



# CITY OF PORTLAND, OREGON BUREAU OF PLANNING

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## Memorandum

**Date:** May 3, 2001  
**To:** Mayor Katz and Members of the Portland City Council  
**From:** Gil Kelley, Director  
**Re:** **Midtown Blocks Planning Study:**  
***Report of the Advisory Council of Experts***

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Attached is the *Report of the Advisory Council of Experts* (ACE) on the future of the Mid-town Blocks, prepared by Donald J. Stastny of StastnyBrun Architects, Inc., convener. The report chronicles the analysis and recommendations that were developed by this group of design and development experts from around the country during their weeklong workshop of February 5 through 9, 2001 in Portland.

As you will recall the ACE workshop provided the Council and the community with a dynamic opportunity to raise and ponder some fundamental questions about the future of downtown. Initiated as a discussion about the design and nature of open space and development in the narrow blocks between Park and North, what emerged from that week of discussions was a clear sense of opportunity to make these blocks and those immediately surrounding them a catalyst for:

- Reinvigorating the retail core of downtown; this can be done by expanding the retail base, by reinforcing and enhancing the traditional arrangement of regional, community and neighborhood retail loci within the district and by turning a gesture toward the emerging retail in the nearby Pearl District (Brewery Blocks);
- Accelerating the development of the newly-dubbed "West End" of Downtown as a very urban neighborhood arcing from the Pearl District to the residential concentration west of the South Park Blocks;
- Providing a "European" model of urban plazas and street treatments, which would link the North and South Park Blocks and reinforce east-west connections between the retail core and the West End as well, leaving some of the narrow blocks built upon and yet preserving the ability over the very long term of opening these too, if and when future densities support doing so.

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It became clear during the week's activities that the Midtown area stands at a literal crossroads: the crossing of the light rail and streetcar lines, the point of linkage between the North and South Park Blocks and the point of overlap between the Downtown core and the emerging West End. What also became clear is that the area stands at a crossroads in time. What steps the City and private entities take in this vicinity over the next few years could set the stage for the next Portland, the Portland of fifty to one hundred years from now as it transitions from a young city into an established one. The investment Portland has made in careful planning and in transportation infrastructure can now leverage the creation of a unique district here that can in turn inform the evolution of the entire Central City. By focusing effort here in the near term the potential exists to define the Central City as a permanent, vital, highly populated mixed use center, the undisputed heart of its region and one of North America's truly great places. This will require a deliberate and assertive strategy to actually achieve the open space, housing density and retail expansion in the right places in Midtown.

To frame, support and carry through on the activities of the ACE I convened, at the request of the Mayor, an inter-bureau staff team that included representatives of Planning, PDC, Parks, OPDR (Design Review) and Transportation. This group provided information and feedback to the ACE and has continued to meet in the weeks since to formulate next steps for carrying forward the energy and direction created by the February event. We would like to continue our work and formalize our arrangement in order that the City continues to act in a deliberate and coordinated fashion with respect to the array of opportunities pointed out by the ACE. We also anticipate an interest on the part of both the Planning and Development Commissions to take on an increased role in preparing a development and funding strategy for carrying out these recommendations. We would like to facilitate this outcome, particularly as a joint effort between the Commissions. The need for coordinated City activity and indeed for leadership is further indicated by the high level of interest expressed by private entities and citizens in seeing these opportunities through to realization. There is great advantage to be had in partnering with private and non-profit entities to implement these aspirations and we recommend that this be an integral part of strategy development.

In order for these aims to be met we recommend that the Council adopt the attached resolution (presently in draft form) that calls for this level of coordination and partnership. The resolution also articulates the key objectives we feel are needed to guide and focus the outcomes. These are:

- **Reestablish the downtown retail core as the region's retail hub.** As presented by the ACE, the Portland region is substantially underserved with retail when compared with any other major metropolitan area in the country. New regional-serving retail will locate in the region in the near to medium term but may not look to Downtown Portland as the preferred location, instead preferring suburban locations such as Washington Square or Wilsonville. Attracting (and retaining) national region-serving retailers (major department stores) will benefit other

specialty region-serving retailers (many of which are locally owned) as well as the attraction of other community and neighborhood-serving retailers. Reestablishing Downtown Portland as the region's retail hub also makes use of the region's transit investments and reinforces the Central City's vitality and identity. Midtown is particularly well suited to a mix of community-serving and specialty regional-serving retail. The degree to which the Portland region is underserved by retail should be more carefully studied and an aggressive retail strategy for Downtown Portland prepared.

