



City of Seattle

Seattle Planning Commission

McCaela Daffern and Jamie Stroble, Co-Chairs
Vanessa Murdock, Executive Director

SEATTLE PLANNING COMMISSION

Thursday, August 08, 2024

Approved Meeting Minutes

Commissioners Present: Xio Alvarez, McCaela Daffern, Andrew Dannenberg, Rose Lew Tsai-Le Whitson, Dhiana Quintanar, Monika Sharma, Lauren Squires, Jamie Stroble, Nick Whipple

Commissioners Absent: Matt Hutchins, Radhika Nair, Kelabe Tewolde

Commission Staff: Vanessa Murdock, Executive Director; John Hoey, Senior Policy Analyst; Olivia Baker, Planning Analyst

Seattle Planning Commission meeting minutes are not an exact transcript and represent key points and the basis of discussion.

Referenced Documents discussed at the meeting can be viewed here:

<https://www.seattle.gov/planningcommission/meetings>

Chair's Report & Minutes Approval

Co-Chair McCaela Daffern called the meeting to order at 3:02 pm and announced several upcoming Commission meetings. Co-Chair Daffern offered the following land acknowledgement:

'On behalf of the Seattle Planning Commission, we'd like to actively recognize that we are on Indigenous land, the traditional and current territories of the Coast Salish people who have lived on and stewarded these lands since the beginning of time and continue to do so today. We acknowledge the role that traditional western-centric planning practices have played in harming, displacing, and attempting to erase Native communities. We commit to identifying racist practices and strive to center restorative land stewardship rather than unsustainable and extractive use of the land.'

Co-Chair Daffern noted that this meeting is a hybrid meeting with some Commissioners and staff participating remotely while other Commissioners and staff are participating in the Boards and Commissions Room at Seattle City Hall. She asked fellow Commissioners to review the Color Brave Space norms and asked for volunteers to select one or more of the norms to read aloud. She suggested to Commissioners that they collectively agree to abide by these norms.

ACTION: Commissioner Nick Whipple moved to approve the July 25, 2024 meeting minutes. Commissioner Rose Lew Tsai-Le Whitson seconded the motion. The motion to approve the minutes passed.

Announcements

Vanessa Murdock, Seattle Planning Commission Executive Director, reviewed the format of the meeting. She noted that public comment could be submitted in writing via email at least eight hours before the start of the meeting or provided in person by members of the public attending the meeting at City Hall. She also noted that the appointment of four new Commissioners and reappointment of seven existing Commissioners is scheduled for consideration at the August 13 City Council meeting.

Public Comment

There was no public comment.

Update: Subarea Planning

Erica Bush and Jesse London, Office of Planning and Community Development (OPCD)

Ms. Bush provided an overview of OPCD's subarea planning and defined how the Comprehensive Plan and subarea planning are connected. Seattle's Comprehensive Plan is a roadmap for where and how our city will grow and invest in our communities over the next twenty years. Within this, the Comprehensive Plan establishes six Regional Growth Centers. Subarea planning is the detailed planning process for each of those Regional Growth Centers. She provided the following examples of differences between the Comprehensive Plan and subarea planning:

- Subarea planning includes a focused geography.
- Subarea planning is grounded in the citywide policy of the Comprehensive Plan.
- Place-specific policies to ensure that our urban centers can successfully accommodate future growth and become more equitable, vibrant, and resilient.
- Ability to focus investment and implementation tools guided by each community's interests and visions for its own future to respond to community-identified needs, including and not limited to economic development, capital facilities, services, and public realm.

Ms. Bush highlighted the timing for completion of subarea planning as noted below:

Phase One Plans 2024-2026

- Downtown
- Capitol Hill / First Hill
- Northgate

Phase Two Plans 2025-2027

- South Lake Union
- Uptown
- University District

She listed the following topics that have been identified across all centers:

- Multifamily family sized units are not being developed and are cost prohibitive to construct.
- Safety is top of mind in all areas.
- People want to see their fellow Seattleites cared for with access to additional social services and basic amenities like restrooms.
- There is a lack of meaningful retail support that addresses equity issues and keeps long time tenants in place.
- Maintenance and continued development of open spaces is needed as we densify.

