

2009-10 ANNUAL REPORT

Raleigh Appearance Commission

The Raleigh Appearance Commission is pleased to present its 2009-10 Annual Report and 2010-11 Work Program request. The coming year holds a truly once in a lifetime opportunity to better Raleigh's appearance. While the current slowdown of development activity is of continuing concern, it also affords an ideal time for updating the City's Unified Development Ordinance (UDO). Including essential design standards in the UDO, focused on creating memorable and attractive streetscapes and open spaces, will ensure that Raleigh will achieve the vision of the new Comprehensive Plan. The Appearance Commission appreciates the opportunities to date to assist in the UDO update process, and is excited about the prospects for future contribution.

Below is a recounting of our current efforts and activities toward creating an ever more attractive and livable Raleigh. It is followed by an outline of Work Program items we wish to pursue in the coming fiscal year.

I. REVIEW

Among the Commission's chief functions is review of the appearance and environmental aspects of proposed development. This effort encompasses site plans and also design-based 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 combined expertise to local issues of design.

Preliminary Site Plans

Since last year's report to City Council, the Development Review Committee has provided comment on 26 site plans, and second-round reviews of 3 plans' specific design details. These figures reflect the reduced local development activity that has characterized the past year; equally telling is that eight of the committee's 26 regularly-scheduled meetings were cancelled due to there being no plans for the committee to review. Nonetheless, the projects submitted have pointed out a variety of issues of urban design, which should be considered in the current update of the Unified Development Code.

Among the plans reviewed, and related observations noted:

Downtown — SECU (N. Salisbury Street), Contemporary Art Museum, Lightner Public Safety Center, S. Harrington Street Substation, RCC Festival Site.

Observations: Existing building setbacks should be retained in the National Register Depot District. Public art should become a standard means of enhancing the pedestrian experience. Utility facilities should be required to be wrapped in active spaces, to enhance on-street activity and appearance.

Commercial — Firestone (Brier Creek), Wake Tech Health Science Building 2 & Parking Deck, Lot 5 Cheviot Assemblage, School of Communication Arts, Raleigh Hotel and Innovation Center, ACS Call Center Parking Lot.

Observations: Specific design scenarios are needed for better design of tall retaining walls and exteriors of parking decks. Seamless, straight-line pedestrian interconnectivity should be a city-wide goal. The City should encourage pole-mounted lights to be dimmed after hours. Use of quality, durable building materials should be assured. The permitted height of pole-mounted lights should be reduced wherever pedestrian-oriented scale is desired, and to minimize glare.

Major Trends Noted — The quality of projects coming before the commission continues to vary greatly. For the vast majority of projects, only those projects whose owners are already predisposed to creating buildings that enhance the streetscapes and city form of Raleigh are doing so. Many of the above projects failed to address the streets and buildings around them. Should the trend continue, many neighborhoods of the city are at risk of being merely a collection of individual sites, rather than a rich tapestry woven together by thoughtful transitions. The need for enhanced design standards runs high.

Zoning Cases

The Appearance Commission provides review and comment regarding all rezoning proposals within districts for which there are specific 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), and cases within the Downtown Overlay District (to which downtown Urban Design guidelines apply).

This fiscal year, only one zoning case has come before the commission:

Z-31-09: PBOD Streetscape and Parking Plan amendment—Glenwood South (Glenwood Avenue and W. Johnson Street): a proposed change to height requirements for certain properties.

Observations: Whenever several zoning cases, in close succession, request a change to requirements for the same PBOD, a general review of the PBOD's standards should be made (particularly regarding how the proposed changes may affect transitions to surrounding properties). For cases involving only a small part of a PBOD, or a single property, the integrity of the PBOD standards should not be compromised. (It should also be noted that in this specific case, properties nearby but outside the PBOD would have afforded the opportunity to achieve the desired height, as of right.)

Other Proposals

PBOD Streetscape Plans: Appearance Commission review also extends to amendment of PBOD Streetscape Plans not requiring rezoning. These changes typically involve pedestrian amenities and streetscape appurtenances. The Hillsborough Street corridor near North Carolina State University, currently the site of a major Public Works street project, was the focus of two sets of amendments in 2009-2010.

University Village: The commission's review of the streetscape plan was limited to approval of those elements of the PBOD which the Hillsborough Street public works project affected. The commission recommended that the PBOD receive a complete review and update given the changes in architectural trends and technology regarding elements of the PBOD which the public works project did not address, such as building awnings.

