

To: Mayor Stephen Buxbaum and the Olympia City Council

From: Jerry Parker - Member of the Olympia Planning Commission

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

Date: May 8, 2013

The comments which follow are offered from my position as one of nine members of the Olympia Planning Commission. They are not offered as Chair of the Commission nor on behalf of the Commission. I have transmitted a summary of the Commission's recommendations and procedures in two separate memoranda.

I endorse the general themes in the July draft Update of the Comprehensive Plan prepared by the staff of Planning and Community Development. I specifically endorse the goal of a more compact and walkable city. I concurrently endorse the changes in that draft recommended by the Commission. Of particular significance is the recommended change from a linear pattern of urban corridors to a nodal focus for higher density development.

The logic for such a pattern of what in the literature is referred to a "poly nodal urbanism" was not articulated in the Commission's recommendations. I believe that given the current market demand for more intensive development, it is imperative that such development be focused in limited areas. This will help assure that the aggregate level of development within those areas achieves a "critical mass" sufficient to support the mixed uses that will achieve the walkable communities that are a key provision in the recommended Update.

I also support the proposal for "gateways" in the City. The current level of accommodation to car traffic is in direct conflict with the city envisioned in the Imagine Olympia process upon which the Update is based. Moreover, there is little in our existing streetscape to provide a sense of place to the City. Our major roads appear to be designed for maximum traffic flow, for getting people through the City and out. They do almost nothing to enhance either the driving experience or the sense of place imperative to a healthy city. Examples from around the nation suggest that the economic vitality of downtowns is inversely related to the speed of vehicular traffic. Creation of boulevards with widened sidewalks, trees, and medians for pedestrians created from multi-lane thoroughfares can generate private sector investment several times their cost. Quite obviously, our options for such enhancement are not unlimited but we need to take advantage of every opportunity to improve both the aesthetics and the economy of Olympia.

The goal of a more compact city requires that we review at the earliest possible time the current urban growth boundary. I realize a review is scheduled later in this decade but a failure to undertake a review at the earliest possible time will likely mean continued

sprawl with the related costs to the City that are not paid by such development. The recommended Update did not identify early review of the urban growth boundary as a goal or policy but such review would be wholly consistent with the foundational goals of the Update.

Many of the goals and policies in the Update to encourage a more compact city require public infrastructure investment and time for such investments to achieve this objective. There is, however, one area where a significant increase in our neighborhood densities (and related walkability) can be achieved with minimal cost and delay: infill. The recommended Update includes a welcome expansion of the area for such infill. However, there needs to be an active program to review the current standards for infill structures. Though commonly understood to be Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs), infill housing is best described as “space efficient housing” and includes a range of alternatives to single family structures. Such infill housing can help provide the neighborhood densities to support walkability by providing the basis for local groceries and convenience stores and for improved public transit. Of equal importance, infill can provide income to current residents and alternatives for individuals or couples at a stage of life where they wish to “downsize” without leaving their communities.

In addition to its inherent benefits, infill has the benefit that most of the research and program development has already been done by cities in the region. An aggressive outreach program in Santa Cruz (CA) produced a dramatic increase in infill construction. Portland and Vancouver, British Columbia have developed very effective regulations and outreach programs and the Sightline Institute in Seattle has a compilation of infill resources. Early action to promote infill could be a very cost effective step for the City in meeting the basic vision of the Update.

The changes proposed in the Update will likely generate concern among the public. Increased density can be understood as equivalent to a decline in quality of life. In my opinion, it is the exact opposite. However, the Update and related City efforts to convey the benefits of a more compact city are ineffective, if not counterproductive. The graphic depictions of mixed use development in the draft Update are, at best, grim. In this context, a picture is worth a thousand words and the Update and related City efforts need “good pictures.” These could be sketches in the actual plan but should be augmented or complemented by a web site with examples from other cities of housing types, infill, mixed use, and streetscapes. Too often, public dialogue regarding proposed development devolves into a rather depressing dichotomy contrasting some arcadian ideal as depicted by Thomas Kinkade with visions of the lower east side of New York in 1910. Lost in that chasm are the streetscapes of Barcelona, Madrid, Rome, Paris, San Francisco, and Portland or, locally and scaled to Olympia, of Kirkland, Bellingham, Walla Walla, and, yes, Burien.

As a corollary to the need for a greatly enhanced public understanding of development options is the need for the City to have on staff or on retainer an urban designer. The City staff working with the Planning Commission has been outstanding. Without their commitment and competence, the Commission would have been lost. However, urban

design is a separate and unique element in urban planning and one that is conspicuously absent in Olympia. An urban designer could not only provide a more effective graphic representation of development alternatives but, most importantly, could propose such development alternatives. I am not proposing that the City abandon its fate to an urban designer. Rather, I believe some well-conceived options developed by an urban designer would provide a far more meaningful public dialogue than the vague but often repeated notions of “vitality” or “vibrancy”.

Finally, I urge the Council to engage the City “pro-actively” in development. For far too long, the City’s role has been reactionary. Projects of questionable design or suitability are brought forward and the City merely approves or rejects them based on current, if outdated, codes. This is wasteful for both developers and for the City and, most importantly, for the residents of Olympia. The City needs to work with residents and neighborhoods to clarify what is wanted and where and then work with developers to make it happen. We have been passive far too long. If the Comprehensive Plan is to have meaning and justify the cost to the City and to the public, it must now move from theory to practice, from talk to action, from concept to construction.