Ms. Bush provided an overview of the schedule and next steps for the Downtown Regional Center subarea planning process. She stated that they are now conducting stakeholder engagement and will be hosting a workshop in September. The draft plan will be circulated internally this fall and published for the public in early 2025. She reviewed the following engagement outcomes:

Housing

- Safety for Downtown residents is a concern
- Improved neighborhood quality and nearby-services are needed to attract more families
- There is a need for many types of housing
- Preparing for seismic retrofits in the CID will be important
- We need to add more affordable housing in the areas with the best concentrations of resources

Arts and Culture

- The City needs to demonstrate a sustained, increased, and coordinated commitment to the arts world
- Space is needed - all kinds, all sizes
- Artists aren't fairly compensated for their work
- Safety concerns are growing
- Construction projects are long and disruptive
- Center racial equity and bring Black, Indigenous, and Brown artists back home Downtown

Employment Access

- Health and safety, as well as transportation into Downtown, are concerns for businesses
- The City should review its own barriers to starting and opening businesses
- Various Downtown neighborhoods operate under different regulatory frameworks and varying levels of access to capital
- There is a strong sense of community support among business owners
- Foot-traffic of office workers has not returned
- The City should be strategic around priority corridor investments

Youth

- More spaces where kids can just hang out
- Youth are a transit-dependent population
- Safety for kids, both experienced and perceived, is important
- If we want families to live Downtown, we need mixed-income housing and public schools
- Youth need to see themselves Downtown
- Downtown has many identities

Ms. Bush highlighted the following Racial Equity Toolkit (RET) Draft Outcomes:

Employment Access Draft RET

Downtown is a center for businesses - of all sizes - that create financial opportunity and stability for entrepreneurs, owners and employees.

Housing Draft RET

Downtown offers diverse housing options that support where people are in their lives without creating a cost burden.

Arts and Culture Draft RET

A thriving, creative community lives in, works in, and shapes the Downtown experience.

Process Draft RET

There are clear and direct connections between diverse lived experiences of Downtowners and the plan recommendations.

The Downtown Plan policies and projects prioritize historically excluded communities.

Ms. Bush shared some of the key technical findings to date, including:

- There are several different definitions of Downtown.
- Today Downtown offers 29,940 housing units and is home to 47,859 residents.
- Downtown housing growth exceeded targets by fifteen percent since 2015.
- Its role as a housing hub is relatively new. More than fifteen percent of Downtown units were built after 2000, with 2011 as the median year of housing units.
- Downtown is on pace to be the largest housing center in Seattle.
- Downtown's demographics are highly diverse across geographies.

She stated that Downtown's vacancies and public land are an opportunity. Downtown has the second highest allocation of land to parking lots, vacancy, and easements.

- Twenty-three percent of CID and twenty-one percent of Pioneer Square land is vacant or a parking lot.
- Twenty-nine percent of parcels are owned by public entities.

Commission Discussion

- Commissioners requested more information on the statement that Downtown is on pace to become Seattle's largest residential center. Ms. Bush stated that there is current zoning capacity Downtown, including for future transit-oriented development. This is the logical location for additional high-density growth. There is a consistent notion that Downtown will never see the high level of commercial occupation that it had before the pandemic.
- Commissioners inquired about tools to ensure development of income-restricted housing during the Downtown building boom. Ms. Bush stated that this issue is probably more complicated than ever, as the cost of new development is so high. The high percentage of publicly owned land in Downtown is a significant opportunity to create affordable housing. There are innovative technologies for higher density development on smaller parcels.

Ms. Bush provided an overview of the Northgate Regional Center subarea planning process. She stated that the boundary for this subarea includes the University of Washington Medical Center (UWMC) to meet the Puget Sound Regional Council criteria for a Regional Center. She reviewed the schedule and next steps for the planning process and stated that the public draft plan will be released early next year. Engagement in Northgate was focused on historically under-served communities and heavily driven by RET outcomes. Below is a summary of engagement outcomes:

Neighborhood Strengths

- Many services can be accessed locally
- Light rail and pedestrian bridge are highly valued
- There are affordable dining and entertainment options
- Great access to jobs - both in Downtown Seattle and upcoming transit access to the north
- Diversity of population
- Kraken Iceplex facility is an asset
- Robust network of community assets
- Thornton Creek and Beaver Pond are loved environmental assets

Top Concerns

- People miss the mall as a gathering and lingering space
- The area is ready for a redefined identity
- More housing to meet a variety of family sizes and incomes
- More vibrant streets and more parks / open spaces
- There is a lot of room for improvement in the pedestrian network
- Connections to light rail could improve
- Housing affordability

Vision for the Future

- Build upon existing environmental assets
- New development, more activity
- More vibrant street life
- Affordable housing, including multigenerational living
- Walkability and more complete pedestrian network
- More public artwork
- Improved east-west transportation connections
- More and better parks

Ms. Bush highlighted the following RET Draft Outcomes:

Environmental Quality

Northgate is an attractive neighborhood, with high standards for air, noise, and water quality.

