REPORT TO COUNCIL

City of Sacramento
915 I Street, Sacramento, CA 95814-2671
www.CityofSacramento.org

STAFF REPORT
November 8, 2005

Honorable Mayor and
Members of the City Council

Subject: Accelerated Program to Update the Urban Design Plan for the Central Business District (CBD) and to Review Height and Setback Issues in the Transition Area Between the CBD and Midtown. (M05-084)

Location/Council District: Central Business District and Midtown / Districts 1, 3

Recommendation:

Adopt a Resolution: 1) approving the scope of work and process for preparation of an update to the Urban Design Plan including a Residential High Rise Strategy that reviews height and set/step back issues in the CBD-Midtown transition area; 2) Select a preferred method of completing the work; and 3) Direct the City Manager to negotiate a professional services agreement with either a professional consultant with urban design expertise or an entity composed of urban design experts (for example the Urban Land Institute or the American Institute of Architects) and return to Council for agreement approval.

Contacts: Gary Stonehouse, Consultant, 808-5567; Steve Peterson, Principal Planner, 808-5981.
Presenter: Gary Stonehouse, Consultant
Department: Development Services Department
Division: Planning
Organization No. 4827

Summary:

The existing, adopted Urban Design Plan for the CBD did not contemplate high-rise residential developments. A Steering Committee of stakeholders met with staff to determine an appropriate scope of work for permanent changes to the Plan and the preparation of a Residential High Rise Strategy for the Central Business District. On October 11, 2005, the Council asked staff to also accelerate the consideration of building height and set/step back standards for the transition area between the CBD and the Midtown residential areas.

The Steering Committee also identified two approaches to implementing the scope of work in an expeditious fashion: the use of a panel of experts (The Urban Land Institute

and the American Institute of Architects both offer this service for a fee) or retaining a professional consultant with urban design expertise in Sacramento.

Committee/Commission Action:

The main recommendations in this report were reviewed by a Steering Committee that included members of the Planning Commission, Design Review and Preservation Board, and Development Oversight Commission. The Steering Committee recommendation is to contract with a professional consultant with urban design expertise in Sacramento.

Background Information:

This report responds to Council direction on two separate urban design issues within the central city that the Council wanted resolved prior to the update of the General Plan. The two issues are to update and expand the Urban Design Plan for the CBD to include guidance relative high rise residential towers, and to review policies regarding building height and set/step backs in the transition area between the CBD and Midtown.

Urban Design Plan

Earlier this year, the City hosted two events that explored new trends and issues regarding high rise residential development in the CBD. The first event was at the May 10, 2005 City Council to review and comment on the proposed 53 story twin tower condominium project on Capitol Mall. At that session, the Council also heard from Gordon Price from Vancouver, British Columbia regarding that city's downtown high rise strategy. The second event was the Skylife Conference held on June 2, 2005. The conference included three panels on high rise living, design, and construction.

At the Council workshop, staff offered the opinion that the twin tower project and the Vancouver presentation raised issues the City has not yet addressed. The list of issues included attracting families to the CBD, skyline issues, view corridors, residential amenities, infrastructure and others. At that time staff pledged to consult with others and return with recommendations on how to address these issues in a timely manner.

Subsequently, staff convened several meetings with staff and the Steering committee to develop today's recommendations. An important decision made by the Steering Committee is that the existing Urban Design Plan, while old, is still a valuable document and it needs to be updated and refreshed - not thrown out. The Steering Committee drafted a scope of work for a comprehensive update of the plan and the development of a High Rise Residential Strategy and Implementation Program (Attachment 1).

The Steering Committee also explored a variety of ways to get the scope of work implemented. Two approaches were examined: Hiring a panel of urban experts to advise the City, or hiring a professional urban design consultant to produce a new plan. Both the Urban Land Institute (ULI) and the American Institute of Architects (AIA) offer expert panels.

Typically, the panel programs take in substantial input early in their deliberations, but present their product as their final recommendations. This is in contrast to the more typical City practice of presenting draft products for substantial continuing community and council review. The panels would not typically conduct, for example, the charrettes that have been held for the JKL Strategy or the Docks Plan. Although they would not conduct charrettes, the process will rely on information generated through the charrettes conducted to date.

