

Introduction

A brief review of the purpose and scope of the Design Guidelines focus group was presented by James Vandiver. It was noted that the issue of design guidelines had been a key topic at one of the recent BIG Picture citizen academies. This focus group has been established to provide an opportunity for additional dialogue and input on this topic.

Role of Design Guidelines

The group was asked to share their initial thoughts on what particular issues should be addressed by design guidelines. The responses included:

1. Provide tools for improving existing areas
2. Provide guidelines for new construction
3. Address appropriate block sizes to facilitate pedestrian flow
4. Provide guidelines governing where and how parking facilities are developed; encourage shared parking
5. Provide guidelines for planting trees and other landscaping
6. Address both residential and commercial development
7. Address the environmental impact of development as well as its aesthetic impact
8. Address both the public realm (public buildings and various street types) and private realm (residential and commercial development)

It was noted that Raleigh, North Carolina had developed a Unified Development Code which would be a good model for Huntsville to investigate. The code includes zoning regulations as well as design standards in one comprehensive document.

Corridor Appearance

When asked which areas of the city need the most attention with regard to design, it was noted that several commercial corridors needed to be addressed. These include:

1. *Memorial Parkway*- it was noted that this is both a heavily traveled route and one of the most unattractive
2. *Andrew Jackson Way/California Street/Whitesburg Drive*- this corridor was suggested because:
 - a. It is a smaller corridor and therefore “more doable”
 - b. It contains smaller parcels and is ripe for small-scale redevelopment

It was suggested that a blight ordinance should be included as a part of any efforts to implement design guidelines. However, it was mentioned that some consider the blight on Memorial Parkway to be caused, at least in part, by long construction delays and the unattractive visual impact of the overpass projects, not just the lack of good design guidelines.

Residential Appearance

It was suggested that burying power lines would play an important role in improving the appearance of residential neighborhoods. James Vandiver noted that this was an expensive undertaking and therefore had been met with some resistance from Huntsville Utilities. It was suggested that phasing these projects might be an option to address this issue.

Design Guidelines Presentation

Lisa Leddo gave a presentation on design guidelines. The presentation summarized the various approaches that cities may take to encourage good design and provided visual examples of how these had been used to enhance the appearance of both existing and new development in other communities.

Following the presentation, several issues were noted including:

1. Implementing such guidelines may be difficult because developers can easily go to the County or other communities within a short commute and develop properties without such restrictions.
2. Design guidelines would be useful tools for encouraging redevelopment at the edges of blighted areas. They would both encourage redevelopment in these communities and would have a stabilizing impact on nearby, more stable areas where disinvestment had not yet occurred.

Urban Growth Boundaries

It was suggested that the implementation of urban growth boundaries, such as those in Portland, Oregon, might be a useful tool in encouraging redevelopment of neighborhoods and help encourage the use of design guidelines in these areas. However, it was noted that such boundaries need to be implemented on a regional basis to be effective. Although well-intended, the regulations in the Portland area have resulted in development relocating to Vancouver, Washington and the resulting creation of dead zones and longer commutes. The same results might be expected in the Huntsville-Madison County area. It was noted that Huntsville would need to be very innovative and flexible in developing tools which would incentivize central city projects without unintended consequences on the periphery of the city.

Tools and Incentives

The following tools and techniques were suggested as appropriate mechanisms for encouraging better design in the community:

1. Transfer of Development Rights
2. Tax Increment Financing Districts
3. Business Improvement Districts
4. Developer incentives for redevelopment along selected corridors such as Memorial Parkway and University Drive

It was suggested that development guidelines should be incorporated as integral requirements placed on developers who benefit from any of these programs.

Revision of Existing Regulations

It was suggested that a progressive community like Huntsville might be supportive of making some bold moves in revising regulations to encourage better design. However, it was noted that many property owners would probably not be willing to “give up” their existing Light or Heavy Industry zoning with its less stringent requirements. It was suggested that efforts to revise regulations, and thus put more restrictions on property owners, would need to be couched in a more positive light. Such efforts should attempt to highlight what property owners might gain in terms of sustainability and long-term value, not just what they would give up.

Summary

The meeting closed with a discussion regarding the general purpose of the design guidelines focus group. It was explained that the various focus groups, as well as the other BIG Picture presentations and public forums, were designed to spur community dialogue and determine the level of support for various ideas and initiatives which might be included as part of the City’s updated comprehensive plan. Such “validation” of community priorities will be an important tool in shaping the plan and Huntsville’s future built environment.