Stanhope Center: The review of this streetscape plan was by way of reference through the University Village review.

Observations: The commission recognizes and appreciates the value of the PBOD plans in providing continuity and pedestrian scale amenities in key areas of the city. If PBODs will not be part of the Uniform Development Ordinance, consideration should be given to create other mechanisms to address issues such as coordinated street furnishings and plantings along the city's significant streetscapes.

Other Streetscapes: The commission also provided comment and recommendation on the following City roadway project:

Falls of Neuse Road Widening and Streetscape Design: The commission provided comments and recommendations to staff and City Council regarding streetscape components of this significant roadway project.

Observations: While the design did successfully incorporate many inputs, including those of adjacent residents, the commission hopes that future such projects will use the Complete Streets approach as the model for successful streetscape design. Roads and streets that incorporate comfortable and safe design for pedestrians and bicycles, as well as vehicles, are critical to create an attractive city that also fulfills the vision of the Comprehensive Plan.

Text Change: In 2003, the commission helped to bring the appearance impacts of front yard parking to City Council. Draft text changes were proposed, but inherent issues were not then resolved. Recent revival of the matter came in the form of TC-7-09, for which the commission provided review and comment.

Unified Development Ordinance (UDO)

The formal identification of issues that the commission believes integral to updating the UDO began last fall at the commission's annual retreat, where trends and issues observed in recent years were the primary focus. The commission joined in stakeholder

discussion sessions with project consultants in October, providing a summary of priority needs and a related policy and data document. Commission member Cindy Szwarcokop was named our representative to the City Council-appointed Advisory Group. In addition to deliberations by the Development Review Committee and the Strategic/Outreach Committee, the commission has held two special commission meetings to develop comments and recommendations regarding the UDO project. This effort culminated in a memorandum of Essential Design Standards, presented to city staff, the UDO Advisory Group, and to the City Council.

Procedural Improvements

Review of Major Projects. Larger projects can have a significant impact on urban design and form. To offer the broadest input regarding site design, the commission now requires that major proposals receive review by the full Appearance Commission, as well as the Development Review Committee (DRC). The term “major projects” applies to:

- Projects which are 75 feet or more in height.
- Projects with 100,000 or more square feet of multi-tenant retail space, or 40,000 or more square feet of single-tenant 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.

Major project review will follow the same process as the commission’s procedure of rezoning cases. Applicants will present the proposal to the DRC, highlighting components outlined in the DRC’s Site Plan Review Checklist. The DRC will provide initial comments, which will then be forwarded to the full commission’s consideration prior to the commission meeting. At the commission meeting, applicants will again present the proposal. The commission will finalize its comments and recommendations, and the recommendations in turn will be entered into the respective Staff Comments form.

Additionally, at the subsequent Planning Commission meeting, a representative of the Appearance Commission (chair or vice-chair) will attend to report the commission’s recommendations, and respond to any questions.

Refinement of Site Plan Review Checklist. The commission also updated the Development Review Committee’s project review checklist (which is provided to all plan applicants whose plans are subject to public hearing) to:

- Reflect recent changes to the City Code due to approval of TC-4-09—Concurrent Actions (e.g., addition of Design Guidelines to the Comprehensive Plan, and removal of Urban Design Guidelines for Mixed Use Neighborhood and Village Centers).
- Include notice that review of site plans for which information is incomplete may be deferred at the discretion of the Development Review Committee until the information can be provided.

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 2009-10.

2009 Sir Walter Raleigh Awards

The 27th Annual Sir Walter Raleigh Awards returned to Fletcher Opera Theater on October 7. Seventeen award recipients, ranging from a residential rehab/ upfit to a LEED-certified college campus, were honored. Of special note was the creation of a new category, "Sustainable Design," which honored two projects. The guest speaker was Marvin Malecha, Dean of the College of Design at NC State University, who offered thoughts on what it takes to make a great building.

Budget limitations spurred the commission to broaden its reach for sponsorship of the 2009 awards ceremony. The result was very positive, forging promising new partnerships including new media contacts that have widened awareness and coverage of the awards and award winners.

RTN Broadcasts

Commission activities continue to receive good exposure through the programming of the Raleigh Television Network, the City's public access system. In addition to taped broadcasts of the 2009 Sir Walter Raleigh Awards ceremony, the station aired a feature piece on the new Sustainable Design award category and its 2009 recipients.