In order to expedite the accelerated process, the Steering Committee recommended expanding the contract with the firm that is currently doing urban design work for the City currently as part of the General Plan project. It also needs to be clear that the local chapter of the AIA has been a helpful member of the Steering Committee and has pledged to help the city with whatever approach the Council chooses. The Steering Committee would also stay in place to provide guidance as the study progressed.

Midtown Transition

On October 11, 2005, the Council directed staff to accelerate a portion of the General Plan Update and expand it to include a specific review of building height issues in the transition area between the CBD and Midtown. This transition area (Attachment 2) allows buildings up to 65 feet by right and higher with a special permit. When the transition area was established in 1999, 65 feet was acceptable to the stakeholders. The Central City Housing Strategy and the Neighborhood Design Guidelines identified this area as appropriate for more intensive mixed use development.

Subsequently, the SACOG Blueprint, generally calls for the City of Sacramento to accommodate a larger portion of the projected regional growth. A major aspect of the General Plan Update is to find how to accommodate the smart growth from the Blueprint in a way that protects existing neighborhoods and makes the City the most livable in the nation. This aspect of the General Plan Update is scheduled for mid 2006.

The Council specifically asked to have the study of the appropriate height of buildings in this area be accelerated and the study expanded to review step and set back requirements relative the tree canopy and tree root zones. A description of this work effort is also included in Attachment 1.

Financial Considerations:

An update to the Urban Design Plan, including a Residential High Rise Strategy that reviews height and set/step back issues in the CBD-Midtown transition area is estimated to cost $120,000 – $150,000. Funding would be provided from the Merged Downtown Redevelopment Project Area Tax Increment funds.

Environmental Considerations:

The actions the staff is asking for in this report do not constitute a project under CEQA.

Policy Considerations:

The existing Urban Design Plan does not provide adequate guidance on high-rise residential neighborhood development in the Central Business District. Staff proposes an accelerated program to update and expand the content of the Plan. Staff is also recommending an accelerated study for the Central City transition area.

Emerging Small Business Considerations (ESBD):

No goods or services are being purchased with this report.

Respectfully Submitted by: _____
Carol Shearly
Interim Planning Director

Recommendation Approved:

_____
FOR ROBERT P. THOMAS
City Manager

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ATTACHMENT 1

Accelerated Downtown Residential Development Plan Scope of Work

1. Update and consolidate the City's Urban Design Plan.

The Urban Design Plan was adopted in 1987. The plan consists of three reports: the Framework Plan, Street Guidelines, and Architectural Design Guidelines. At a minimum, the guidelines need to be updated and consolidated. They anticipated the arrival of light rail, the redesign of Chavez Plaza and a number of other things that have since happened.

City staff and the Steering Committee have determined that the existing plan and guidelines are still valuable and have served the City well. The consultant should thoroughly review the guidelines as part of the scope of this project. The main effort should be to expand the guidelines to include the new topics that are listed below and to update the guidelines based upon the current context.

The existing plan and guidelines apply to the City's central business district (CBD). The revised plan and the residential and high rise strategy must be developed in a broader geographic context. The City anticipates substantial residential development in the downtown, Midtown, Railyards, West Sacramento, the Docks, and R Street. The revised plan must also be developed in the context of the Riverfront Master plan and the concept of "decking" a portion of Interstate 5. The Plan area also contains a number of designated historic buildings and historic districts.

The scope of the plan and especially the Architectural Guidelines also needs to be expanded to include issues not covered in the existing documents. These issues include view corridors (especially Old Sacramento, along the river, and the Capitol), tower spacing, microclimate concerns, design guidelines for residential towers, guidelines for mixing residential and office towers, concerns about access to daylight, and policies for the look of the city skyline itself.

Finally, the City Council has asked that the study be expanded to include an area in Midtown bounded by I Street, 20th Street, L Street and 16th Street. This area is currently covered by the adopted Central City Neighborhood Design Guidelines and is zoned RMX and C-2 with an UN (urban neighborhood) overlay which allows residential uses by right if they comply with height and set back standards. The Council recently approved a residential project in this area with a substantial increase in height (to 95 feet). The Council and the community would like an accelerated examination of the potential future development in the area and a consideration of changes to the existing guidelines to include a changing scale of development in the area.

