

2006-07 ANNUAL REPORT

Raleigh Appearance Commission

The Raleigh Appearance Commission is pleased to present its 2006-07 Annual Report and 2007-08 Work Program request. With the update of the City's comprehensive plan underway it is a critical time for the discussion of design and development in Raleigh. The City consistently ranks high on countless lists as a great place to live. That fact translates directly into growth; the number of Raleigh's citizens has now surpassed that of St. Louis, and is gaining on Minneapolis. With this rise in national attention, now more than ever it is important that the City pays close attention to how it grows—to its urban form and appearance—as essential ingredients in assuring a high quality of life for its citizens. This report aims to highlight the Appearance Commission's efforts over the past year towards that goal, and what we hope to do in the coming year to preserve and enhance all that makes Raleigh such a desirable and attractive place to live.

I. REVIEW

Among the Commission's chief functions is review of the appearance and environmental aspects of proposed development. This effort encompasses both site plans and design-based zoning proposals (Planned Development District [PDD] Master Plans, Pedestrian Business Overlay Districts, cases with concept plans, etc.). Recommendations regarding either set of proposals chiefly fall to the commission's Development Review Committee (DRC). Additionally, the Commission offers special reviews as requested by Council, bringing the commission's collective expertise to local issues of design.

Preliminary Site Plans

Over the past year, the Development Review Committee provided comment on more than 40 project plans, with an additional 14 follow-up reviews of specific plan details. It is noteworthy that a significant number were concentrated in the heart of the City, reflecting the continued interest in downtown revitalization, and giving rise to a new definition of downtown as spanning from Peace Street to Shaw University. Furthermore, these projects tended to be residential or mixed use projects, which continue to change the face of downtown. Highlights include the RBC Centura tower, Reynolds tower, The West, 630 North, Tucker Street development, Bloomsbury Estates and The Nash.

Zoning Cases

In 2006 the Commission changed its focus to concentrate on PDD Master Plans instead of the multitude of conditional use zoning cases we handled in the past. Since PDD plans affect such a broad group of people, the Commission hopes that the increased effort spent on these cases will result in even more thought-out suggestions.

PDD Master Plans examined in 2006-07 have included Windsor Manor, 5401, the North Blount Redevelopment, and NCSU Biomedical Campus. The Commission also provided review of amendment to the Oakwood/Mordecai Streetscape Plan Amendment (an outgrowth of a request

for increased height at an overlap with North Blount PDD), and comment on the Maywood Avenue Condos (a zoning condition follow-through in joint effort with the Raleigh Historic Districts Commission).

Special Assignments

The City of Raleigh Arts Policy lists the Commission as integral to the review of proposed public art projects. The focal point of those Commission duties in the past year has been review of concept proposals for the City Square/City Plaza project, intended to integrate art and urban form in the plaza space near the south end of Fayetteville Street. The Commission recommended rejection of the first design, citing the Fayetteville Street redesign's mandate for maintaining a clear vista from the Capitol building to the Performing Arts Center. Subsequently, Commission members participated in design charrettes for the follow-up proposal, City Plaza, which led to a concept which has gained wide approval. The Commission joins now in looking forward to the project's final design, and eventual completion.

Most recently, the Appearance Commission was requested by the City Council to appoint a member to the Tree Conservation Task Force (TCTF). Tree conservation has long been a major area of interest of the Commission. Over the past winter, the TCTF was reconvened and charged with determining whether the Ordinance enacted in 2005 is achieving its original goals, and to propose any modifications deemed necessary. These meetings are still in progress, with an expected completion date in May of this year.

II. OUTREACH

The Appearance Commission actively pursues public awareness and education initiatives on a variety of fronts, frequently through collaborative partnerships. The following describes the commission's major public outreach efforts during 2006-07.