Training/ Collaboration

Several members participated in the joint NCSU College of Design/ Raleigh City Planning Department conference "Creating Value: Designing for Resilient Cities" in March and participated in City Planning Department's "Designing a 21st Century City" lecture series.

III. OTHER INITIATIVES

Wake County Parking Deck Aesthetic Improvements

The new Wake County Parking Deck, which fronts McDowell and Davie streets within view from the new Convention Center, is currently faced with an aesthetic challenge. Economic conditions have delayed anticipated construction of a future office "wrap," which will eventually sheathe the deck with active space. In the meantime, the expansive concrete interior walls stand exposed. The length of time that this interim condition may be in place is of concern to the commission. The commission has begun studying the feasibility of installing large framed fabric panels, displaying graphics or illustrations, as a more attractive and less expensive alternative to painting the walls.

2010-11 WORK PROGRAM

Raleigh Appearance Commission

Our proposed 2010-2011 Work Program outlines the goals of the Commission for the coming year. Some projects are ongoing from the 2009-2010 year, and others are new initiatives in our continuing effort to ensure that Raleigh develops at its best. The proposed Work Program includes:

1. Two major initiatives:
 - Assisting in the update of the City’s Unified Development Ordinance
 - Improving the interim appearance of the Wake County Parking Deck
2. An evaluation of the effectiveness of the commission’s new site plan and zoning case review procedures
3. Presentation of the 28th Annual Sir Walter Raleigh Awards
4. Special tasks, as directed by the City Council

I. MAJOR INITIATIVES

Update of the City’s Unified Development Ordinance (UDO)

The current efforts toward updating the City’s Unified Development Ordinance represent unprecedented opportunity to shape a Raleigh worthy of the high goals of the new Comprehensive Plan: one which is even more beautiful, more livable, and more environmentally sustainable. The Appearance Commission welcomes all opportunities to apply and focus its collective expertise to this important initiative, but hopes especially that we have the opportunity to focus on developing essential design standards with staff and the consultant as outlined in the commission’s April 6, 2010 presentation to City Council. The Strategic/ Outreach Committee will lead the commission’s efforts.

Wake County Parking Deck Aesthetic Improvements

The Strategic/ Outreach Committee will continue to explore alternatives to improve the interim condition of the unfinished parking deck facades. Throughout, the committee plans close collaboration with City and County staff, potential vendors, and outside funding sources to arrive at a mutually desirable design treatment.

II. REVIEW

Assessment of Site Plan and Zoning Case Procedures

The implementation of procedural improvements carried out in 2009 calls for an evaluation of their effectiveness. The Development Review Committee will assess and report on the results of the Major Project Review procedures and the refined Site Plan Review Checklist, for inclusion in next year's Annual Report. In order to assess the effects of the commission's input during Major Project Reviews, the commission will coordinate with staff regarding the most effective means of receiving information on the final outcome of the cases.

III. OUTREACH

2010 Sir Walter Raleigh Awards for Community Appearance

This year, the Sir Walter Raleigh Awards mark their 28th year of honoring outstanding contributions to the appearance of the City. The award ceremonies, which are slated for Thursday, October 7, will again take place at the Fletcher Opera Theater of the Progress Energy Center for the Performing Arts. The deadline for 2010 nominations is July 9. The commission plans special emphasis on broadening the access to and awareness of the awards, through continued cultivation of media sponsors.

Collaboration

The commission hopes to continue the dialogue that was begun with members of the Planning Commission and City Council during the New Urbanist Communities Tour (February, 2009). The full agendas of the Planning Commission did not afford its membership time to meet with the Appearance Commission in 2009-2010. The commission will endeavor to restart the dialogue with the Planning Commission so that both commissions can collaborate regarding issues of design quality in site plans and rezoning cases.

IV. ON-GOING SERVICE

As always, the Appearance Commission remains ready to undertake all tasks as assigned by the Raleigh City Council.

The Appearance Commission thanks you for the opportunity to serve City Council and the citizens of Raleigh. With the rewriting of the Uniform Development Code, we believe that Raleigh is at the crossroads of its future. The choice to enact essential design standards, or to continue with voluntary guidelines, will affect Raleigh for decades to come. The decision to require materials that convey the city's strength and permanence, to create streets that are defined by buildings rather than by parking, and to create a city characterized by meaningful and memorable open space will affect not only the city's appearance, but its continued attractiveness as a destination for relocation of business and people. We remain committed to our charge of assisting you, and hope you will call on us whenever our advice is needed.

Respectfully submitted,



Thomas Skolnicki
Chair

