



CITY OF DURHAM | DURHAM COUNTY
NORTH CAROLINA



Date: October 20, 2014

To: Thomas J. Bonfield, City Manager
Through: Keith Chadwell, Deputy City Manager
From: Steven L. Medlin, AICP, Planning Director
Subject: Downtown Open Space Plan

Summary. The Planning Department has completed a draft of the Downtown Open Space Plan which includes goals and objectives, existing conditions, policy and Unified Development Ordinance (UDO) change recommendations, locations of open spaces, illustrative open space concepts, and implementation strategies. The Planning Department would like to present the project to the City Council for its consideration.

Recommendation. Staff recommends that the City Council conduct a public hearing and receive public comments on the Downtown Open Space Plan, and adopt the Downtown Open Space Plan. The Planning Commission unanimously recommended adoption on April 11, 2014.

Background. The Downtown Open Space Plan was begun in 2011 as a companion project to the creation of the Downtown Design District. The main purpose of the Plan was to evaluate downtown open space needs holistically, and develop downtown-specific open space recommendations. Five public workshops and meetings were held on the Downtown Open Space Plan, the last in February 2014, to garner input on the draft document. Staff has surveyed the public attitudes on open space at the beginning of the project and after the draft document was released to the public. Staff has presented the Plan and received positive feedback and support from various City and County advisory boards and commissions including the Durham Board of County Commissioners, Planning Commission, the Joint City-County Planning Committee, the Durham Open Space and Trails Commission, the Appearance Commission, the Environmental Affairs Board, and Historic Preservation Commission. In addition, the Plan has also been presented to the board of Downtown Durham Incorporated, the Durham Appearance Advocacy Group, the Durham Arts Council, and the Duke University and North Carolina Central University architecture offices.

Issues. Two big picture issues have arisen in the course of the Plan's development. First, as with any successful downtown, there are always competing interests vying for available land and what its highest and best use may be. Most open spaces identified in the Plan are on existing public land. The tension between whether that public land should be open space, parking, or future development has been a recurring theme throughout the planning process. Planning staff has worked with other City Departments to understand the competing parking needs and development vision, and propose open space locations that balance all those competing goals. In addition, the Plan is an analysis and set of recommendations based on the information available at the time of its development. As downtown continues to evolve it is expected that the vision captured in the Plan will also evolve as conditions and opportunities in downtown change over time.

The second issue, which arose in early stages of the Plan's development, is a desire that the Downtown Open Space Plan expand to become a comprehensive downtown environmental mitigation and green roof plan. While the Plan takes these environmental concerns into consideration, and includes some specific recommendations related to these issues, the focus of the Plan is to provide for publicly accessible open space. The environmental benefits associated with downtown open space are recognized but they are not the main purpose of the Plan.

Notification. Staff certifies that newspaper advertisements and email notice to neighborhood organizations within 1,000 feet of the district have been carried out consistent with the requirements for public notification in Section 3.2.5 of the UDO.

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Attachments:

Attachment 1, Downtown Open Space Plan Draft, October 2014

Attachment 2, Planning Commission Comments from April 8, 2014