



Land Use & Environment Committee

Briefing & Discussion about Downtown Plan Scoping

Agenda Date: 12/11/2014
Agenda Item Number: 4.A
File Number: 14-1198

Type: report **Version:** 1 **Status:** Filed

Title

Briefing & Discussion about Downtown Plan Scoping

City Manager Recommendation:

Receive briefing from staff; provide guidance on principles to shape the scoping process and how to address the existing downtown plan (see options).

Report

Issue:

First discussion about downtown plan scoping, set to begin in early 2015. Staff will provide an overview of Olympia's past downtown planning efforts, what is in the current downtown plan, what other cities have done, and what in general can be achieved with a new downtown planning effort.

Staff Contact:

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Presenter(s):

Amy Buckler, Associate Planner, Community Planning and Development (CP&D)
Leonard Bauer, Deputy Director, CP&D
Brian Wilson, Downtown Liaison, CP&D

Background and Analysis:

The City Council will adopt a Comprehensive Plan Update in December of 2014. Goals GL17-19 and related policies in the Land Use Chapter relate specifically to downtown, including:

PL17.1: Adopt a Downtown Plan addressing - at minimum - housing, public spaces, parking management, rehabilitation and redevelopment, architecture and cultural resources, building skyline and views, and relationships to the Port peninsula and Capitol Campus.

The City has a current plan for downtown which is outlined in the existing Comprehensive Plan and development regulations. The current downtown plan is the result and evolution of over 70 years of continued focus on downtown by the City and various other stakeholders.

As part of the Comprehensive Plan Update, sections of the existing Comprehensive Plan specifically

related to downtown (with exception of GL17-19) were moved to a separate 26-page document (**Attachment 3**) proposed to be adopted separately from the Plan. Thus, “the downtown plan” would not formally be part of the Comprehensive Plan, rather a separate goal and policy document that could be updated and include strategic actions and become an updated “Downtown Strategic Plan.” The rationale for removing these sections from the Comp Plan was to free the downtown plan from the limited annual Comprehensive Plan amendment process, allowing more flexibility for the City - in working with other downtown stakeholders - to make changes as needs arise.

Throughout the Comprehensive Plan Update process, community members have expressed interest in further downtown planning. The City Council has set a preliminary timeline for downtown plan scoping to occur during the first 6 months of 2015, with planning to occur in the subsequent 12 months. Recent Council discussions have questioned whether a full 6 months is needed for scoping, a question to be addressed over the next couple months as Council continues to shape the process with support from staff. Accelerating the scoping effort should take into consideration other work plan items such as development of the Action Plan and moving forward with subarea planning.

WHAT IS THE DOWNTOWN PLAN?

- The downtown plan is intended as a **strategy** to implement the comprehensive plan. The LUEC may want to consider formerly branding this process in a manner that helps to convey the purpose and energy of this effort.
- It is like subarea planning in that downtown is the geographic subarea of focus, although it differs from the City’s other subareas due to its regional social, economic and environmental importance.
- It relates to the Action Plan in that it will likely result in strategic actions the City can take over a 5 year period to achieve certain goals or objectives.
- The downtown plan relates to the Community Renewal Area (CRA) “plan” (better described as a “project partnership”) in that they can inform each other. For example, responses the City receives to its CRA “Request for Proposals (RFP)” can provide an important market perspective about what’s currently possible for downtown; while public input and data gathered for the downtown plan can inform Council decisions about the CRA. The CRA will also be a powerful tool to assist in the implementation of the downtown plan.
- The downtown plan is not a “master plan” that will determine specific uses or design for each parcel in the downtown.
- However, the process could include a project focus and/or other immediate milestone - it depends on the scope to be set by the City Council.

Two distinct elements of the downtown plan are 1) Scoping and 2) Planning.

SCOPING

Scoping is a preliminary step set to occur during the first 6 months of 2015. Scoping is very important toward framing a realistic and action-oriented planning process.

As part of scoping, the City will consider lessons learned from other jurisdictions and Olympia’s past downtown plans; existing data; other data we need to gather; and what the geographic boundaries, topics, process, various roles and desired outcomes of the planning process will be.

