MEMO

To: Lindy Chan, Principal Planner, City of Redwood City
From: Martha Miller, Director, Lisa Wise Consulting, Inc.
Date: August 19, 2019
Subject: Information Gathering Meeting Input Summary

Introduction

As part of the Citywide Single-Family Residential Design Guidelines effort, Lisa Wise Consulting, Inc. (LWC) participated in a series of discussions with a cross-section of people who are familiar with residential design in Redwood City or otherwise have knowledge of residential design issues and considerations. Scheduled discussions were held in the mornings of August 13th and August 14th and any interested party was invited to come to City Hall between 4:00 and 7:00 pm on August 13th and participate in a discussion with LWC. Over the two days, LWC had discussions with twelve individuals consisting of residents, architects, designers, real estate professionals, builders, and a neighborhood representative.

While participants were asked questions regarding their experience with residential single-family design, as well as overarching concerns and specific items to pay attention to as the project moves forward, specific topics of discussion varied as participants were given the opportunity to discuss issues of significance to them.

Common Topics

Several similar topics or areas of focus for the design guidelines emerged through the discussions. While participants may ultimately differ on precise actions to take to address the topics, there was general agreement regarding what are important considerations for the guidelines. These common topics include:

- Variety in design
- Height and roof form
- Design and materials
- Privacy
- Frontage/appearance from the street
- Parking and garages
- Landscape

In addition to general observations, other common subjects of discussion included process and administration of the guidelines, examples or best practices from other areas to consider, Redwood Shores, and Floor Area Ratio (FAR). A list of comments received, organized by topic, follows.
Participant Comments

General Observations

- Set guidelines. It doesn't matter what they are. The important thing is to have a level playing field.
- The design guidelines should offer design solutions. Such as ‘don’t locate a window across from a neighboring window. If that is unavoidable, use opaque glass to help with privacy.’
- Guidelines are helpful for staff and they are helpful to neighbors. They provide an understanding or a basis as to understand why something is being approved.
- Design guidelines will give tools to the planners for them to evaluate projects. It empowers staff.
- Avoid being too prescriptive. One example is taking upper story setbacks too far as to force a ‘wedding cake design’ which looks bad and reduces livable space. Pay attention to good ideas gone bad.
- Guidelines should address scale. In some examples, the issue isn't the design or the architecture itself, it's that it doesn't fit with the neighborhood scale.
- How to achieve scale: articulate levels with design elements, articulate floor heights, use roof overhangs as a way to stop the eye as it goes up.
- It is the responsibility of the designer to look at the refinements that great architects use and apply those to the buildings they design.
- Families are changing, extended families are moving in. That is one factor in people wanting bigger homes.
- Public process is important to the success of this exercise. Engage people in the neighborhood as well as people in the industry. That will help in creating workable guidelines that are effective.
- Keep track of input that is given throughout the process. Then people can see how their input is incorporated and know that they have been heard and considered.
- Hillside lots are difficult because no matter what, private views come into play and the City can't regulate that.
- Don't want a fake design. Fake always looks horrible.
- Masses of building need to be broken up. No two-story boxes.
- Bulkiness is the issue. You can design a big house and it doesn't look like a big house.
- Character is interesting. Especially when mixing old with new. Neighborhoods evolve and sometimes negative reactions are based in a reaction to change, not necessarily design.
- Just because one house is going to be a certain design, doesn't mean the whole neighborhood will become that design. In proportion to the amount of housing, there is not that much new. It's a small percentage. It needs to be put into perspective.
- There are ebbs and flows of a community.
- Generally, we are going from one-story to two-story neighborhoods. This change in and of itself brings out concern. But it's not just about greed, the way we live is changing.
- It's typically not developers and builders that are pushing bad design. It's homeowners trying to do additions.
- Most of the homes in Redwood City were built from the 40s to 70s. They are single story, ranch style. This is changing.
• Most of the second stories that I observe don’t occupy the full floor plate. Most are partial. The ones that do occupy the full first floor plate really stand out. Some are tasteful, some are not that great.

• It’s hard to do a second story addition on an existing home. Sometimes starting from scratch works better because the whole design is integrated, and it makes sense.

• For the average homeowner that wants to stay in their home but need to add on, there are a lot of challenges and decisions that get made depending on their situation. One big thing is to keep it livable while construction is going on.

• Not everyone is an investor or a deep-pocketed property owner. Keep that in mind.

• On a basic level, it goes to good design. There is not a one size fits all approach that works. Sometimes in order to get what you want, you might have to tear it down and start over.

• In some areas design issues are more basic, particularly small houses on small lots.

