

# 2011-12 ANNUAL REPORT

## *Raleigh Appearance Commission*

**T**he Raleigh Appearance Commission is pleased to present its 2011-12 Annual Report and 2012-13 Work Program request.

During the past year, the City of Raleigh Appearance Commission was active and engaged in a number of activities on behalf of the Citizens of Raleigh:

**Banner Effort:** The Commission, with Elizabeth Byrd leading the effort, succeeded in incorporating banners into the Wake County Parking Deck façade. This initiative not only beautified the incomplete structure, but sent a strong message that the City of Raleigh takes the appearance of its built environment seriously.



*July 2011 – Installation of “The Fantastic Sky Race” banners on the Wake County Parking Deck.*

**2011 Sir Walter Raleigh Awards for Community Appearance:** The Commission organized and presented the 29<sup>th</sup> annual Sir Walter Awards, in partnership with the Urban Land Institute’s Triangle Chapter. ULI Fellow and nationally-acclaimed author Ed McMahon offered an excellent presentation concerning community appearance, quality of the built environment, and long term value.

This presentation is viewable on the City’s website at <http://www.raleighnc.gov/portal/portal/cor/ext/RTNVideos> .

**Project Review:** Since last year’s report to City Council, the Commission provided review and commentary for 29 site plans, and 7 zoning cases.

## **Trends:**

The Commission is uniquely positioned to see, through regular site plan and zoning review, trends in development around the City. Some of these trends are encouraging, such as the marked increase in infill development, particularly housing. Others are more discouraging, showing a continued adherence to auto-dominant, suburban, and prototypical-development models.

**Multifamily Infill Development:** The Appearance Commission saw a considerable uptick in activity this year. Notable positives are that several midscale (5-6 stories) multifamily projects are in development in the urban core areas.

Of note is the **Edison Apartments**, which came before the Commission for an initial review in January, and then returned in April with a substantially upgraded design. The Development team solicited detailed input from the Commission, and responded well to key input concerning materials, treatment of corners, and other design fundamentals.



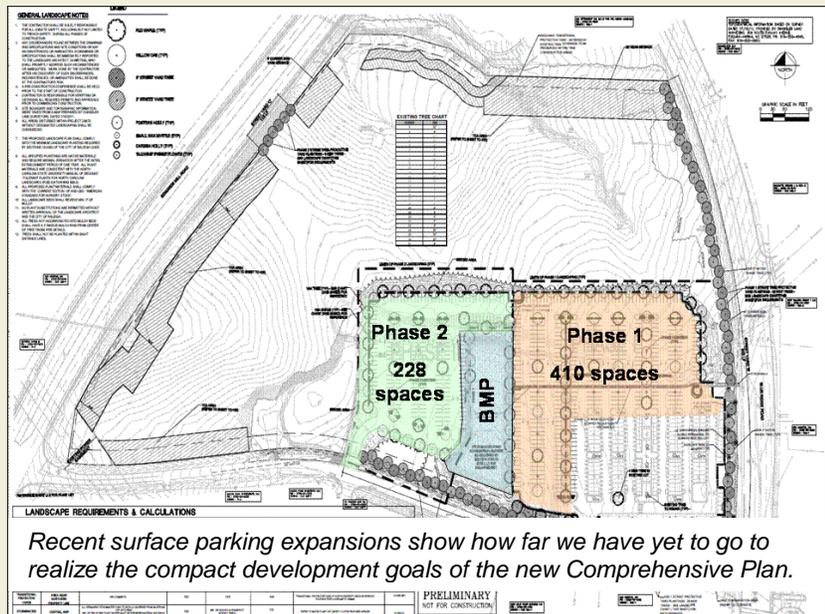
**The Edison**—corner of E. Davie & S. Blount streets. First submittal pictured at left; second submittal (after first-round comments by the Appearance Commission) depicted at right.

