18, the Commission approved the July draft, as amended.

A separate viewpoint argues that the Commission only recommended adoption by the Council of those elements in the July draft that the Commission identified for review and had either revised or approved as written in the July draft. This viewpoint holds that the Commission recommendations on these elements imply neither approval nor rejection of the remainder of the July draft.

As chair, I have invited all members of the Planning Commission sitting at the Commission meeting of March 18 and which the final recommended changes were approved to comment directly to the Council in separate letters their understanding of the scope of the recommendations at that meeting.

Some members of the Commission remain concerned that the Commission did not have adequate time to review all changes and topics as thorough a manner as they felt necessary. These concerns will be reflected in the suggested “work plan” for 2013 that the Commission will be submitting to the Council once new members are on board later this spring.

In completing our review and revision of the July draft Comprehensive Plan within the time allotted by the overall schedule, the Commission benefited from the very dedicated support of City staff. They provided considerable background information to assist the Commission while not intruding into the Commission's policy making role, as well as organizing and recording rather complex and sometimes confusing layers of proposed and revised text, goals, and policies. And finally, I must thank all Commission members for participation in what was a trying if not exhausting schedule of meetings and, in particular, Commissioner Bardin who conducted the three most recent meetings of the Commission while I was on vacation.

Looking forward, I believe the real work now begins. The Comprehensive Plan provides the framework, the bones of a future Olympia. Now we need to put flesh on the bones. Our programs and regulations will determine whether the goals and policies in the Plan become the creative, exciting city the Commission and, more importantly, the people of Olympia imagine and expect.