

Urban design group meets with City Council, planning commission
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Three groups in Charlottesville — including City Council — began a conversation Wednesday about how the city's rules and regulations could be tweaked in order to improve future buildings.

"We're here tonight to talk about how we can all work together on several substantial projects," Deputy City Attorney Lisa Robertson said.

Councilors met with the planning commission and the PLACE Design Task Force to get their feedback on the upcoming revision of the Comprehensive Plan, the use of form-based code for a section of the Strategic Investment Area and changes to the city's standards and design manual.

"What we're doing is a huge undertaking, and it's because the city is not happy with what's been happening lately, and I don't want to lose focus on that," City Councilor Bob Fenwick said. "The bottom

line is we have one of the best cities in the country and the architecture doesn't reflect that."

In September, City Council adopted the Streets that Work policy to guide redevelopment of roadways to add bike lanes, sidewalks and street trees. At the same time, they established new timelines for the review of the zoning code.

The zoning ordinance was last revised in 2003 at a time when many sections of the city were up-zoned to allow for more residential density.

"It is 13 years old now, and I was asked to undertake the first step, which was a comprehensive legal review," Robertson said. Issues include the way building heights are measured, appurtenances and an unclear definition of the term "mixed-use."

Among the items to be addressed are parking requirements, building heights, the special-use permit process and whether the city should still allow for properties to be specially zoned as planned unit developments.

The Comprehensive Plan was last updated in 2013 when the document was completely rewritten. As such, the groups were asked how extensive the 2018 update should be.

"The Comprehensive Plan is supposed to be a utilitarian document that specifies the locations of features such as transportation and parks, and also to indicate where features you have might be expanded," Robertson said. "To me, a comp plan is like a business plan in the business world."

Robertson said five-year reviews of the plan are intended to allow localities to adjust on a periodic basis. In this case, the idea is to have a clear vision of what the city's mixed-use districts should look like.

Councilor Kathy Galvin said she wanted to ensure that the work resulted in a map depicting where the city government wants growth to occur and where transition zones should be set up.

Planning Commissioner Genevieve Keller said she would like to see the plan better reflect the city's social divisions.

"The document we have now is based on words and numbers," Keller said. "We need a plan based on geography."

Keller suggested the city needs a better definition of "mixed-use" districts.

Mayor Mike Signer said he is not an expert on much of the technical jargon associated with land use, but he wants to ensure that the plan takes the future into account.

"There have been discussions about us becoming a 'smart city,' and this could have impacts on the Comprehensive Plan," Signer said, referring to the need to anticipate infrastructure for driverless cars and other technologies that may be implemented.

Keller said she wants neighborhoods to play a greater role in the 2018 revision.

"I would like to see us go back a neighborhood-based process," Keller said. "But what I've seen in the last five years is a growing agitation in the neighborhoods that they've been left out of this."

Another task before city government is an update of the manual that governs the design standards for roads, tree planting and other infrastructure. Councilors will discuss in December whether to use some of a year-end surplus to fund a consultant to do the work at a cost of up to \$200,000.

City Council and the commission will hold another joint work session on Dec. 19.

Councilor Wes Bellamy, who is under fire for past racist and misogynistic posts on Twitter, attended the meeting. He announced his resignation from the state Board of Education half an hour before the meeting began.