

# 2008-09 ANNUAL REPORT

## *Raleigh Appearance Commission*

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**T**he Raleigh Appearance Commission is pleased to present its 2008-09 Annual Report and 2009-10 Work Program request.

*The duties and responsibilities of the Appearance Commission are outlined in the North Carolina General Statutes (NCGS §160A-452) and Raleigh Code of Ordinances (Article C., §10-1021). Within that framework, during the past year, commission efforts have centered on two broad categories of service:*

### I. REVIEW

Among the Commission's chief functions is review of the appearance and contextual aspects of proposed development. This effort encompasses site plans and also design-specific zoning proposals. 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 larger issues of urban design.

#### **Preliminary Site Plans**

Since last year's report to City Council, the Development Review Committee has provided comment on more than 40 site plans, and second-round reviews of 5 plans (regarding specific plan details). These figures reflect reduction in local development activity, yet the diversity and geographic spread of the projects underscores Raleigh's long-term trend for growth. The projects also have demonstrated needs for exploring and applying further best practices of urban design.

Among the plans reviewed, and observations noted:

Downtown—Powerhouse Plaza, Seaboard Apartments, The Edison.

*Observation:* The Commission recommends that accessible, public open space should be a requirement of all major downtown development projects.

Corporate Prototypes: McDonald's (Western Boulevard), Goddard School (Creedmoor Road), Bloom (Strickland Road), LD Byrider Project (New Bern Avenue), ABC Store #1 (Sandy Forks Road), CVS (Rock Quarry Road), Z-43-08 Concept Plan (Creedmoor/Millbrook).

*Observation:* Franchise and corporate prototype building designs continue to be proposed, and approved, irrespective of context and urban design (e.g., turning side walls to streets). Methods for better integrating these buildings into the wider built environment need to be explored, such as enhanced connectivity, streetscape provisions, visually permeable storefronts (e.g., min. 50% glass), etc.

Residential Infill—Garland Drive Townhomes, HighPark Court, Millbank Street Townhomes, Triangle Place Promenade Apartments.

*Observation:* Matters of scale, orientation, and access continue to be public concerns regarding these projects.

*Positive Trend:* “Green” components are finding their way into more and more private sector projects. This fact bodes well for the future of the City. Recent project proposals include: St. Francis of Assisi Catholic Church Phase V, Z-44-08 Concept Plan Building B, 615 Boylan, Wake County Continuum of Care, and NC Licensing Board of General Contractors. The City should pursue instituting methods and standards encouraging more such projects.

## **Zoning Cases**

The Appearance Commission provides review and comment regarding all rezoning proposals for which there are design guidelines. Such cases include Planned Development Districts (PDDs, which are required to submit a Master Plan), cases within Pedestrian Business Overlay Districts (PBODs, which require compliance with Streetscape & Parking Plans), within the Downtown Overlay District (to which downtown Urban Design guidelines apply) and cases involving Concept Plans (which must comply with the *Urban Design Guidelines for Mixed Use Neighborhood and Village Centers*).

Zoning cases examined in the past year have included:

Z-27-08: PBOD Streetscape & Parking Plan amendment — Glenwood South

Z-40-08: PBOD Streetscape & Parking Plan amendment — Cameron Village (Clark Avenue / Oberlin Road)

Z-43-08: Concept Plan — Shopping center (Millbrook Road / Creedmoor Road)

Z-44-08: Concept Plan — Shopping center (Six Forks Road / Colonnade Center Drive)

Z-14-09: Rezoning within PBOD (Glenwood Avenue / W. North Street)

Z-22-09: PDD amendment — North Hills East (St. Albans Drive)

As stated in the North Carolina General Statutes, the commission is called upon “to provide leadership and guidance in matters of community design and appearance.” In site plan and zoning review, we encourage developers to maintain the highest standards for user friendly buildings. We also recognize that good design goes beyond what a project looks like to passers-by, and includes how the occupants of a building engage the building’s exterior surroundings while they are inside, looking out a window—context is of equal importance

## **Raleigh 2030 Comprehensive Plan**

The update of the City’s Comprehensive Plan has provided the opportunity to assess and amend the policies which shape our community’s future development. The Appearance Commission has taken keen interest and involvement in this process. We thank Planning Director Mitchell Silver and Deputy Planning Director Ken Bowers for their presentations and discussions with the Appearance Commission this past winter.

We provided comments to staff in February, and the Planning Department returned comments to us for our March meeting as part of a Special Report accompanying Public Hearing.

The Appearance Commission wishes to commend the Planning Department for its vision and attention to detail in preparing the new Comprehensive Plan.

### **Special Assignment**

This past year, the Tree Conservation Task Force completed its deliberations regarding refinements to the City's tree preservation ordinance. Tom Skolnicki, Vice Chair of the Appearance Commission, participated in the discussions as the commission's representative.

## **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 2008-09.

### **2008 Sir Walter Raleigh Awards**

The 26<sup>th</sup> Annual Sir Walter Raleigh Awards were held September 8 at the new Raleigh Convention Center, as part of the facility's opening week celebration. Thirteen award recipients were honored, ranging from downtown condos to a manufactured housing community, from the rehab of a 1870s church to the CREE Shimmer Wall. The guest speaker was green building pioneer Gail Lindsey, who offered a presentation entitled "Being Green: The Nature of Nature," stressing the importance of green design not just to architecture, but to everyday life.