- **Develop the West End as a dense urban neighborhood that incorporates cultural, arts, and civic uses with parks and new, primarily market-rate residential/mixed use developments.** The Planning Commission has forwarded a set of recommendations to Council in the form of the West End Plan that aims to cement this vision. While it is important to protect the affordable housing that exists in the West End and to provide the opportunity for additional affordable units, it is critical to the success of the area to achieve a mix of incomes. A robust supply of market rate housing will support retail in around the midtown blocks, merge the residential development in the Pearl and South Park Blocks into a unique city neighborhood and give life to the urban open space that was the ostensible subject of the ACE's consultation. New housing should be built in a sophisticated, urbane manner, potentially mixing retail and service uses below with housing towers above. Public investment in infrastructure and partnering in development may be required to jump start the market-rate housing activity and provide permanent neighborhood amenities.
- **Acknowledge the Midtown Blocks proper, the narrow blocks between Park and Ninth Avenues (together with the street rights of way that surround them) as a unit and design the open space and streetscape improvements accordingly.** City staff should proceed with designs for Block 5 and O'Bryant Square. These designs should include schematic treatment for the option of including Block 4 as part of a larger urban square, a safe and appealing pedestrian crossing at Burnside and a cohesive streetscape approach throughout. The designs should provide for east-west orientation, particularly at Yamhill and Morrison to reinforce the crossroads notion as well as the importance of a civic presence with the Library and Pioneer Courthouse nearby. Finally, the designs should allow the potential (over the long, long term) for additional blocks within the chain to be opened if future density and activity in the adjacent blocks support this. In the meantime, the urban plazas should be designed with the notion of active uses fronting them on all sides.
- **Identify and pursue catalyst public/private projects in the Midtown Blocks, which will not only spark new development but also further the other objectives in this Resolution.** The City should partner with private entities to create catalyst projects. These must be done within a cohesive development strategy to be prepared and recommended by the Planning and Development

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Commissions. New projects should aid the mutual objectives, activate the public open spaces, reinforce the architectural uniqueness of Midtown, consolidate underground parking where feasible and in some cases incorporate civic and cultural uses in new development.

- **Over time, seek control of the land and buildings in the narrow blocks for the public trust even where buildings are to remain.** Ultimately, public control of all the land and buildings within the narrow blocks between the North and South Park Blocks is in the best public interest. This is because it allows the public to: limit new development on them, allow options in the future for additional open space if warranted, activate the buildings which remain with uses and designs that compliment and invigorate the special character of the district and, preferably, to subsidize costs for arts, cultural and unique tenants. The City could partner with other entities to improve, manage and maintain buildings to remain.
- **Bring together business and property owners, the Park Blocks Foundation, and civic and arts organizations to form partnerships with the City** for creating and programming open space, activating the buildings and blocks around the public spaces and generally fulfilling the objectives of this Resolution.
- **Create sufficient public funds for strategic investments that will highly leverage other investments in the district.** The City should explore a variety of means, including the creation of a new urban renewal district that could conceivably include not only Midtown and the West End, but also parts of Downtown and Goose Hollow. The City should study other implementation tools and options as well.

Given these objectives, I recommend carrying forward the work of this group and engaging the Planning and Development Commissions, the Bureau Directors Planning Coordination Team, together with stakeholders from the community, in preparing a more detailed development strategy to carry out these objectives. I anticipate this strategy could be prepared within a few months time and submitted to Council by year's end. In the meantime, design work on the public spaces will proceed, as will discussions with stakeholders about catalyst projects, as well as evaluation of retail attraction efforts. These will be collaborative efforts between the City bureaus.

I am forwarding this set of recommendations to the Planning, Development, Design, and Historic Landmarks Commissions. Their comments as well as those received from the public will be forwarded to you for consideration at the May 31 meeting.

Please contact me (503-823-7701) or Mark Raggett (503-823-6030) or Amy Schwartz (503-823-6143) at the Bureau of Planning if you have any questions.