• R-1 zoning has created our housing crisis.

• Can’t prevent change. Embrace change and make it work.

Allow Variety in Design

• The “bar” to set isn’t compatibility, it’s good design. That is what we are striving for.

• Neighborhood compatibility is not as important as good design. A well-designed home will fit in appropriately with the neighborhood.

• Can’t compare a new design to something that was in fashion at a different time. That doesn’t make sense. Look for good design, not for something to ‘match’.

• There is a set of six recently built homes. They are beautiful and fit in with the neighborhood, but they don’t all look alike.

• Diversity is not enemy. Diversity in design is good and important to the neighborhood.

• Neighborhoods are meant to evolve and change. You can’t stop that.

• People want to give individuality to a house. Otherwise everything looks the same and that’s not what you want.

• A lot of design styles should be allowed. Different people, different generations prefer different styles. That is all ok and should be embraced. Don’t favor one over the other.

• Don’t dictate design or style.

• Look at neighboring ‘pro-development’ communities, not everything is modern. Just because some people are doing modern design doesn’t mean everyone is.

• Redwood City is a city of neighborhoods and they have a variety of demographics, income levels, culture, etc. Keep that in mind. This exercise seems to be targeted toward a certain group.

• Neighborhoods are meant to evolve, this is desired. Housing needs change.

• Redwood City has a lot of history. Certain areas like West Roosevelt, Woodside were built as tract homes. Everything was built in a way that reflects the economic reality of the time. They shouldn’t have to stay that way forever.

• People are trying to have us keep the design language of 50 years ago. That doesn’t make sense. It’s not authentic to the time. Authenticity is important.

• The City is progressing. The same thing should happen in the neighborhood. If everything is limited to old designs, there won’t be any creativity or individuality.
• Just because there may be a set pattern, it might not be worth saving. Just because something was built reflecting the time, doesn’t mean it makes sense to always do that. Diversity is important.

• Allow other architecture to be built. Break up the monotony.

• Mt Carmel is beautiful; it has a great diversity of housing style. That shows that not everything needs to look the same. Redwood Shores is different. That is a planned community. That should stay that way.

**Height and Roof Form**

• Graduated height helps with compatibility.

• Measure height to plate height and then have pitch limitation.

• When measuring height, it’s better to regulate maximum plate height along with roof pitch. Maximum height is impossible to measure and enforce. Anything beyond 6:12 should require extra review.

• Limiting plate height can be effective in addressing apparent mass and bulk. You only need to focus on the front of the building, since that is what is visible. It doesn’t necessarily need to be limited in the rear of the building, that is where you can allow some flexibility.

• Be careful in restricting plate height because you don’t want to restrict creativity (solar roofs, great rooms, clerestory windows).

• Some areas in the County have a daylight plane requirement (University Heights). That seems to work and is an idea worth looking at.

• Having daylight plane and FAR limitations will compel a better building envelope.

• Daylight plane requirements help.

• Allow pop-outs and other things that move out of rectangular hip roof approach. This can help provide more square footage without a big structural imposition.

• Hip, gable, gambrel roofs help reduce apparent massing.

• Roof articulation is important. However, the Energy Code which will be updated in 2020 is going to require solar. Everyone is going to do simple roof forms so that they can accommodate solar. It will be interesting to see how this will influence design.

• One story homes have variation in roof line which can look weird when you add on a second story.

• Hip roof design was popular at one point but that is almost gone. It’s not done any more. Don’t force outdated approaches.

• Hip roofs can limit creativity. Just because that was the prominent roof form at the time the house was built, doesn’t mean you should have to be forever limited to that. Allow a project to integrate other roof forms and types. It doesn’t “match” the existing roof form but it doesn’t have to. Different roof forms can be integrated and look great.

**Details and Materials**

• There are some examples of bad design being built. A recent project should have done more with upper story setbacks so the façade doesn’t just look like a big wall. Change in materials, roof forms, "solar setback rule" could’ve helped. Maybe limit the height at front setback, or require that highest parts be modulated by gabled, etc. Avoid "great big box effect".

• Details are important. Ask for more architectural details in projects.
• Having a flush two-story wall in the front (second story on top of a garage) is a problem. There should be some break in massing.
• Encourage recessed windows or window trim.
• Windows need to be articulated. They should have trim or be recessed to create shadow.
• San Carlos requires a recess after a certain distance of wall. A 20 foot blank wall becomes a little long, maybe limit it to 10 feet; and then you need to have a recess or projection of a minimum of two feet.
• Break up the length of elements.
• Banding, horizontal coursing, articulated wood siding...these treatments help to keep scale down.
• There should be something to break up massing – entry, roof form, materials, shadow, any number of things.
• Quality materials are the key.
• Material selection is important. There should be an appropriate mix of quality materials.
• It’s ok to prohibit vinyl windows.
• Material compatibility is important.