Community Appearance Survey

In 2006, the second phase of the Community Appearance Survey was conducted by NCSU's Center for Urban Affairs and Community Services (CUACS) under the direction of the Appearance Commission. The first phase, a city-wide telephone survey, was conducted the previous year, and garnered statistical data on citizen views as to specific appearance issues. The second phase, a series of focus group sessions, explored open-ended questions to help identify appearance matters of greatest concern, and greatest pride, to a cross-section of residents. A summary report on the survey, offering cross-phase comparison, is currently under preparation. Also to be included will be recommendations to frame possible solutions to appearance problems facing the City.

2006 Sir Walter Raleigh Awards

Each year, the Appearance Commission coordinates the Sir Walter Raleigh Awards, which celebrates the city's best new design and development projects. In 2006, twelve projects and individuals were recognized, ranging from the Cameron Village Public Library renovation to the reopened Fayetteville Street. The ceremony was held October 26 at NCSU's McKimmon Center. The keynote speaker was Dr. David Godschalk of UNC-Chapel Hill, who spoke on "Tomorrow's Urban Fabric: Weaving Together Planning, Design, and Development." A commemorative booklet honoring the 2006 Sir Walter Raleigh Award recipients is available in print and online.

Training/collaboration

During 2006-07, the Appearance Commission has sought to gain further insight into opportunities for enhancing City appearance by investigating programs of other cities. Several members have met with the Durham Appearance Commission to explore local issues and initiatives of our Triangle sister city. Internally, members had a roundtable discussion with the Raleigh Planning Commission, toward maximizing the effectiveness of comments made by the Appearance Commission when reviewing proposed development and zoning cases. Most recently, several members participated in the joint NCSU College of Design/ Raleigh Urban Design Center conference “Designing for a Sustainable Urban Region.”

III. PROCESS

Completing the restructuring begun in 2005, the Appearance Commission now consists of two committees, the Development Review Committee (DRC) and the Strategic/Outreach Committee (SOC). This simplification was done to increase the efficiency of the Commission and bolster participation. Previously, Commission members had served on two or more committees in addition to their main seat on the Appearance Commission.

In 2006, the Appearance Commission’s Development Review Committee shifted its meeting location to One Exchange Plaza from the Raleigh Municipal Building. This change afforded staff members of the Raleigh Planning Department to be close to plan back-up materials, should the need arise to secure them for plan review discussions.

2007-08 WORK PROGRAM

Raleigh Appearance Commission

Our proposed 2007-2008 Work Program outlines the goals of the Commission for the coming year. Some projects are ongoing from the 2006-2007 year, and others are new initiatives in our continuing effort to ensure that Raleigh develops to its best. The Work Program includes:

1. Two major initiatives: a Silver Anniversary Celebration for the Sir Walter Raleigh Awards, and a joint City Council/ Commissions tour of selected New Urbanist communities in North Carolina.
2. Enhancement to three aspects of Commission review services: providing Council with a report on emerging appearance issues and trends in Raleigh, Commission electronic access to site plans prior to review meetings, and re-instituting Commission review of appearance-related text changes.
3. Two outreach goals: the publication of the Community Appearance Survey Results and participation in the Comprehensive Plan Update.
4. Continuing service as assigned by the City Council.

I. MAJOR INITIATIVES

Silver Anniversary Celebration--

Sir Walter Raleigh Awards for Community Appearance

In 2007, the City's annual salute to outstanding design and development will celebrate its 25th year. The Commission wishes to mark that milestone with special programming commemorating exceptional local design of the past and promoting the importance of quality design as Raleigh develops. Activities will be centered on an awards presentation in October or November. Added funding is being requested to assist in anticipated extra expenses.

Special features of the celebration center on featuring a nationally-known speaker, perhaps as an extension of the Planning Department's 21st Century City lecture series. Special audio/visual features are also under consideration, with emphasis on the twenty-five years of design excellence exemplified by past Sir Walter Raleigh Award winners. Display boards or exhibits could also highlight newly-nominated projects. A special venue is under consideration to mark this important milestone. The deadline for 2007 nominations is July 12.