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Attachments:        *Draft Resolution on Midtown Planning and Development*  
                          *Report of the Advisory Council of Experts*

cc:    Baruti Arthuree, Acting Director, PDC  
       Don Mazziotti, Incoming Director, PDC  
       Charles Jordan, Director, Portland Parks and Recreation  
       Vic Rhodes, Director of Transportation  
       Margaret Mahoney, Director, OPDR

## **Draft Resolution No.**

Accept the *Report of the Advisory Council of Experts*, as shown in Exhibit A, providing conceptual information for the future design and redevelopment of the Midtown Blocks and their vicinity. Adopt the objectives in this Resolution to provide guidance for the city's future planning and development work in the Midtown area. (Resolution)

The City of Portland resolves:

WHEREAS, the future of the Midtown Blocks has been uncertain. Redevelopment proposals produced by both the public and private sectors have envisioned different characters for these blocks. Property owners, business owners, and stakeholder groups are looking to the city to develop policies that specifically address the future of these blocks;

WHEREAS, in the fall of 2000, the Mayor asked the Planning Director to convene an inter-bureau team to analyze urban design concepts and development opportunities in the Midtown Blocks. This team produced background information to understand the policy, development, transportation, and open space histories of the area, and has continued to meet to formulate the next steps in the process;

WHEREAS, an Advisory Council of Experts (ACE) was convened by the Bureau of Planning in cooperation with the Portland Development Commission, Portland Parks and Recreation, the Portland Office of Transportation, and the Office of Planning and Development Review, and with the assistance of consultant Donald J. Stastny FAIA FAICP of StastnyBrun Architects, Inc. to explore ways in which this unique district might develop over time. The assembled ACE was comprised of nationally-recognized professionals with experience in a wide range of land-use issues. The ACE was convened for a one-week intensive workshop in February, 2001, that analyzed the role of the Midtown Blocks and their vicinity and explored a series of redevelopment and design strategies, with participation from residents, businesses, property owners, civic organizations and others;

WHEREAS, it is in the public interest that the recommendations contained in the *Report of the Advisory Council of Experts* be accepted as a starting place to direct and manage change in the Midtown area over time. The recommended urban design concepts outlined in the report will serve as the basis for future analysis, decision-making, and public deliberation; and

WHEREAS, it is the intent of the city to continue deliberate and coordinated planning and development work in the Midtown area. The development of a detailed, aggressive development strategy for this area will build on the history of careful planning and transportation infrastructure investments and ensure new, active open spaces, residential

densities, civic and cultural functions, and retail expansions in the appropriate locations in the Midtown area.

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED by the Council of the City of Portland, a municipal corporation of the State of Oregon, that the City Council accept the *Report of the Advisory Council of Experts*, as shown in Exhibit A, for the Midtown Blocks and vicinity;

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the *Report of the Advisory Council of Experts* is accepted by City Council as a starting place for future discussions, projects, and programs that will help implement the direction of the report;

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the City Council adopts the following objectives for further planning and development work in the Midtown area, as articulated in the memorandum of May 3, 2001 from the City's Planning Director:

1. Reestablish the downtown retail core as the region's retail hub.
2. Develop the West End as a dense urban neighborhood that incorporates cultural, arts, and civic uses with parks and new, primarily market-rate, residential/mixed-use developments.
3. Acknowledge the Midtown Blocks proper, the narrow blocks between Park and Ninth Avenues (together with the street rights of way that surround them) as a unit and design the open space and streetscape improvements accordingly.
4. Identify and pursue catalyst public/private projects in the Midtown Blocks, which will not only spark new development but also further the other objectives in this Resolution.
5. Over time, seek control of the land and buildings in the narrow blocks for the public trust even where buildings are to remain.
6. Bring together business and property owners, the Park Blocks Foundation, and civic and arts organizations to form partnerships with the City.
7. Create sufficient public funds for strategic investments that will highly leverage other investments in the district.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the City Council directs the Planning Director to continue to convene the inter-bureau team including the Bureau of Planning, the Portland Development Commission, Portland Parks and Recreation, the Portland Office of Transportation, and the Office of Planning and Development Review, to produce a development strategy to implement the objectives listed above;

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the City Council directs the Planning Director and the inter-bureau team to engage the Planning and Development Commissions, the Bureau Director Coordination Team, and community stakeholders in this effort; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the City Council directs the inter-bureau team, through the Planning Director, to return to City Council within 180 days with a specific development strategy to implement these objectives.

Adopted by the Council,

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Mayor Vera Katz  
Gil Kelley  
February 21, 2001

GARY BLACKMER  
Auditor of the City of Portland

By

Deputy