Privacy
• It seems that most neighbor concerns have to do with sunlight, solar access, and privacy. They usually don’t want windows within 5 feet of the property line. They also don’t want eaves that extend close to the property line.
• Common issues that neighbors have are window placement/privacy and height. Good moves that help projects succeed include declining height and perimeter landscaping.
• Privacy is important. Landscaping can be a privacy solution.
• It should be explicitly stated that views are not guaranteed.

Frontage/Appearance from the Street
• Streetscape pattern is important. There should be a pattern from one end of the street to the other. This can be created through façade treatment, plate heights, etc.
• A consistent front setback is important in presenting a unified look to the neighborhood.
• Generally speaking, people want to minimize the front yard to maximize back yards.
• The biggest problem is a big façade along the front.
• On small lots, focus on the front. The street image is the important element.
• The current setback of 15 feet for the house and 20 feet for garage appropriately addresses garage placement and design. People tend to build as close to the front of the lot as possible to maximize the back yard.
• Entrances should be visible.
• No two-story entrances. Keep it all in scale. Prominent entrance that is in scale to the house.
• Entrances that extend to second story are a no go. Definitely limit that.
• Encourage porches. Entrance to house has to be visual and attractive, but not the Taj Mahal.
• Porches are important but not always necessary. There should be some inviting entrance or prominent entrance so the house looks ‘friendly to street’.

• Allow roofed porches to project into the front setback. It will incentivize well designed porches and won’t negatively affect the streetscape pattern. An inset porch, that is hard to do well.

• An open porch should be able to project into the front setback.

• Burlingame allows some projection into upper story stepbacks. There are limits on width, requirements for windows, and other stipulations to ensure it’s well done.

• A current trend is to have a farmhouse vernacular. That is fine, but it needs to fit in with the streetscape.

• Fences in the front yard should match the architecture of the house. They should definitely not be higher than four feet. If it’s higher than four feet, they need to be natural materials.

**Parking and Garages**

• A two car garage is a huge impact on the streetscape.

• Garage setback vs: house setback: people definitely take advantage of the extra 5 ft for house so having a 15 foot setback for the house and a 20 foot setback for the garage helps minimize the prominence of the garage.

• Garages in the back on the property line is a concern because you can put ADU on top. That can lead to privacy concerns.

• Allow tandem garages. People want two car garages. Tandem garages is a way to get that while reducing perceived mass.

• Allow tandem parking.

• Burlingame provides an incentive for a detached garage (it is exempt from FAR).

• Driveway parking area should count for required parking.

• If the garage is setback to the rear of the lot, it adds a long driveway that can provide for more parking and allow for a place for kids to play.

• No concrete driveways! It doesn’t need to be permeable pavers; any paver is fine. Any paver is permeable if it’s installed correctly.

**Landscape**

• Landscaping is the key. In a way, that is really more important than design.

• Landscaping is important. Perimeter planting is key to compatibility and privacy.

• Landscaping and trees are important. It is important to require trees or other landscaping to provide some softening of the façade.

• There is an over reliance on landscaping. Landscaping isn’t necessarily enforceable.

• Height of desired landscaping will depend on location (views, traffic patterns).

• Some cities require a deposit at the time of pulling building permit that commits to landscaping, so that it will not be left out. This may be a good idea to make sure the landscaping actually gets planted.

• Menlo Park requires street trees. The homeowner should have to provide street trees.

• Street trees and trees in the front yard help with design and with climate control.
• Trees really, really, really make a City beautiful. Make people plant trees. The City should keep a list of trees that are appropriate to plant and won't damage utilities.

**Process and Administration**

• Don't make the requirements overly complicated with a bunch of calculations that are difficult to understand.

• The guidelines need to be readable and understandable by everyone.

• Rules should be clear so everyone, including neighbors know what is expected and what will be allowed.

• Be clear in what the rules can address. Make it clear that the rules don't regulate private views.

• Keep the guidelines simple and straight forward. Otherwise they are difficult to apply and interpret, even by staff. Poor application or interpretation can lead to bad design.

• Diagrams of maximum building envelope would be very helpful on zoning handout.

• Don't draw a hard line. Allow flexibility.

• Allow some flexibility at staff level for design solutions.

• Allow for some flexibility. San Carlos allows a small waiver to be granted at the staff level. This is good because sometimes you need a little flexibility to accommodate a design solution and it doesn't need to rise to the level of a variance.