### **New Urbanist Communities Tour**

New Urbanism is an approach to urban design viewed by many as a model for creating walkable, compact communities. In recent years, it has been translated from theory to fact in a growing number of cities. Some of the region's best examples are found in north Mecklenburg County. Toward assessing the positive attributes and design challenges experienced by those communities in implementing New Urbanist design, the Appearance Commission organized a visit to half a dozen project sites in the towns of Mooresville, Davidson, and Huntersville. The tour, held February 26, 2009, included members of the Planning Commission, Appearance Commission, city staff, and City Council. Fact-finding included on-site and en route dialogues with Planning Directors and other community officials. The tour provided an opportunity for experiential consideration of lessons learned by each development, and their possible application in Raleigh through incorporation into the pending upgrade of the Code of Ordinances.

### **Training/ Collaboration**

Several Appearance Commission members participated in the joint NCSU College of Design/ Raleigh City Planning Department conference "Healthy Cities, Healthy People" in February, 2009. In addition, members have participated in City Planning Department's "Designing a 21<sup>st</sup> Century City" lecture series. The information gained in turn helps to improve the commission's collective expertise and capabilities.

# 2009-10 WORK PROGRAM

## *Raleigh Appearance Commission*

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Our proposed 2009-10 Work Program outlines the goals of the Commission for the coming year. Some projects will be ongoing from the 2008-2009 year, and others are new initiatives in our continuing effort to ensure that Raleigh develops at its best. The proposed Work Program includes:

### I. DESIGN ISSUES

#### **Preliminary Study: Corporate Prototype Standards**

Repeatedly, the commission has found that prototype designs, usually proposed by national businesses such as drugstore or fast food chains, do not respond to the opportunities offered by the site. The commission wishes to study how the City might pursue some basic, city-wide design standards (e.g., building orientation, glazing percentages for storefronts, etc.). The initial step to that end would involve researching the current approaches of other Triangle communities, as well as best practices from outside the immediate area.

#### **Discussion/ Charrette on “Big Box” Design**

The “big box” store is ubiquitous to modern retailing. While meeting a multitude of consumer needs and desires, however, as a built form it sometimes presents significant challenges to city infrastructure and the natural environment. Communities across the country have discovered ways of mitigating such impacts. The commission would like to investigate bringing together expert individuals and organizations for a public presentation on the topic, toward initiating a wider dialogue and understanding of design options as we approach the update of the City Code.

### II. PROCEDURAL IMPROVEMENTS

As part of its on-going efforts both to improve City appearance and provide the Planning Commission and City Council with useful advice, the commission wishes to pursue several modifications to how it performs site plan review.

Review of Major Projects. Larger projects can have a significant impact on urban design and form—not just on their own site, but those around them as well. To offer the broadest input regarding site design, the commission proposes that major proposals go before the full Appearance Commission. The term “major projects” would apply to:

- Projects which are 7 or more stories in height.
- Projects with 500,000 or more square feet of retail space.
- Projects encompassing 75 or more acres.
- Projects within the Downtown Overlay District, or a Pedestrian Business Overlay District.

- Public projects valued at \$1 million or more.
- Any project directed to full-commission review by the City Council or the City Planning Department.

Additionally, when such projects go before the Planning Commission, a representative of the Appearance Commission (chair or vice-chair) will attend to report the commission's recommendations, and respond to questions in that regard. The commission wishes to work with Staff toward making these procedural amendments.

Availability of Project Information/ Applicants. To ensure the optimal use of plan applicants' and Development Review Committee members' time, the committee wishes to pursue policies guaranteeing full project information is available at the time of review. These measures, to be worked out with City Planning staff, include:

- Prior notice to applicants that review of plans for which the committee feels insufficient information has been provided would be postponed until the next meeting.
- Every project going before the Development Review Committee should be represented by individuals who can speak with authority to matters of:
  - Architecture
  - Landscape Architecture
  - Civil Engineering
  - Project Ownership (i.e., may speak to whether and what design options are available)
 Again, plans which do not meet this threshold would be held till the next meeting.

The commission would like to amend its project checklist used by the Development Review Committee (which is provided to all plan applicants whose plans are subject to public hearing) to reflect these changes.

### III. OUTREACH

#### **2009 Sir Walter Raleigh Awards for Community Appearance**

This year's Sir Walter Raleigh Awards will be held Wednesday, October 8, at the Fletcher Opera Theater. The awards, which have long recognized outstanding contributions to community design and environment, will add a new category in 2009 combining both those elements, in the form of "Green Design." This year's awards speaker will be Marvin Malecha, FAIA, Dean of NCSU's College of Design. Nominations for the 2009 awards will be accepted through June 25.

### IV. CONTINUING SERVICE

The commission provides review of development projects 26 times a year, both at the site plan level and with regard to design-based zoning cases. We are also proud to continue the tradition of recognizing exemplary design in our City with the Sir Walter Raleigh Awards. As always, the Appearance Commission remains ready to undertake any other service as assigned by the Raleigh City Council.

**T**he Appearance Commission accepts the duty of recommending good design, promoting commonly held community values for durability, ease of circulation, approachability, and humane scale. These considerations often control the success of a project more than style-based design or clinging to a prototype. We look forward to the opportunity to serve the community in the coming year.

Respectfully submitted,



Andrew Leager  
Chair