The draft guidelines will be the subject of public hearings by the Design Review Board and by the City Council.

2. Develop a downtown Residential Development and High Rise Strategy

Part of the Vancouver residential strategy is that if the downtown is a good place for families and children, it would be a good place for anyone to live. Assuming the City of Sacramento will support the same concept, we need to develop a comprehensive strategy to make sure that residential neighborhoods develop with all the facilities and amenities to make them complete. The strategy should include the following:

- A description of the proposed residential community, now and in the future. Related developments are expected to occur in the Central business District, the Capitol Plan area, the Railyards, in west Sacramento, in the docks area and even on a deck covering part of the I-5 Freeway.
- The population capacity of the community. Vancouver plans for about 10,000 people per community.
- Sites for schools, parks and day care.
- Plans for neighborhood serving retail. (The current zoning ordinance requires ground floor retail uses of many blocks within the central business district. This is generally seen as business serving retail and may not meet the needs of a large residential population)
- The mix and/or boundaries between residential and office uses.
- The infrastructure needed to support the strategy – the connections with the rest of the community and important features such as the rivers.
- How to address the current applications.
- The Strategy will be the subject of public hearings by the City Planning Commission and the City Council.

3. Prepare an Implementation Program for the Strategy

The implementation program should include a public/private mechanism for providing the programs and facilities necessary to implement the strategy in a timely manner. The program should include a market study or assessment on what is needed to make this a livable community. Programs used successfully in other jurisdictions should be evaluated for application in Sacramento. The

consultant should recommend incentives or accelerators in the programs, evaluate possible treatment for catalyst sites, and conduct a public process for the development of the Strategy and the Implementation Program.

4. Transition Area Height and Set / Step Back Standards

The City Council has directed staff to accelerate the portion of the General Plan Update that determines the appropriate building height and intensity for the "transition area" between the Central Business District and the Midtown residential areas. Currently the height limit in the Midtown area is 35 feet. There is no height limit in the CBD. The current height limit in the transition area is 65 feet for residential or mixed use buildings.

