



## Land Use White Paper

At Great City, we believe that the time has come for a fundamental shift in our land use and planning process. To this end, Great City has gathered a group of business leaders, environmentalists, public servants, and neighborhood leaders to outline today's land use and planning challenges, offer a vision for reform, and recommend positive actions the new Mayor and City Council could take to meet the needs of their constituencies while creating a better path forward for Seattle. Our intention with this statement is to complement efforts that are gaining significant momentum around the region such as the Cascade Agenda and Quality Growth Alliance.

At the core of this document lies the conviction that Seattle must create enduring and flexible land-use policies that address the pressing concerns of our time: the economy, the environment and social equity. A streamlined and clearer regulatory environment will not only encourage responsible development; it will also lower barriers and red tape so communities find it easier to engage in the development of their own neighborhoods. We have used the following five themes to guide proposed implementation strategies:

- *Articulate a clear and long-term vision for growth*
- *Elevate our planning process*
- *Invigorate neighborhood planning*
- *Build bridges between departments and disciplines*
- *Create a flexible and responsive planning environment*

## **Goals**

### *Articulate a clear and long-term vision for growth*

Past processes have produced transaction zoning where community efforts are focused on one-time legislation with little understanding of the greater results to be achieved. This short-term effort on long-term issues generally produces little improvement if not more problems. The new Mayor and City Council must start by creating a compelling vision for how Seattle will grow in the coming years. This vision should build upon the Comprehensive Plan's successful Urban Centers / Urban Villages strategy, while allowing for innovation and localized planning.

### *Elevate our planning process*

For the past eight years, the Department of Planning and Development (DPD) has focused primarily on short term planning – i.e., development and construction – without the resources or the political will to engage in true long-range planning. The new Mayor and Council must foster a working climate where DPD has the tools and resources to support informed decision-making that results in policies that address our long-term, structural challenges rather than short-term fixes. In addition, we believe the Planning Commission should be elevated to a more significant role in making recommendations on planning issues of citywide importance.

### *Invigorate neighborhood planning*

It's been stated that the new Mayor and Council will need to decide between a centralized neighborhood planning system or a decentralized one. Although Seattle has experienced both extremes over the past twenty years, today's context is fundamentally different. The opportunity to organize locally, to make information accessible and to encourage a citywide understanding of growth goals is finally here. Ultimately, any city wide planning vision will still come down to the neighborhood scale on implementation. Empowered and informed grassroots efforts can help positively define how growth takes shape at the neighborhood level while also meeting the City's growth goals.

### *Build bridges between departments and disciplines*

Collaboration is an essential element in meeting our community challenges and department priorities need to be aligned strategically along common goals. The City can break through silos within the bureaucracy by bringing

applicable departments and disciplines together to address specific projects. The city's Bell Street Boulevard project is an example of how department collaboration has worked well to bring together key city staff to solve specific problems in an integrated and innovative way.

*Create a flexible and responsive regulatory environment*

We have a history of making rules that prevent us from creating the very types of communities that would make our city more livable, affordable and sustainable. Our zoning system makes it difficult to design and negotiate solutions within our neighborhoods while also creating barriers for community engagement. We need to redefine the core functions needed in a zoning code so they will more fully address specific context, thoughtful urban design, and sustainability in a manner that creates a durable city.

**Action Plan**

We believe that the following short-term actions, if taken, will set the city on the path towards achieving these goals.

*Vision*

- Assign the Planning Commission to assemble a team of diverse leaders in the fields of progressive planning and design along with stakeholders from across the city, to develop a vision for growth in Seattle. This vision should strive to meet urban growth targets in the context of our Urban Centers, Villages and emerging neighborhood opportunities. Since we are continually challenged to do more with less, the leveraging of infrastructure and improvements is essential to encourage more housing and jobs. New PSRC regional growth forecasts present us with an ideal opportunity to shape a bold vision that shows how growth can be managed in a flexible and positive environment in Seattle.