Environmental assets flourish.

Metrics for tracking: air quality, noise levels, tree canopy.

Housing

Northgate's housing inventory meets growth targets, offering options and choices that reflect Northgate's vision for the future. Available housing mix reflects the income levels, family sizes, and design preferences of cultural communities and residents of Seattle.

Metrics for tracking: Count of housing units, average rent and range of rent rates for housing, percent population BIPOC.

Transportation

Available transportation options reflect the vehicle access and modal preferences of cultural communities and residents of Northgate, including options for walking.

Metrics for tracking: Mode share, Link and Metro ridership

Social Infrastructure and Wellbeing

Residents of Northgate feel connected to the natural environment and have safe access to schools, recreational facilities, transit stops, community gathering spaces, and other services at levels of service comparable to other North Seattle neighborhoods.

Metrics for tracking: percent of population within a 10-minute walkshed of a park, asset map completeness.

Placemaking

Northgate neighborhoods feel vibrant, comfortable, and culturally relevant to their residents and broader communities. Public and private developments prioritize urban design that builds identity.

Metrics for tracking: Foot traffic counts, event counts, crime rates.

Indigenous Inclusivity

Parts of the Northgate neighborhood are co-developed in partnership with indigenous communities and the neighborhood becomes a hub of activity for indigenous people, including a mix of residential and culturally specific sites.

Metrics for tracking: Population counts for AI/AN in the greater Northgate area.

Anti-Displacement

Growth in Northgate benefits its long-standing residents and business-owners. Anti-displacement measures provide support for households and businesses who want to remain in the growing and changing Northgate subarea.

Metrics for tracking: Anti-displacement policies.

Business Mix

Northgate is full of opportunities for entrepreneurship and business ownership.

A diverse economic ecosystem provides a healthy mix of retail, services, and jobs.

Metrics for tracking: New business licenses, job counts.

Ms. Bush shared some of the key technical findings to date, including:

- Northgate is still built for cars.

- Most blocks are at least three times the ideal size.
- There is a high volume of missing or poor sidewalks.
- Increased risk of heat island and flooding.
- Pace of development has slowed due to supply side costs
 - Pipeline is exclusively rental housing
 - Multiple significant affordable housing projects coming
 - Newer market-rate units expected to increase average rents
- Incomes are far below the city and region.
 - 11,000 jobs to 5,200 employed residents
 - UWMC adding several hundred jobs
 - Opportunity to either:
 - ✓ match existing less skilled or formally educated residents with dependable growth in service
 - ✓ OR connect residents with growing job sectors (healthcare, etc.) via nearby workforce training

Commission Discussion

- Commissioners noted the proximity of Regional Centers to Interstate 5 or State Route 99 and asked about air quality considerations in the subarea planning process. Mr. London stated that all three subarea planning areas have significant tree canopy issues as well as an abundance of overly paved areas. Ms. Bush stated that the subarea planning team is starting to think about building code or other mechanisms for more focused solutions in those areas. There is interest in the Lid I-5 project and opportunities to improve air quality in Downtown. Commissioners requested more information on any corresponding actions and the associated timeline. Mr. London stated that the subarea planning team is not currently resourced for zoning changes. This will likely be turned over to the land use team at OPCD while the subarea planning team is starting work on other plans.
- Commissioners noted that the UWMC is included in the Northgate subarea planning boundary for its jobs and asked why North Seattle College was not included. Mr. London stated that the boundary lines were drawn in the 1990s and changing them would take time. Commissioners suggested an approach that considers the Regional Center as a whole, more than only jobs.

Mr. London provided an overview of the First Hill and Capitol Hill Regional Center subarea planning process. He stated that this subarea plan includes several areas with significantly different conditions and identities. He reviewed the planning process schedule and next steps. They are currently in the middle of the second round of community engagement and expect a draft plan to be published next summer. Mr. London highlighted the planning process' engagement plan, that is being conducted in collaboration with The Urban League of Metropolitan Seattle. He stated that this engagement plan is more forward looking than other plans, and includes small group discussions, community walking tours, pop-up events, a public workshop, and online surveys. Below is a summary of the small group discussions to date:

Consistent across all topics

- First Hill and Capitol Hill are very different experientially and there is a physical disconnection between these two neighborhoods and Downtown.
- Capitol Hill is a good place for ground floor retail, but spaces are closing. There is a fear that it is losing its eclectic-ness and there is displacement of arts and nonprofits.
- This area is very diverse and LGBTQ+ friendly.
- Mental health and substance abuse in plain sight.
- Need for more green space and tree canopy.
- Lack of public restrooms.