Similarly, the team from **401 Oberlin** visited the Commission twice, bringing refinements aimed at making effective transition to adjacent neighbors through steps in building height and articulation of sidewalk treatments. The team also included a pedestrian path at the Western side of the site at the Commission's request, to break the effective block length for pedestrian and bike traffic headed north and south in the neighborhood.

**Parking Lot Expansions:** Less encouraging, the Commission reviewed several large-scale parking lot expansions. These included a remote lot for **Rex Hospital**, a large new parking field for **Watts Chapel** and most recently a **CarMax** at the corner of Capital Boulevard and Perry Creek Roads.

**Rex and CarMax** were of particular concern, as the lots front major arterials and/or thoroughfares, yet offer nothing in the way of street wall, architectural connectivity, or pedestrian scale amenity.

The Commission has previously identified the **lack of surface parking maximums** as a major community appearance issue, and recommends that framers of the pending Unified Development Ordinance (UDO) look carefully at the projects to assure that frontage requirements and other measures will limit the viability of such poor land use choices in the future.



**Roadway Design:** While roads within the central core of the City are being put on diets, roadways in the suburban fringe continue to be planned like 20<sup>th</sup> century freeways. The Commission reviewed two such widening projects: Mitchell Mill Road and Leesville Road.

Though doubtless current traffic counts validate these improvements, the resulting designs, which create wide center islands, increase lanes from 1 to 2 in each direction and limit pedestrian crossings, will in the long run create more problems than they solve.

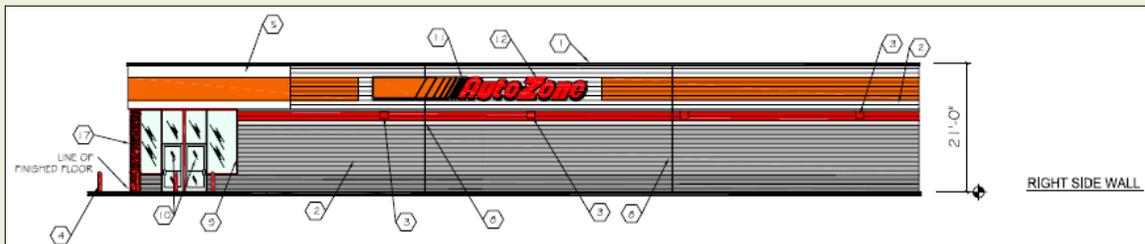
Increased traffic speeds, difficult ingress and egress from sites, and a less pleasant view corridor will perpetuate auto dependent patterns rather than encouraging alternatives.

The Commission observes that these portions of the City should not be left behind in our efforts to create a more sustainable and less auto dependent fabric.

**Fine Grain Reviews:** The commission also reviewed numerous small projects, offering improvements to each, and overall making an effort to see that each project proposed in the City meets its greatest potential. **513 W. Peace Street**, a modest 1500 sf building fit up, was severely constrained by rights of way and utilities. However, per the Appearance Commission's request, the developer reworked a concrete retaining wall at the street, adding openings, a trellis, and plantings.

This type of modest improvement is typical of many of the commissions' exchanges, and in sum, these small acts of 'design acupuncture' add up to a richer, more commodious built environment for the City's citizens.

**Chains:** The City continues to lack methods to require that chain development provide the highest quality of design available. An **AutoZone** on a prominent corner of Louisburg Road was no more than a painted concrete block box; the applicants were reluctant to provide improvements, and the Commission lacked tools for requiring quality materials, areas of transparency, or sensitive attention to site landscaping.



*Off-the-shelf chain architecture often runs counter to creating a high-quality urban environment.*

The **McDonald's** at Falls Pointe made modest moves to improve a façade fronting Falls of the Neuse Road, but in the end offered only an unadorned drive thru as the primary element addressing the street. This is the second Mc Donald's to employ this site orientation with Raleigh. The Western Boulevard location was similarly constructed last year, to correspondingly poor effect on the Western Boulevard Street face.

