

## AGENDA # 1

City of Madison, Wisconsin

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REPORT OF: URBAN DESIGN COMMISSION

**PRESENTED:** January 14, 2015

TITLE: Discussion of Urban Design Issues with  
Mayor Paul R. Soglin (36750)

**REFERRED:**

**REREFERRED:**

**REPORTED BACK:**

AUTHOR: Alan J. Martin, Secretary

**ADOPTED:**

**POF:**

DATED: January 14, 2015

**ID NUMBER:**

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Members present were: Richard Wagner, Chair; John Harrington, Dawn O'Kroley, Melissa Huggins, Richard Slayton and Cliff Goodhart.

### **SUMMARY:**

At its meeting of January 14, 2015, the Urban Design Commission **DISCUSSED** the role of the Urban Design Commission with regard to their recommendations on design and the general feeling that the weight of their deliberations are not always carried through the process. The Mayor began the discussion by listing the involved parties:

1. The Urban Design Commission
2. The Plan Commission
3. The Alder
4. The neighborhood
5. City staff

How do the Urban Design Commission's recommendations get conveyed to others? Is the UDC position on a recommendation being faithfully presented to the Plan Commission by a staff member who may not agree with it? The Chair responded that this was accurate and without dwelling on one project, it illuminates the issue with the project at 330 East Wilson Street, because the Commission felt they had worked long and hard, heard the staff views on building materials, and when it was sent back from the Plan Commission they revisited it and determined that their initial recommendation was still a valid one. One of the members expressed surprised, he didn't know that the metal would meet the standards, that only the staff recommendation for brick would meet the standards, so something is not getting conveyed quite right. The Mayor stated that 3 or 4 years ago, there was a question whether or not the UDC was following the ordinances or inserting their personal opinions; it raises a question about the Plan Commission members, which is are they ignoring the ordinances which require them to respect and honor the UDC recommendations, or are they in fact substituting their own judgment? We may have that problem, and the first problem conspiring in a way to really minimize the role of the Urban Design Commission.

The Chair noted that generally the UDC is the first stop for the public meeting process, and people come with all the issues associated with the project, and they are gently encouraged to take those issues up with the Plan

Commission, respecting their jurisdiction; they don't feel the same mutuality coming back. He recognizes that all Commission members bring a certain personal judgment to the process, but by City ordinance the UDC is particularly charged with weighing those against standards but if there is a place for subjectivity the ordinance creates this place for it more than the Plan Commission or other places. We have all these professional judgments coming to the table because they are designated that way, and to have it cavalierly overthrown after all that hard work, is the ordinance wrong in thinking this is the place for making those judgments in a public body? In response the Mayor inquired about a structured meeting between the Landmarks Commission, Urban Design Commission and Plan Commission with a very specific agenda to understand roles. The purpose is not to rehash past disagreements but to use them as a sign post for further discussion. Simultaneous to that he suggested bringing together all the various staff members for those respective commission to have a discussion about their individual commissions and their roles, and what the staff person's obligation should be in presenting the views of the commissions to the Alders. He would not invite developers and neighborhood groups to participate in the discussion, but would instead invite them to listen, process it and then give feedback to him, various directors and the various commission members. The Chair stated that would be a good first step. Presumably all the bodies are dealing with development on a project-by-project basis, and trying to figure out how the projects fit into the City's development strategy is something that is not on any of the tables when considering projects. There ought to be something of a coherence among the Commissions and what staff is presenting in terms of that understanding of the City's development strategy. That could be useful information at that kind of a joint meeting. When the Mayor looks around at other states and look at buildings that are more than 80-100 years old, he is tremendously impressed by what they have that Madison does not. The question he has every time a project is approved is "one hundred years from now, what is the thought going to be?" Are we approving something that is going to be torn down in 60-80 years? Or is this something that folks will be reluctant to part with in 100 years? He further stated that he doesn't think it is wrong to delay a project a month or two if the process makes the project better.

Huggins noted that things have shifted at the staff level and that is where we're also running into some bumps. We have an incredibly talented staff who do wonderful work. In this particular instance it maybe was a lack of communication to the Plan Commission, but also as staff gives recommendations to developers about design, they should be thinking about what they think Urban Design Commission wants to see, not necessarily what they would like to see because that truly is personal opinion. This is the decision making body, the kinds of things we've been asking to see from developers, those things are stripped by staff. In regards to the role between Urban Design Commission and Plan Commission is also true in the segment between the initial developer contact and Urban Design Commission. Developers come and they have projects in process, and sometimes dialogue with Urban Design Commission helps improve those projects, sometimes discussions with staff improve those projects, but this is the public table where that occurs, which is an important part for the neighbors and other public members to have access to that information. The Mayor would welcome any comments from the public or developers on these ideas.

### **ACTION:**

Since this was a **DISCUSSION** no formal action was taken by the Commission.