Many issues have been discussed as potential topics for downtown planning - far more than the

City's timeline and budget can support within a year and a half. As part of scoping, the Council will prioritize and choose a vital few topics to be the immediate planning focus.

A graphic depicting some of these possible issues is included as **Attachment 4**.

PLANNING

Although not yet decided by City Council, staff anticipates that \$250,000 from the 2014 year end savings may be applied to the downtown planning effort. Staff also anticipates the need for a consultant team to work with the City in developing the plan once the scope is determined. The topics, process, roles, etc. during the planning process will be determined during scoping, and in some cases as part of selecting the consultant team.

Staff will be developing the Request for Qualification (RFQ) document to solicit submittals from interested planning firms concurrent with the development of the scope to ensure that when the principle elements of the scope are identified that we will be able to move quickly into this process and get a planning firm on board as soon as possible following completion of the scope.

TONIGHT'S MEETING

In preparation for tonight's presentation and discussion, staff has met with each Councilmember on an individual basis to determine preliminary expectations for the downtown plan and process. This initial input guided a staff proposed set of principles for the scoping process (**Attachment 1**). Staff also researched the City's past planning efforts (**Attachment 2**) and what other cities of similar character to Olympia have done.

Some of the lessons learned from other cities' downtown plans include:

- Need a clearly-articulated purpose that drives a focused scope and direction
- Invest in an accurate picture of current conditions and market opportunities
- "District" approach can be helpful for pedestrian-oriented activity areas
 - Can promote a consistent design or "feel" - creates a "destination"
 - Don't be too prescriptive in defining districts' function- may stifle market response
- City only has direct control in public realm - streetscapes, land use, development and design standards, public placemaking, parking
- "Catalyst projects" in public realm alone may not be enough to achieve goals
- Private and non-profit partners are instrumental to success
- Explore all potential tools for implementation
 - Be explicit about city and partner responsibilities, timelines and costs
 - Targeted marketing can be very effective

This evening staff requests guidance from the Land Use Committee on three matters, outlined under Options.

There are other matters also related to scoping that will require the Committee's guidance over the next couple months. These include guidance on a recommendation or options for City Council regarding:

- A timeline for scoping and planning;

- Roles for City Council, the Land Use & Environment Committee, City Advisory Boards and Commissions, staff, and other stakeholders;
- An approach to SEPA:
 - Staff is also researching options in the State Environmental Policy Act (SEPA) statutes and rules for conducting environmental review of the downtown plan. Under some optional SEPA approaches, potential impacts are completely addressed “up-front” during the planning process, streamlining the SEPA process for planned projects during their permit review;
- The specific boundaries that the plan will address (i.e., all of downtown, specific districts, including West Bay?)
- Relationships and connections to other related planning efforts;
- The priority topics that the downtown plan will address, and the generally desired outcome of the process; and
- A brand, communication and public involvement plan; and
- Criteria and a draft RFQ for a planning element consultant team.

Staff recommends that the Land Use Committee focus on these issues at their January meeting. Staff will be prepared with options and support materials to help the committee continue the discussion about these matters.

Options:

Receive briefing from staff; provide guidance on:

1) Proposed principles to shape the scoping process.

The proposed principles were shaped from staff conversations with individual Councilmembers. Accepted principles will help staff to shape options for the scoping process and provide a reference for Council's decisions. Staff is looking for feedback from the Committee. Did we get it right? Are there any principles the Committee recommends be added or changed?

2) How to address the 26-page excerpt regarding downtown which was removed from the existing Comprehensive Plan:

As part of the Comp Plan Update, sections of the existing Comprehensive Plan specifically related to downtown were moved to a separate 26-page document (**Attachment 3**) and were proposed to be adopted separately from the Plan. Does the Committee recommend the City Council:

- a. Adopt this excerpt immediately following adoption of the Comprehensive Plan Update to serve as the interim downtown plan until the updated downtown plan has been completed? OR
- b. Set aside these excerpts for now, pending adoption of the updated downtown plan in 2016?

3) Define issues for continued discussion by the Committee in January.

Type: report **Version:** 1 **Status:** Filed

Financial Impact:

\$250,000 of 2014 year end savings is anticipated for this effort.