*Planning Culture*

- Expand the role of the Planning Commission and modify conflict-of-interest rules so as to make full use of volunteer members' expertise and perspectives. In connection with the vision process described above, give the commission a six-month timetable and the authority to:

- Develop the long-range planning work program
- Establish a process for transparent discussion and agreement for major planning efforts
- Look to sources such as “PlaNYC” for implementation strategies that will guide responsive city planning in 24-month timeframes.
- Empower DPD’s long-range planning functions to be more focused on a collaborative approach to community development. Staff should be charged with being collaborative and accountable through a ‘hands-on’ working relationship with the Planning Commission. Independent recommendations generated by staff, commissions and neighborhoods, need to see the light of day and not be stifled by centralized efforts to control community planning processes.
- Assign coordinators to guide key neighborhood planning and community development initiatives. Seattle currently has a Center City Coordinator who has been successful at this and the role should be expanded to serve all geographic areas.
- We urge the new Mayor and Council to create an open neighborhood planning system, one in which the city engages communities to develop neighborhood visions. Such visions need to become a responsible part of sustainable growth citywide. Choices should be made based on clear and transparent information that outlines specific baseline objectives. The city should use the allocation of capital dollars, incentives and fees to support parts of the city that are absorbing new growth and ensure that we follow through on commitments to provide essential infrastructure and community improvements.

### *Implementation*

- The City needs to consolidate land-use information resources on the built environment, neighborhoods, environmental issues, demographics and other key data in a transparent and accessible system that supports high level policy, neighborhood planning and grassroots efforts alike. We cannot effectively make choices in a complex, fast changing world if we don’t begin to use contemporary tools to build a base of transparent and interactive information.
- Online tools that will allow more transparency for citizens and businesses while also encouraging feedback and correction. We are

- supportive of the current proposal for a Public Engagement Portal (My.Seattle.Gov) and encourage the city to think even more broadly about how land use tools, such as the above referenced land use data base, can be incorporated.
- Undertake an audit of our existing zoning to identify areas where we can do more to encourage, rather than impede, sustainable land use patterns. While Seattle zoning is far more up-to-date than you'll find in many cities, and there are innovative elements of our zoning, the elements worth saving and expanding should be considered building blocks, not the finish line.
  - The Growth Management Act provides a useful tool for articulating the type of growth that meets our regional growth goals. The Planned Action, in which environmental analysis is performed for a designated area (such as a Station Area), can shorten the environmental review process at the project stage. It is a powerful strategy for helping our light rail and other mass transit stations develop in a collaborative, integrated, and innovative fashion. We call on the Mayor and Council to work with neighborhoods, visionaries, and the business community to identify pilot projects in our transit-oriented communities where a Planned Action can be implemented and used as a model.
  - In addition to identifying pilot projects, the city should develop sustainable tools to finance infrastructure that will serve growth. Examples would include prioritizing Capital Improvement Projects in Urban Growth areas, implementing transit cost incentives, encouraging Local Improvement Districts (LID), Local Revenue Financing, Innovation Partnership Zones, and the Local Infrastructure Financing Tool (LIFT).
  - To stimulate cooperation and drive results, DPD and City Council should develop a program that would grant greater incentives for taking more risk while working to meet community, city, and regional goals. These incentives could then be relaxed within a reasonable time frame as areas become mature growth centers.
  - We encourage the evaluation of the recently enacted (2008) Incentive Zoning legislation. The effectiveness of this program is questionable and limited, whereas a "menu" approach that would include additional public benefits such as regional Transfer of Development Rights and local infrastructure funding could tailor incentives to different parts of the city, based on development conditions. In addition, market

conditions vary among neighborhoods, and a “one size fits all” approach simply doesn’t match the realities of growth in our diverse city.

Seattle is one of the most vibrant, livable, and progressive cities in the United States. Our approach to land use and planning should reflect that. If the new Mayor and City Council make a serious effort to tap into the passion and intelligence of our citizenry and create a bold vision with a clear, coherent action plan for implementing it, we could advance Seattle even further as an example for other cities and inherit a vibrant connected city for future generations.