The Commission observes that both our current Code and the proposed UDO lack tools to redirect this kind of 'lowest common denominator' chain construction. The Commission hopes that Design Review will be included in the new UDO to help enhance the City's appearance and built environment.

## Other Service:

**Collaboration:** At the request of Council and other public bodies, commission representatives have recently joined with other citizens in addressing specific appearance-related matters. Last summer, commission member Leza Mundt served on the **Public Art Policy Task Force**, which helped develop the City's first comprehensive approach to managing City-owned art. Over the winter, members Wayne Maiorano and Elizabeth Byrd assisted in crafting recommendations regarding temporary signs as part of the **Special Events Signage Task Force**.

**Meetings:** The Appearance Commission initiated a bi-monthly meeting schedule in September, 2011. Attendance by members, particularly for site plan reviews, has continued to be strong.

# 2012-13 WORK PROGRAM

## *Raleigh Appearance Commission*

The Appearance Commission stands ready to lend its perspective and expertise to the ongoing UDO effort, and proposes the following initiatives for the balance of 2012 and into 2013, and as may be needed beyond:

- **2012 Sir Walter Raleigh Awards for Community Appearance**  
Planning for the 2012 Sir Walter Raleigh Awards, the City's annual recognition of outstanding conservation and design, is currently underway. This year marks the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Awards. This year's awards ceremony will be held October 9<sup>th</sup> at the new Nature Research Center of the North Carolina Museum of Natural Science. Jim Goodmon, President and CEO of Capitol Broadcasting Company, will be the event's keynote speaker.
- **"Community Conversation" on design excellence**  
How do we, as a community, not only promote but assure quality design? In the coming year, the commission wishes to explore the question in consultation with the community. A series of "conversation events" is envisioned, which would bring together representatives of NCSU College of Design, stakeholders from the private sector, and the public sector. The process might include bringing in local speakers on specific strategy options/ themes, pooling thoughts and ideas (advantages, drawbacks, trade-offs) by theme, and summarizing finding and recommendations. Themes might include design regulations, design guidelines, incentives, staff review, design review board, and the like—all aimed at finding the best structure and process for Raleigh. The April, 2011 memo on design review from CodeStudio, consultants for the UDO update, provides a basis for examining the various approaches.
- **Building materials in Design Standards**  
As the UDO goes forward, it might be possible to include building materials among specified design standards, especially downtown. The commission would like to pursue this possibility.
- **Improving the design outcome, not just enforcing minimum compliance**  
The Appearance Commission continues to advocate for a Design Review component in the new UDO process. Design review is not just following a checklist; part of good design will always be subjective, due to the need to observe variations in context, and to incorporate community values. The current system does meet that requirement, though compliance is largely voluntary. The commission stands ready to participate in dialog and process toward 'right-sizing' a design review component within the new UDO.
- **Appearance Commission review of new site plan and zoning cases**  
Adoption of the UDO will mean that for a time, there will be overlaps between UDO and current site development review processes. The Appearance Commission wishes to continue in its present advisory capacity in the interim, as an added means to help hone UDO standards and processes. Staff will need to discuss that prospect

further, however. The commission could assist with the current Code/ UDO test case scenarios requested by City Council, comparing how product types might fare. Those tests would be for projects already approved, not those pending.

- **Special projects:** The Appearance Commission will continue to identify and seek solutions to City appearance improvement projects, such as the Wake County Parking Deck façade improvement.

**T**he commission thanks the City Council for offering us the opportunity to be of service to Raleigh. We stand ready to assist in the creation of a truly sustainable City fabric that will serve all of the Citizens of Raleigh well in the coming decades.

*Please call on us; we are here to be of service to you and the community.*

*Thank you for your support,*



*Ted Van Dyk  
Chair*



*Elizabeth Byrd  
Vice-Chair*

