CITY OF CARSON

PLANNING COMMISSION STAFF REPORT

NEW BUSINESS DISCUSSION:	March 10, 2011
SUBJECT:	Workshop to discuss building colors and Site Plan and Design Review responsibilities
APPLICANT:	City of Carson
REQUEST:	Workshop to discuss guidelines related to the exterior colors of buildings and to discuss responsibilities for Site Plan and Design Review approval
PROPERTIES INVOLVED:	Citywide

COMMISSION ACTION

____ Concurred with staff

____ Did not concur with staff

____ Other

COMMISSIONERS' VOTE

AYE	NO		AYE	NO	
		Chairman Faletogo			**Gordon**
		Vice-Chair Park			**Saenz**
		Brimmer			**Schaefer**
		Diaz			**Verrett**
		Goolsby			

Item No. 12C

I. Introduction and Discussion

This item is a workshop to discuss guidelines related to exterior colors for new construction and repainting of the exterior of existing buildings. Currently, the Carson Municipal Code (CMC) does not provide adequate guidelines regarding color selection. It is staff's opinion that the CMC should provide guidelines for color selection so that architects and property owners may select colors that are not so bold that buildings stand out from the surrounding area. At the same time, the guidelines should provide flexibility so that architects and property owners can create a unique identity for buildings.

In addition, this item discusses the Site Plan and Design Review approval authority responsibilities. Currently, the CMC divides the approval authority between the Planning Officer and the Planning Commission based on the valuation of the improvements. If the improvements are $50,000 or less, the Planning Officer has the approval authority. For projects with a valuation more than $50,000, the Planning Commission has the authority. This staff report will provide some suggestions on alternative ways to divide responsibility.

After staff receives direction from the Planning Commission on these items, a code amendment may be drafted to reflect the Planning Commission's direction and will be brought back for a public hearing.

Building Colors

One of the issues that the Planning Commission has raised recently is how to address colors on both proposed projects and when property owners repaint their existing buildings. Section 9172.23.D.1.b. of CMC states that the approving authority has to make the following finding prior to approval of projects subject to Site Plan and Design Review:

> "Compatibility of architecture and design with existing and anticipated development in the vicinity, including the aspects of site planning, land coverage, landscaping, appearance and scale of structures and open spaces, and other features relative to a harmonious and attractive development of the area."

The colors of buildings fall into the architecture and design portion of the above finding. Therefore, the code already provides the Commission the authority to review and approve colors of new buildings. However, the difficult part is how to determine which colors are appropriate and which colors are not. Some communities have gone as far as having an approved color palette for all new development or rehabilitation of existing buildings. Applicants are required to select colors only from the approved color palette. However, like Carson, most communities do not have approved color palettes but they do provide input on colors.

Staff recommends guidelines that indicate inappropriate colors rather than outlining specific colors. This approach provides designers more freedom to be creative in producing unique and attractive designs and colors. For example, the following language could be added to the findings for approval of Site Plan and Design Review:

> "Bright colors should be avoided as the primary color on the buildings. Bright colors, preferably light shades of bright colors, should only be used for building trim as accent colors."

Staff believes this language would give staff and the Commission enough discretion to prevent color schemes that are incompatible with the surrounding areas.

The Commission's second concern with colors was the lack of review and approval authority for the Commission before property owners repaint their existing buildings. Most of the time, property owners repaint their buildings with appropriate colors. However, exceptions do exist such as the property on 22022 Main Street that stands out and does not fit into the surrounding area. Existing structures fall into two categories: those with approved Site Plan and Design Review and those without. Those with approved Site Plan and Design Review would have to comply with the original approved color palette. However, the older buildings that have not gone through the approval process and do not have approved colors may repaint the building any color they desire without input from the city. In some cases, this may be desired because the new paint would improve the look of the building. However, if an owner painted the building a color that is undesirable, the building would look out of character and inappropriate for the surrounding neighborhood.

The first step in giving the Commission more control over buildings with no approval is to identify the areas that the Commission would like to exercise control. For example, the Commission can direct staff to target repainting of commercial buildings on major thoroughfares with high visibility. Staff would then take a photo inventory of the buildings within the targeted area to establish a base year inventory. The next step would be to draft a code amendment to require all property owners to obtain approval from the city prior to repainting their building.