• Educate planning staff, empower them to make decisions.

• Planners should be better trained on design. The City should hire someone on staff with architectural or design expertise or hire someone to work with the planners a couple hours a week to train them.

• They City should pay attention to how much work the process that is set up will mean. They need to make sure that they are ready to execute what gets put into place.

• If everything requires a public process, you need to create a case, assign a planner, do a site visit, write a report, notice neighbors, hold a hearing, etc. Workload can triple.

• There should be an initial design submittal to the planners to make sure the design is on the right track before they go too far.

• The City should evaluate submittal requirements. Plans are required to have a fairly extensive level of detail, almost down to the piping for landscaping. If there is a change in design, that all needs to be redone. Evaluate design on a more schematic level of plans in order to prevent unnecessary costs. Full construction drawings aren't needed for design review.

• Neighborhood outreach is important. Do it early to hear concerns.

• Give notice to neighbors about a project before staff takes action. That way, staff can sit down with neighbors before action is taken so they can get involved or have their concerns heard. It's much easier to be proactive than to start a conversation when the neighbors are already mad.

• Give notice, take an action, and then send another notice after action is taken to let people know about the appeal process. Also notice more than just the immediate neighbors. Also let the people across the street know. They are the ones who have to look at it.

• A camel is a horse designed by a committee. Involving neighbors too early or to heavily in the process don't necessarily result in good design.
Examples to Consider

- The City of San Mateo’s guidelines were helpful in guiding design and providing direction. They gave the planners the tools to work with applicants. No one wants to sit in front of Planning Commission about window trim.
- Examples of “this, not this” are helpful in design guidelines. City of San Mateo has nice design guidelines. They are old but they work. They also have a friendly tone.
- “Do this, not this” examples are helpful in design guidelines.
- San Mateo County has 3D diagrams of what can be built. That is helpful. Show what is allowed vs what is not allowed.
- Look at the County’s standards for R-1 in the S-72 and S-82 areas. Those areas seem pretty successful in making new construction work while being respectful of neighbors.
- Design guidelines should be clear, comprehensive, not overly complicated. Menlo Oaks is a great place to build because the Design Guidelines are transparent, predictable.
- Menlo Oaks is a good example of guidelines and standards that work.
- Woodside is too detailed and complicated, don't follow their lead.

Redwood Shores

- Redwood Shores is a unique area, and citywide rules don't apply. Every property in RS (zip code 940065) has CC&Rs. On top of that, 50% of RS properties are in HOAs.
- Every RS project is reviewed by the RS design board, which pays an architect to review projects as well.
- The main issues in Redwood Shores are:
  - Buildability. Some plans that are submitted may not be buildable. The paid architect is helpful in identifying what is and what isn't buildable.
  - Parking. Until last year, the City required another parking space for 4 or more bedrooms. That curbed large development. Since this standard has been removed, larger homes have become more common. Given the limited public transit in RS, parking spaces really are needed
  - Houses on the water: When docks are added incorrectly, it compromises the lagoon and causes flooding. The City needs to do another audit for construction on the lagoon. There needs to be knowledgeable inspectors at the City or the task should be contracted out.
  - Size: Massive homes next to one-story houses.
- Other issues that the architect helps identify/work out:
  - Window placement (should not be aligned with neighbors' windows).
  - Design consistency. There are about 6 or 8 non-HOA developments within RS. They are not cookie-cutter, but consistent, and design must fall within the range of design features seen within the original development. The Design Review Board basically feels that additions need to match the house. Compatibility with existing structure in materials, style, roof design.
  - Recent bad examples: "boulder" siding, vinyl siding, out-of-scale entry features. We do look at styles, though we don't want people to incur huge costs by re-working an entire set of plans.
Solar needs to be approved by the Design Review Board which can require that it lie flat against roof and that the conduit matches the roof.

- Overall, the process works well. We do a write-up and keep it common-sense. We very rarely get complaints. Because people know that we (the DR Board) are there so they come to us right away.
- Letters are now required from neighbors stating that they’re aware of projects.
- 90% of everything at the City works for us and is helpful in our review of projects. The parking space issue is the biggest problem.

**Floor Area Ratio (FAR)**

*While the single-family design guideline project does not address FAR, the City is considering FAR limitations through a separate process. Comments received regarding FAR are included for City consideration as appropriate.*

- ADUs should be exempt from FAR, otherwise you will compel people to go underground. Only wealthy people will go underground.
- San Carlos has a new FAR ordinance went into effect in May. It may be worth looking at what they are doing.
- Idea: don’t include detached garages in FAR? This may be a good incentive.
- FAR limits are good.