Environment

- First Hill lacks small businesses and the cultural “vibe” that Capitol Hill has.
- Trees are being removed and not replaced.
- First Hill does not have walkable amenities.
- There are so many more dogs since the pandemic. They are co-opting spaces for people.

Culture/Health

- First Hill is inaccessible, particularly for those that might be impaired or accessing the hospital.
- Alleys are a place for drug use in Capitol Hill. A safe space for drug use is needed.
- Lambert House is a good safe queer space.
- There are no public bathrooms in the area; these are needed in light rail stations.
- Public art is working well. The AIDS Memorial Plaza looks great.

Economy/Housing

- New development housing is small units, however young families need and want space here.
- There are vacancies in studio apartments.
- It is difficult to create a sense of belonging or community with smaller units.
- More natural areas are needed.

Transportation

- Protected bike lanes are good, but there is a lack of continuity. Difficult to bike to health care.
- Outdoor seating is good and there is a lot of pedestrian activity at night.
- Boren Avenue is impossible to cross at parts.
- First Hill arterials are used as a pass through.
- Central needs connections to ferries and Sounder Transit; this all happens through Capitol Hill.

Mr. London highlighted the following RET Draft Outcomes:

Environment

First Hill/Capitol Hill balances sustainable growth with a healthy environment.

Economy

First Hill /Capitol Hill is a place that is accepting of difference, where community members can see their cultural values reflected.

Small, local retail thrives in First Hill/ Capitol Hill.

Housing

Stable, low to moderate income housing is preserved and created to welcome newcomers and support long-time community members in all patterns of living.

Residents of First Hill/Capitol Hill live healthy, fulfilling lives, with specific support for the most vulnerable community members.

Transportation

Jobs, retail, and services can all be accessed without a car.

Transportation options support healthy lifestyles, overcoming historic environmental injustice.

First Hill/Capitol Hill is well-connected to the neighborhoods that surround them.

Mr. London provided an overview of the subarea planning technical research and analysis to date:

- Commercial vacancies are much higher than they were pre-pandemic.
- There have been requests from property owners for height increases.
- Existing housing stock is older.
- There has been a staggering amount of residential growth.
- The area has a very skilled workforce. Seventy-five percent of jobs on Capitol Hill are in health care.
- Vulnerability to climate change and seismic vulnerability, especially in the Pike/Pine corridor.

Commission Discussion

- Commissioners asked how they can be helpful to the subarea planning process. Ms. Bush stated that they are hearing a lot about displacement. The subarea planning team would appreciate learning of any anti-displacement tools. They would also appreciate learning of any ideas on how to infuse greenery in urban rights of way.
- Commissioners expressed interest in hearing more from the subarea planning team. Ms. Murdock stated that she will be in touch with Ms. Bush and Mr. London to explore opportunities for additional briefings and updates soon.

Working Session: Seattle Planning Commission budget and housing papers

John Hoey, Seattle Planning Commission staff, provided an overview of the City's budget process. He stated that the City of Seattle uses a biennial budget process. The Seattle City Council exclusively focuses on creating a budget for about two months every year, from late September through late November. The Mayor transmits a proposed budget to City Council in mid to late September. The Council's job, as defined by the City Charter, is to consider the Mayor's proposed budget, listen to members of the public, elevate issues and propose changes that are deliberated by the entire Council after robust community stakeholder engagement.

He provided the following summary of the budget process:

- Step 1: Mayor delivers and Central Budget Office (CBO) presents the Proposed Budget; Council deliberations begin.

- Step 2: Budget Hearings: CBO and Department presentations, Central Staff presents policy considerations; Revenue forecast update
- Step 3: Presentation of Chair’s balancing package and Councilmember proposed amendments
- Step 4: Vote on balancing package and amendments
- Step 5: Final Council action

Mr. Hoey presented the following schedule for the upcoming budget process:

- The Mayor’s Proposed 2025-2026 Budget is scheduled to be delivered to Council on Tuesday, September 24.
- First meeting of the Fall 2024 Select Budget Committee Deliberations: September 25
- Department presentations: September 30 – October 3
- Central Staff presentation of policy considerations: October 16-21
- October Economic and Revenue Forecast Update: October 22
- Presentation of Chair’s Balancing Package: October 30
- Councilmember proposed amendments due: November 1
- Budget Committee votes on the Balancing Package, including amendments: November 14 and 15
- Committee takes any final votes on budget legislation and technical amendments: November 19
- City Council takes final action on proposed budget, all associated budget legislation: November 21

There are the three ways the public can share their input during the budget process:

- Budget Committee meetings
- Public hearings
- Written comment

Commission Discussion

- Commissioners inquired whether the Planning Commission has commented in the past during the budget process. Ms. Murdock stated that in her tenure as Executive Director the Commission has only commented once during the budget process. That comment was to request additional funding for OPCD to enhance its work on the Comprehensive Plan.