Through the adoption of the code amendment, all impacted property owners will be notified of the city's desire to review and approve the new color palette for repainting their building. Staff recommends that the Planning Officer be given authority to approve the new color schemes. If an applicant is unsatisfied, the decision of the Planning Officer should be appealed to the Commission. Staff believes this approach would reduce the approval time and expense; therefore, encouraging property owners to comply with this requirement when repainting buildings.

Site Plan and Design Review Approval Authority

Section 9172.23 of CMC, adopted in 1977 and amended in 1984, 1990, 1993 and 2003, sets forth the approval authority for proposed development projects. This

section grants the approval authority to the Planning Commission if the valuation of the improvement is $50,000.00 or more and to the Planning officer if less than $50,000. The intention of this section is to authorize the Planning Officer to review and approve smaller and less significant projects. Larger more significant projects are approved by the Planning Commission.

If adjusted for inflation the $50,000 limit would be equivalent to $140,000 in today's dollars. For the purposes of this discussion, improvements include new construction, any expansion, addition, alteration or repair to an existing structure, or other construction. The valuation of construction delineated by this section is established by the Building Official, using as a guide, the Marshall Valuation Service compiled by the Marshall and Swift Publication Company or otherwise known as building valuation.

This valuation is determined at the time construction plans are submitted to the building department which is several months after the planning application is submitted to the planning division for review and approval. When planning division receives applications, it needs to determine the value of improvements which is difficult without the benefit of having construction plans. Moreover, the project could go through some significant changes throughout the planning process. Therefore, staff would like to propose other options for the planning commission to consider instead of using valuation as the determining factor for the approval authority between the planning commission and the planning officer. The current code has different thresholds for residential and non-residential developments.

Detached Single Family Residential

Section 9121.1 of CMS allows approval of single family dwellings on 50-foot wide lots or greater to be approved over-the-counter by staff. However, single family dwellings proposed on lots less than 50 feet wide are subject to approval of Site Plan and Design Review. Section 9172.23 of the CMC further divides the approval responsibility to the Planning Commission if the valuation of the improvement is $50,000.00 or more and to the Planning Officer for projects with less than $50,000.

The code does not distinguish between single family projects that have one unit or several units. Therefore, if a project is for 20 units, each on 50-foot-wide lots, the City does not have the opportunity to review the architecture of the homes. Staff would grant ministerial approval for these homes over the counter. Staff recommends adopting a threshold that is based on number of units instead of the width of the lots. If this threshold is adopted, then the building valuation numbers become obsolete. Staff suggests that all single family projects with four (4) or less units to be approved by the Planning Officer and all single family projects with more than four (4) units be approved by the Planning Commission.

Non-Residential

Non-residential projects are approved using the same $50,000 threshold. If the valuation is $50,000 or more, a project is approved by the Planning Commission; if it is less than $50,000, it is approved by the Planning Officer. As an alternative, staff recommends the Planning Commission consider providing the Planning Officer the approval authority for the following improvements:

1. Modifications to the façade of a building without adding square footage or making significant modifications to the parking lot regardless of the cost of improvements;

2. Additions for 1,000 square feet or less that are consistent with the architecture of the existing building and do not substantially change the parking lot layout; and

3. Minor redesigns to a parking lot, including landscaping and screening.

Furthermore, staff recommends that the Planning Commission have the approval authority for the following improvements:

1. Entirely new buildings;

2. Additions with over 1,000 square feet; and

3. Major parking lot redesign.

The following provides support for the proposed changes:

1. The valuation regardless of the dollar amount is not always a good measure to determine approval authority since the building valuation is determined when construction drawings are submitted to the Building Division. This information is not available during the planning stage.

2. Projects could go through significant changes in the planning process that could impact their valuation.

3. A more streamlined process may encourage more property owners to upgrade and improve their properties since it saves time and money.

4. The Planning Commission would have complete approval authority for all new commercial construction, all major additions to existing buildings, and major modifications to parking lots.

5. The Planning Commission would have complete approval over projects for all single family development over 4 units.

II. Recommendation

That the Planning Commission:

- CONSIDER and DISCUSS the information provided for in this workshop; and
- DIRECT staff to draft code amendments for procedures for reviewing building colors and Site Plan and Design Review approval authority.

III. Exhibits

None.

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