Old Town North Small Area Plan Update (OTN SAP Update)

Planning, Land Use and Design & Housing Subcommittee Meeting #1

Wednesday, January 20, 2016, 8:00 – 10:00 AM
City Hall, Sister Cities Conference Room

DRAFT MEETING NOTES
(01.22.2016 DRAFT)

PLANNING, LAND USE AND DESIGN

A two part presentation by staff was given on Planning Design and Land Use. The first part of the presentation started with an overview of the 1992 Urban Design Objectives and the 1994 Urban Design Guidelines and then explored Urban Design Strategies and Tools for addressing Blank Walls and Surface Parking Lots. The second part of the presentation included an overview of the Land Use mix in Old Town North and introduced some considerations for development including density (FAR), height, use and parking.

Urban Design Opportunities Discussion

Comment: The map shows a lot of surface parking on privately owned sites.

Question: What incentives do property owners have to redevelop a fully occupied building and to spend a lot of money to dress a façade? **Response:** Some improvements might only be for streetscape and not for buildings.

Comment: Should consider tools and incentives for streetscape improvements and public art (there is a public art requirement for new development). For art, we should also consider murals which are less expensive and we should keep in mind more immediate strategies since all desired improvements may not happen simultaneously.

Comment: The art on Harris Teeter is received very well by the community.

Question: How do we prioritize enhancements? Should we limit to certain streets such as St. Asaph and Montgomery or disperse?

Comment: We can start with visible streets to get things going. A lot of those blank walls are on streets that are not heavily travelled, however the site across from Harris Teeter is very visible and should be explored as a possible target area.

Comment: We should create a priority list

Comment: We can have a short term and a long term strategy. Focus on concentrated and targeted in the short-term and look to expand in the long-term.

Comment: Landscape screening is a good strategy. Canal Place effectively screened their surface parking with landscape.

Comment: Landscape screening is an effective interim strategy whereas active liner buildings might be more long-term.

Comment: Are we going to get a chance to see more options? **Response**: The strategies shown today are some of the main tools but certainly not all of them. We would like to receive more feedback on what is appropriate. Are there certain strategies better than others? Are there some additional strategies you have seen in other cities that should be considered?

Comment: New developments will not build blank walls or inward facing buildings. The strategies shown today are aimed for existing conditions and we should focus on dealing with these existing problems as part of this discussion.

Question: How do we incentivize a property owner with a parking lot to add liner buildings? **Response:** The market is pushing towards redevelopment. Properties in a few years may have new property owners who may want to redevelop or current owners may want to consider it.

Comment: FAR has to be carefully implemented. We should explore geographic areas where tax incentives may be used for improvements.

Comments: The tools and strategies are not mutually exclusive. Multiple tools can be combined.

Comment: Look at nighttime and daytime strategies. Landscape screening looks good during the day but can be dead during the night. Need to look at strategies to activate the streets during the day and night.

Zoning Tools and Strategies Discussion

Comment: There are tall buildings in the area; however people often want low density. This can become problematic if you locate tall buildings next to short buildings without proper context.

Comment: Would caution against less density. Looking at context is important.

Comment: We need to look at directing density towards things that the community wants. **Response:** It is important to think about composition of uses within a building and focus on the targeted retail areas since ground floor retail needs to be taller which can drive up the height of a building.

Comment: We cannot get a variety of height and ground floor activity without incentive which translates to FAR.

Question: NRG is a blank slate, so how do we begin to think of it? How do we attract unique uses on that site that can help the identity of the neighborhood?

Comment: NOTICe's vision includes centrality of design, articulation, materials, varying heights and aesthetic quality. The vision reflects a desire for mixed-use and open space for the NRG site.

Comment: The current relation of commercial to residential in the land use mix is good. We should try to keep it for economic viability.

Comment: Courtyards are a great tool especially with underground parking, however many become too private.

Comment: We need to have interior community spaces. How do we incorporate that? **Response:** We can do something similar to how fitness centers are used as community spaces but with Art Centers.

Comment: We also need to discuss office conversion. **Response:** AEDP is looking at a feasibility study of offices Citywide. More developers are going for less office space Citywide. 86% of all office space in Alexandria is located near Metro stations. For OTN, we can explore what is appropriate for conversion.

Comment: Should we allow the addition of retail if they do not convert?

Comment: Property owners want flexibility because market dictates what is valuable. We need to target those retail areas and not have retail dispersed throughout the plan area.

Comment: Alexandria is not much fun for millennials and young people. We need to push the envelope more in practical ways. Allow later restaurant hours and bars that are not primarily restaurants. **Response:** One of the opportunities is look at a university or something that introduces a new age group as a possible use on NRG.

Comments: Mixed income development- as an example Chatham Square – offers some valuable lessons. The interior courtyards and parking areas in Chatham Square are challenging from a couple perspectives. Also, the operation of mixed income developments can be challenging. We need to move away from interior courtyards and closed developments because of security issues. Also, we need to be mindful of outdoor events and where they are located. In many cases they are too close to residential properties.

HOUSING

A staff presentation was given on Housing that started with an overview of the City's Housing Master Plan goals and targets for affordable housing. The presentation also explained the tools and partners that the City utilizes to achieve housing affordability.

Housing Tools and Strategies Discussion

Comment: Mixed-income housing if not designed properly can create tension between residents such as separation of parking, courtyard and trash collection.

Question: Who addresses these issues? **Response:** For ARHA units, it is ARHA which is an independent agency. For City units, the City addresses those issues. Also in case of development within condominiums, there is condominium by-laws.

Comment: The goal is to plan more thoughtfully and to create a community that meets and knows each other and help people towards living more harmoniously.

Question: Are the current housing tools enough to get us to the 2,000 units goal by 2025? **Response:** The City uses many tools to achieve this goal which includes new and existing units. We need to look at short-term and long-term tools, such as reduction of parking, community land trusts and extending terms of affordability in developments where they are about to expire. We also need to explore more funding opportunities, The Housing Trust Fund will not be sufficient. We are also looking at opportunities for mixed-income assisted living.

Comment: Great to see how housing is tied to planning and zoning tools by addressing FAR and Density.

Comment: Affordable units should not be in one section of the building.

Comment: We hope that what comes out of the tools for affordability will include art spaces. The Art League is one of the largest institutions in the City. It energizes retail, streetscape and the community. The Art League does not have any real estate or money and relies on affordable space. There is concern about it being pushed out. **Response:** There are regulatory, financial and programming tools that can be explored and that will be discussed this afternoon.

Question: How do we insure that future developments is addressed in a more cohesive manner, additionally, how much flexibility does the community have or are developers driving the process? **Response:** This process looks at the plan as a whole rather than a site by site procedure. There will be a review process for the plan and for each project by many people including the community, the Planning Commission, the City Council and the Urban Design Advisory Committee.

Comment: It is important to include philanthropic, grants and other opportunities to support the art related goals.