Olivia Baker, Seattle Planning Commission staff, introduced the Commission’s approach to developing a paper on housing affordability. She provided the following overview:

Message

- We need to protect, maintain, and grow funding for affordable housing and community stabilization programs.

Goal

- Build awareness – make the data on the housing crisis more approachable and relatable to everyone, even those with housing security.
- Empower people to engage in the budget process and support funding for affordable housing and the programs that support community-led projects.

Audience

- People curious about housing and interested in engaging with City Council around the budget but may be unfamiliar with the process.
- Include a glossary of common budget terms for this group.

Timeline

- Late September when the Mayor's budget is transmitted to Council.

Ms. Baker presented the following draft outline for the housing affordability paper:

Introduction

- Why do we care about housing affordability as a city and a community?
 - Housing affordability impacts everyone
 - Access to affordable housing decreases risk of homelessness
 - Housing stability leads to improved health outcomes for both children and adults
 - Housing stability leads to improved education outcomes for children
 - Investments in the production and preservation of affordable housing has positive impacts on the local economy through the creation of jobs, property tax revenue, and increased business for local stores and services.
 - When we do not have enough housing, especially affordable housing, we see increased rates of displacement and disproportionate impacts to communities of color and low-income households.

Context of Housing Crisis

- High-level information on the housing gap
 - Graphic of housing production needed and what % of that needs to be subsidized
 - Note the market will not produce enough housing on its own
- Explanation of the mechanism behind what the city is already doing for affordable housing. Graphic of the web of city departments, community orgs, and funding sources that come together to create the affordable housing system in Seattle
 - Timeline of housing development from funding to completion
 - Discuss importance of funding that supports community-led projects and how those investments are amplified by community benefits
- Note the housing gap that remains – what happens if that gap isn't addressed or is allowed to grow? Who is most impacted?

Call to Action

- What do we need to do? Protect, maintain, and grow the funding for housing affordability programs.
 - You can get involved by following the City budget process and speaking up for programs that support this work.

Closing Statement

- Housing affordability brings benefits to everyone

- Abundant housing leads to better communities through increased cultural and economic diversity, and better walkability and access to services. Housing affordability means the stability to stay long-term and build community, the ability to raise children in the city, to age in place in your home, and to see adult children and family friends able to move back home to Seattle.
- A future where all these things are possible is tangible and we can get there through building more housing and focusing on subsidized, affordable housing and community-led housing projects.

Ms. Murdock stated that that intent of this effort is to create a very cogent paper to help the public understand housing affordability. She recommended that the scope be limited as to be very narrow and understandable, given the timeframe for readers to reference this paper during the budget process.

Commission Discussion

- Commissioners suggested that the paper include a message on the complexity of affordable housing policy and its many layered elements. True affordable housing policy would need to be very nuanced. This paper is not intended to approach all the topics. For example, what percentage of the unhoused population suffers from addiction, and what is the City doing about that population? Ms. Baker suggested that this could be addressed with the proposed graphic demonstrating the web of inter-connected systems and departments.
- Commissioners acknowledged the intent to keep this paper to two pages. A focus on the challenges of the unhoused could lead to an entire paper on that topic alone.
- Commissioners noted that one of the solutions to that problem is creating vastly more permanent supportive housing.
- Commissioners inquired whether the Planning Commission is considering writing this paper because of its concern for the upcoming city budget. Ms. Murdock stated that there are several Commissioners who are concerned about the funding for the Equitable Development Initiative (EDI). Commissioners suggested it would be helpful to prepare a short paper to address the issue of housing affordability that could be referenced during the upcoming budget process.
- Commissioners recommended focusing on how the Commission's values can influence the budget. Resourcing for the immediate needs of our city is at risk. This paper should be grounded in the reality of housing need. Commissioners encouraged using more targeted language that focuses on tangibly investing in the specific outcomes.
- Commissioners suggested making a clear connection to the Commission's role in stewarding the Comprehensive Plan by encouraging the City to continue investing in its Vision.
- Commissioners stated that there have been some great letters written in support of EDI. The Commission's paper should reflect the community voices that are already speaking out.

Public Comment

There was no public comment.

The meeting was adjourned at 5:25 pm.