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# The Report of the Advisory Council of Experts: The Midtown Blocks Planning Study

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To: Neil Goldschmidt, Ernie Munch, Jim Westwood  
From: Ernie Bonner  
Date: October 6, 2003

## **The Report of the Advisory Council of Experts The Midtown Blocks Planning Study**

As an introduction, let me make a few points.

It should be emphasized that these recommendations were specifically posed as "near-term." Nowhere did I find any definition of what is meant by "near-term," but from the scale and scope of their recommendations with respect to the Midtown Park Blocks, it is clear that their vision did not extend beyond 15 or 20 years. So they essentially said nothing about the long-term, though Stastny noted in his introductory comments that they considered "principles" covering what the City should be in 100 or 200 years from now.

At the same time, the Advisory Council made no recommendations for new development or redevelopment in the Midtown Park Blocks, except for underground parking. They did recommend a new mixed-use, predominantly residential building on the block just north of O'Bryant Square. That is the only recommendation they made (to my knowledge) which is in clear, immediate and direct opposition to anything the Park Blocks Foundation proposed.

The recommendations unquestionably supported the notion of public purchase of the Zell Block, as part of an 'integrated development' of the blocks now occupied by the Yamhill Parking Garage, Zales and Nordstrom, with parking underground. I think they would also support the concept of the property switch now being studied by PDC.

The recommendations called for high density mixed use development in the area around the Midtown Park Blocks, and supported the City's West End Plan in that respect. And the Advisory Council noted that: 'Whether or not Portland currently has too much open space, that will not be the case in the future as the City continues to grow, and as the new West End neighborhood evolves. The Advisory Council encourages the City to examine its long-term open space requirements, especially as property will become increasingly expensive to purchase in the future.'

The Advisory Group was sensitive to the issue of preservation of historic properties, but did not exactly answer the call to arms from the preservation community. In fact, they advised a process which sounds a lot like what Ernie Munch has been proposing.

'While a City's memory is essential to preserve, age alone is not the determining factor for preserving buildings or areas within a City. . . . The Advisory Council advises that the City and community determine, in a focused manner, what specific historic buildings are important for Portland to safeguard today. Then it can be free to work in creative ways to conserve, restore, renovate or adapt those buildings or areas, while allowing new growth

and transformation to occur. The ACE suggests the Midtown Blocks serve as a test case for the application of this approach in other areas of Portland.'

The Advisory Council was favorably impressed with the commitment of the Park Blocks Foundation to the project: 'Property control, as pursued by the Park Blocks Foundation, is essential to transforming this area.'

### **May 2001: Final Recommendations of the Advisory Council of Experts**

Following are the final printed recommendations of the Advisory Council of Experts, which appeared in their May 2001 report. (The text of their recommendations is in italics. I have in some cases made minor modifications to the text to shorten, simplify or clarify.)

The recommendation of the Advisory Council of Experts for the near-term development of the Midtown Blocks and adjacent areas:

1. *provide a north/south linkage of intensely urban activity connecting the North and South Park Blocks by defining civic spaces and streets of special character;*

Step 1: Create the 'Urban Room.' Use the design of O'Bryant Square and Park Block 5 and the elements of paving and street furnishings in the rights of way along the Midtown Blocks to establish a unified design scheme for an 'urban room' 6 blocks long and 200' wide—offering a variety of civic open space and vibrant uses in existing buildings. This scheme should be part of a larger, long-term plan that defines the Midtown Blocks as a unique place in Portland.

[Note: This recommendation has already been acted upon, in the form of a plan by Lloyd Lindley (for PDC?) completed about 3 years ago.]

2. *promote infill development to provide immediate additional mid-to high-income housing in mixed use complexes;*

Step 2: Initiate Strategic Infill. Explore incremental opportunities for immediate increases in the supply of market-rate housing. Potential for major new half-block structure on the west side of the block on which Studio Arts Building, Guild Theatre and Pythian Building are located. A second potential site for predominantly residential new building on block directly north of O'Bryant Square.

3. *support the east-west linkage of the regional retail core to a new West End neighborhood;*

Step 3: Reinforce the East/West Connection. Redevelopment of the Nordstrom Block (Block 211), the Zell Block (Block 4), and the Yamhill Garage (Block 218) into an integrated development that provides underground parking, covered (not enclosed) open space on Block 4, a potential

*civic/cultural use and incorporation of local retailers and market-rate residential in a high density mixed-use development.*

[Note: Variants of this recommendation are now being studied by PDC. By now, it seems that no one is assuming that the Zell Block will be redeveloped.]

4. *promote development that will have a positive impact on the evolving West End neighborhood.*

Step 4: Anchor a New Neighborhood. *Promote high density of mixed use in new development and adaptive reuse of selected buildings in the 6 blocks between Washington and Yamhill Streets centered on Tenth Avenue. This area should become the impetus for, and focus of, the new West End neighborhood.*

### **Objectives for Further Planning and Development Work in Midtown Park Blocks by City Council**

After the ACE recommendations were made to the City Council informally in February of 2001, The ACE report was published and submitted to City Council in April of 2001. In May of 2001, after publication of the ACE recommendations above, the City Council:

1. accepted the ACE Report as "a starting place for future discussions, projects, and programs that will help implement the direction of the report;
2. adopted the following objectives for further planning and development work in the Midtown area:
  - a. Reestablish the downtown retail core as the region's retail hub.
  - b. 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;
  - c. Acknowledge the midtown blocks proper, the narrow blocks between park and Ninth Avenues (together with street rights of way that surround them) as a unit and design the open space and streetscape improvements accordingly.
  - d. 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.
  - e. Over time, seek control of the land and buildings in the narrow blocks between Salmon and Burnside streets for the public trust.
  - f. Bring together business and property owners, the Park Blocks Foundation, and civic and arts organizations to form partnerships with the City.
  - g. Create sufficient public funds for strategic investments that will highly leverage other investments in the district.
  - h. Acknowledge the special character that existing historic buildings and small retail establishments lend to the area and augment this quality as the area redevelops. [Note to reader: This provision was added after

consultation with the various City Commissions, but does not fit squarely with the ACE recommendations. See above.]

3. Essentially placed the Planning Director in charge of the effort, to return to the City council with a specific development strategy to implement these objectives.

### **Current Status of Development Strategy**

Over 2 years later, this draft development strategy has yet to surface from the Planning Bureau.