



## PLANNING COMMISSION STAFF REPORT

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MEETING DATE: March 4, 2008

TO: Town of Truckee Planning Commission

FROM: Denyelle Nishimori, Assistant Planner

PROJECT: 2008 Development Code Update – Design Review

Agenda No.: \_\_\_\_\_

Approved By: \_\_\_\_\_

John McLaughlin,  
Community Development Director

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**RECOMMENDATION** That the Planning Commission review the current informal design review process and provide comments to staff on possible amendments to the Development Code.

### **DISCUSSION/ANALYSIS**

#### ***Background***

Both the Planning Commission and the Town Council have stated that quality architecture and site design are important to maintaining Truckee's small mountain town character. For most projects that require discretionary review, the applicant must submit a letter of justification that explains how the project is consistent the Development Code design guidelines, achieves the overall design objectives of the design guidelines, and would not impair the design and architectural integrity and character of the surrounding neighborhood. However, often the letter of justification and the project design would fall short of the community's expectations. In 2003, staff began using local architects as part of an informal design review process to be able to provide additional feedback to applicants on their proposed project. The architects' role was to review plans and provide off-the-cuff comments on site design and building architecture to staff. Often when these off-the-cuff comments were shared with a development team, the project architect was able to make design adjustments that led to a higher quality project. If the project architect could explain why maybe some of the suggestions were not possible, staff would provide a summary of this background information for the review body in the staff report. This process evolved out of a desire to utilize the expertise of local architects to help project architects—who are often not from Truckee or familiar with "Truckee-funkitecture"—meet the Town's high design standards as expected by the Commission, Council and community.

In 2005, staff held a luncheon for the participating local architects to discuss how the informal design review process had been working to date (see Attachment #1). All of the architects present agreed that the process was useful, but that it could use some refinement. Key issues

raised included:

- The review process should be kept informal.
- Architect comments should be included in the staff report with a history of the design evolution.
- Architects should be notified of the project outcome (i.e.-did the comments make a difference in the project's quality).

Since meeting in 2005, staff has used the informal architectural review process outlined in Attachment #1 to provide feedback to applicants early in the land use permit review process as well as to formulate recommendations to the designated review body.

Although the informal architectural review process has been beneficial in helping applicants understand the Town's design expectations, there are some challenges with this process. The most notable issue is that the architects do not always make comments that can be directly tied to the Development Code design guidelines or other established policies or standards. This is primarily due to the fact that the comments made are off-the-cuff and that the discussion occurs as a roundtable discussion with free flowing comments. In addition, because the architects are tasked with focusing on design, they are not necessarily looking at the entire project (i.e.-areas of conflicting policy, General Plan consistency, Development Code deviations, etc.). Some architects have strong opinions about certain topics (such as snow shed, modern design, green building, etc.) that can lead to varying or conflicting opinions, lack of consensus, or significantly varying direction.

### **STAFF SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATION**

It is staff's opinion that there are many benefits to keeping the current informal design review process informal. First, the applicant has an opportunity to interact with staff and local architects on a non-confrontational level. There is the ability to interact and ask questions/"design on the fly" that would not be possible if the process were formal. Second, there is an opportunity to enhance the existing design guidelines to make them clearer or to develop additional standards that would make the community's design expectations easier to understand. A common complaint staff currently hears from applicants is that the design guidelines are treated as standards, and that the community's expectation are not clear in the Development Code. Last, the process remains flexible and can be easily adapted. In keeping the design review process informal, staff believes that there is the opportunity to implement immediate change as necessary. A few thoughts along this line would be to hold another luncheon and solicit feedback from the participating architects, conduct a mandatory training, or require minimum levels of participation and Town expectations.

Staff is not in support of a more formal design review process for the following additional reasons:

- The current informal design review process is treated more like peer-review and is accepted by applicants.
- A formal review process could consume significant staff resources that might be better spent on other Town programs such as a Historic Preservation Grant/Award program, sign inventory and amortization, Downtown River Revitalization Strategy

- implementation, etc.
- There is the potential for less off-the-cuff discussion and more constrained opinions. Staff believes that the ability to have open discussions between staff, the applicant, and the applicant at a meeting is invaluable.
  - There could additional processing time or costs to the applicant.

**PUBLIC COMMUNICATIONS:** Notice of this Planning Commission agenda item was sent to all persons included in the Development Code Update e-mail notification list.

**ATTACHMENTS**

Attachment 1 – July 26, 2005 Staff Memo