

Business Area Study Session: Answers to Preliminary Study Questions

Why hasn't anything happened to improve the commercial area?

About nine years ago, members of the City's economic development team brought the idea of making major improvements to the commercial areas of the Highlands (centered on the Hi-Lands shopping center) to the community. However, the timing was not right given economic conditions. Market conditions first slowed nationwide with the burst of the "dot-com" bubble, but investment was further impaired after the events of September 11, 2001. Additionally, all of the commercial property is in private ownership. Although several major investment and redevelopment options were presented, the private property owners weren't able to sell as the buyers and sellers did not agree on a price.

In 2005, the City hired a consultant to analyze the economics of revitalization of the Highlands neighborhood, including the shopping center. The resulting report, called *The Heartland Report*, suggested that improvements to the commercial area would only be viable if there were more people in the surrounding area to spend money at a shopping center. As a result, the City began researching alternatives to increase the number and range of options for housing in the Highlands. In May 2007, the Council adopted a package of land use and zoning changes that was recommended by the Highlands Task Force on Zoning. These changes allow for an increase in housing units in the Highlands if private property owners choose to sell or redevelop the properties at higher densities. It will take some time to begin to see new housing development in the Highlands, partly because the housing market has recently slowed down. It is less certain that this very slow pace of housing redevelopment will be enough to spur commercial improvements.

In the meantime, however, the City has made an effort at outreach to the commercial businesses in the Highlands. Last summer, the City's Economic Development & Neighborhoods division visited with businesses individually to talk with them about how business is going, what they would like to see improved in the area, and how the City could support them. As a result of this outreach, a number of businesses have made use of the Renton Small Business Development Center, which offers free and confidential business assistance and is jointly sponsored by the City, Renton Chamber of Commerce, and Renton Technical College. Also, the Police department followed up with businesses that had problems with crime, theft, or undesirable customers. Recently, the Police department also hosted a meeting with Highlands businesses to continue to address concerns about public safety.

Who is responsible for keeping the commercial areas clean?

As with all private property, the property owner is responsible for keeping commercial areas clean.

Are those old commercial buildings “up to code”?

Unless there is a risk to public safety, the City of Renton does not routinely inspect old buildings to ensure they are up to code. A building is only required to be inspected for compliance with the building code in effect at the time that the building was constructed. All new, or substantially remodeled buildings, must obtain a building permit and be inspected to ensure they meet current code. After that point, the City does not make any determination of whether or not a building is “up to code.” However, if there is dilapidated building that poses a safety concern, it may be an issue that can be addressed by the Code Compliance team. Aside from building codes, the City Fire & Emergency Services department does an annual life safety inspection for all commercial buildings to evaluate the adequacy of emergency access and to test fire alarm and sprinkler systems.

How do we get more businesses up there, and better businesses than are there now (e.g. medical clinic, family-style restaurants, post office, bakery)?

The basic answer to this question is that most business investments are private decisions that are market driven. That means that a business owner or real estate developer needs to be assured that there are people who want to buy the goods and services they offer, and that the business will make a profit at the location. While the City cannot make a business locate in the Highlands, there are things that the City can do to make investment in the neighborhood more attractive to businesses. Recently, the City established an improvement district for water system upgrades for businesses along Sunset Boulevard.

Upcoming developments that may attract new business investment include expansion of the Viet Wah supermarket, and Harrington Square. Harrington Square is a project that has been in conception for about five years. It will be located near NE 9th Street on Harrington Avenue and include 217 housing units, underground parking, and more than 3,000 square feet of commercial space.

How do we get rid of businesses that the community does not like (e.g. Methadone clinic)?

It is very difficult to get rid of businesses that the community does not like if they are legally operating. Generally, businesses can be restricted through zoning regulations, but there are some limitations of the use of zoning power. First, businesses which supply an essential public service (such a drug rehabilitation center) can not be completely prohibited under state and federal regulations. Second, zoning is a blunt tool that can be used to regulate, but cannot discriminate between types of businesses. The same rules that allow a specialty grocer, like Trader Joe’s, would also allow a discount store. Market factors are another consideration. As long as a company is making money, it is likely to stay in a location. That means that people in the community are supporting the business, and it is filling some need.

What design standard is in place for the commercial area?

The Highlands Task Force on Zoning recommended adoption of design regulations within their study area. All of the commercial area on Sunset Boulevard, between Edmonds and Monroe, is within Design District 'E'. Regulations for District 'E' are very similar to those in place for downtown Renton, and include provisions for site design, building layout and design, pedestrian amenities, parking, landscaping, and signage. These standards are applied to new development, not existing development.

Is there any way to coordinate the redevelopment of the commercial area into something that is physically, socially, and economically related to the neighborhood?

There is always a way to better coordinate a redevelopment project with the surrounding area. Physically, the Design Regulations provide strong tools for creating pedestrian connections and an attractive and inviting environment. Socially, there are many different ways that public facilities, recreational opportunities, or neighborhood gathering spots could be included as a feature of redevelopment. Economically, the area could be more related to the neighborhood by providing a greater range of daily goods and services.

Some of the challenges to achieving this goal include the fact that commercial area is owned by several people and that private development decisions are made by property owners. Redevelopment that happens in small increments can make it more difficult to coordinate any specific outcome. The City can influence decisions somewhat by using incentives and through negotiations. Ultimately, though, many major decisions are made by private parties who are acting in their own best interests.

Is there a corridor improvement plan for Sunset Boulevard?

At the current time, there is no corridor improvement plan for Sunset Boulevard by the City of Renton. Sunset Boulevard is a state highway, so improvements could also be made by the Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT). WSDOT has completed some recent sidewalk improvements in the corridor. In order to initiate a corridor improvement plan, the project would need to be a work item listed on the City's six-year Transportation Improvement Plan.

Are there any programs out there to help with tree planting or beautification?

This area may be competitive for state grants for improvements along Sunset Boulevard, which could include tree planting and other beautification measures as part of a larger package of planned improvements. In order to compete for such a grant, the project would need to be listed on the City's six-year Transportation Improvement Plan, as indicated in the question above. City of Renton Neighborhood Program grants are available for tree planting and beautification projects. Any officially recognized neighborhood organization is eligible to apply for these grants. Information about neighborhood grants or

becoming an officially recognized neighborhood organization can be obtained by calling Norma McQuiller at (425)430-6595.