Joint City Council/ Commissions Tour of Selected North Carolina New Urbanist Communities

Compact development is integral to the City's future. Models are plentiful, but their on-the-ground success is not always evident, viewed from a distance. The commission wishes to offer an opportunity for key officials to experience New Urbanist concepts on the "as-built" level. This item was approved by City Council as part of the Appearance Commission's 2006-07 Work Program; we would like to request funding to cover transportation costs.

Potential participants would be members of and staff support for City Council, Planning Commission, Appearance Commission, Environmental Advisory Board, and the Parks, Recreation & Greenways Advisory Board. The range of the tour would depend on the funds available. Stops in the Charlotte area could include Huntersville, Cornelius, and Davidson. A more locally-focused tour might include Southern Village and Meadowmont in Chapel Hill, and Bedford in Raleigh. Pre-tour preparations would include presentations and printed materials detailing each site, especially the respective regulatory and design standards. Bus transportation is preferred to encourage in-travel discussion; the added funding would cover costs of that transportation and related incidental expenses.

II. REVIEW

During 2007-2008, Appearance Commission would like to expand its service to the City by pursuing enhancement of three aspects of its review responsibilities:

As outlined and approved in our 2005-06 Annual Report, the Commission wishes to provide a summary of current appearance issues and trends in Raleigh, as have surfaced over the past fiscal year in the deliberations of the Development Review Committee. This report will note any recurring areas of concern, toward possible text changes or other responsive action.

The Appearance Commission hopes to gain an upgrade of its site plan and zoning review capabilities through electronic access to copies of proposed site and master plans prior to the respective Development Review Committee (DRC) meetings. Currently, the DRC first sees the proposals at the meeting during which they make recommendations. Through this new effort, the DRC hopes to achieve greater economy of staff and applicant time, and make more thoughtful recommendations. This capability is now being developed; the Commission hopes for its implementation in the very near future.

The Commission also hopes that its review of appearance-related text changes can be formally structured. This service follows as an extension of N.C.G.S. §160A-252(6)c. which calls on appearance commissions in North Carolina:

“...To formulate and recommend to the appropriate municipal planning or governing board the adoption or amendment of ordinances (including the zoning ordinance, subdivision regulations, and other local ordinances regulating the use of property) that will, in the opinion of the commission, serve to enhance the appearance of the municipality and its surrounding areas”.

Review responsibility would fall to the Strategic/ Outreach Committee, in complement to site plan review efforts by the Development Review Committee. The Commission wishes to work with staff to develop specific parameters and standards for this duty.

III. OUTREACH

In 2007, the Appearance Commission will publish the results of the Community Appearance Survey. These results will be made available both online and in printed form. The summary report will correlate the focus group meetings and the telephone survey, and suggest direction for mitigating identified issues.

The Appearance Commission also greatly looks forward to participation in the update of the Raleigh Comprehensive Plan, to begin in 2007. The Appearance Commission provided the impetus for the original Urban Form Plan adopted as part of the present plan document. The Commission views this work is a key component of its mission.

IV. CONTINUING SERVICE

As always, the Appearance Commission remains ready to undertake all service as assigned by the Raleigh City Council, as in its current participation in the Tree Conservation Task Force.

The Appearance Commission is honored to serve the City Council and the citizens of Raleigh. How the city looks is a direct reflection of how we view ourselves, and impacts significantly the quality of life of the city. The profile of Raleigh is rising in the United States, making this a crucial time for the work of the Appearance Commission. It is our goal that Raleigh maintains and expands upon the design qualities which have drawn so many here and earned us attention and acclaim. The appearance of our built and natural environment is integral our future prosperity. We look forward to a productive and positive 2007-2008 fiscal year.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'M. Fluhrer', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Mitchell Fluhrer
Chair