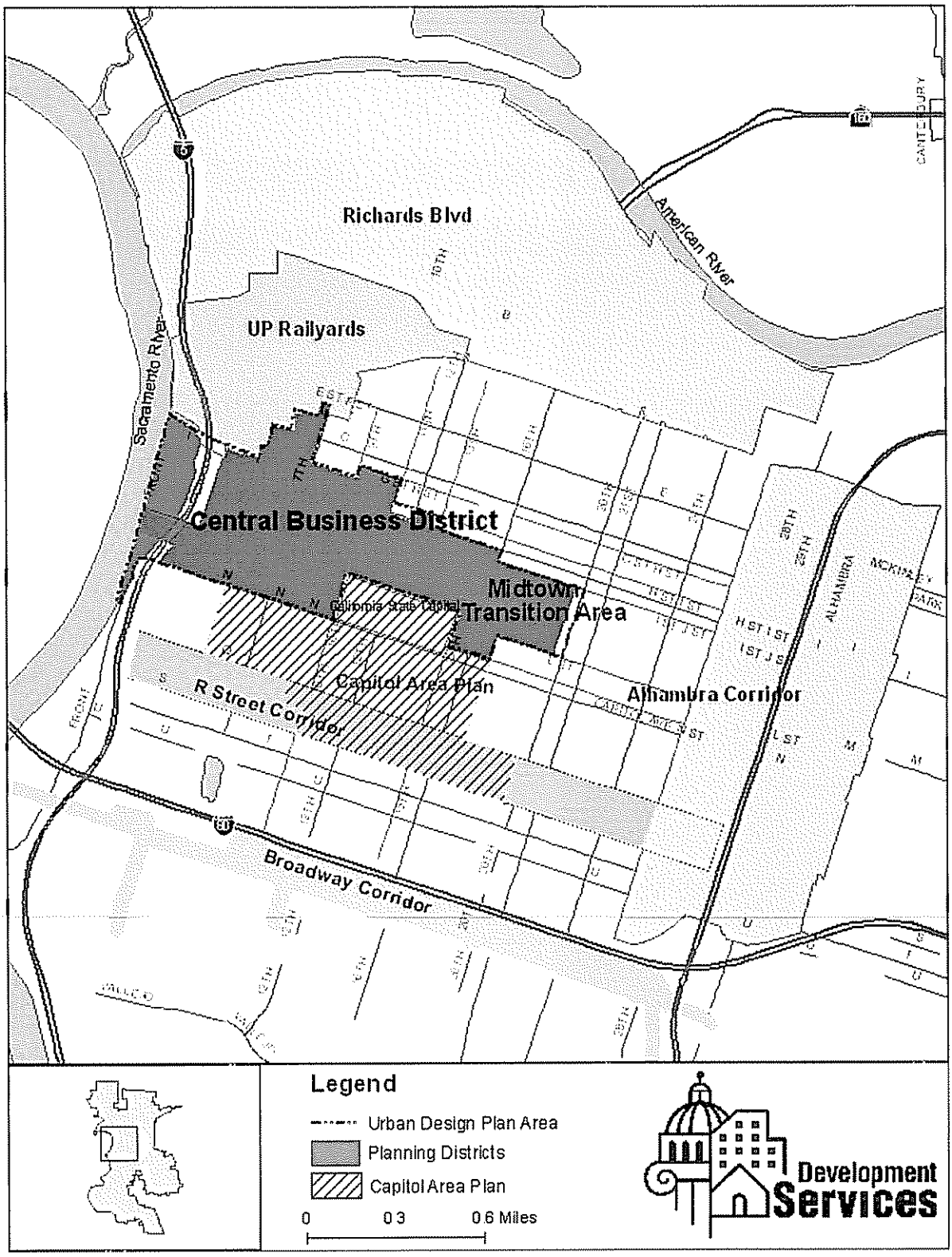
The Council recently approved a 90+ foot high residential building in the transition area. The Council was sympathetic to the argument that higher densities and higher building would be appropriate for this area if the City is to carry out its responsibilities under smart growth principles and the SACOG Blueprint.

As part of the consideration of height and intensity in this area, the Council wants a review and recommendations on appropriate building set back and step backs to protect existing and future tree canopies and root zones. The Council also wants recommendations on the appropriate species of trees for this intense urban area.

5. Schedule

It is desired that this work be completed within six months of having a signed contract.

ATTACHMENT 2 -- CBD Urban Design Plan Area



RESOLUTION NO. 2005 - XXXX

Adopted by the Sacramento City Council

November 8, 2005

ACCELERATED PROGRAM TO UPDATE THE URBAN DESIGN PLAN FOR THE CENTRAL BUSINESS DISTRICT (CBD) AND TO REVIEW HEIGHT AND SET / STEP BACK ISSUES IN THE TRANSITION AREA BETWEEN THE CBD AND MIDTOWN (M05-084)

BACKGROUND

A. The existing Urban Design Plan for the Central Business District does not address high rise residential towers.

B. The City does not have a comprehensive strategy for encouraging the development of high-rise residential neighborhoods with all of the appropriate facilities, services and amenities.

C. Because of current and future applications, the City Council wants to accelerate the development of an updated Urban Design Plan for the CBD and an accelerated analysis of future growth in the Midtown transition area.

D. Staff and stakeholders have presented a proposed scope of work for this accelerated work effort.

BASED ON THE FACTS SET FORTH IN THE BACKGROUND, THE CITY COUNCIL RESOLVES AS FOLLOWS:

Section 1. Approves the scope of work and process for preparation of an update to the Urban Design Plan including a Residential High Rise Strategy that reviews height and set / step back issues in the CBD and Midtown transition area.

Section 2. Directs the City Manager to negotiate a professional services agreement with either a professional consultant with urban design expertise or an entity composed of urban design experts (for example the Urban Land Institute or the American Institute of Architects) and return to Council for agreement approval.