

Developers urge taller building code

By **SAM BENNETT**
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Developers, historic preservationists and affordable housing advocates urged the City Council on Wednesday to pass zoning changes to allow taller buildings downtown.

Due to the complexity of the proposal, the city has set a tentative date of March 27, 2006, for a final vote.

At a meeting of the Urban Development & Planning Committee, council members said they need time to craft the city budget this fall, but will continue work on Mayor Greg Nickels' up-zone recommendations.

Nickels wants to see buildings that stretch 600 and 700 feet in the area south of the retail core. The Denny Triangle would see buildings as high as 400 feet.

The city has hired Vancouver, B.C., planners Larry Beasley and Ray Spaxman to study the mayor's proposal and draft recommendations. They will make a presentation to the council at 9:30 a.m. on Aug. 8 at City Hall.

At Wednesday's meeting, Touchstone Corp.'s Douglas Howe said the city needs to prevent the spread of "squat" buildings that have sprung up in areas like Belltown.

"This plan allows for a better quality of architecture, with

taller buildings and flexible designs," said Howe. "Swift passage is critical if the benefits are going to be realized in this decade."

Howe said the design-construction process takes three to five years, and urged the council to pass the up-zones this fall to catch the next wave of development.

"What's at stake is the opportunity to create world-class architecture," he said.

William Justen of Samis Land Co. said he supports taller structures downtown, but he dismissed comparisons between Seattle and Vancouver, B.C., where tall residential towers line the waterfront.

He said Seattle has more restrictive seismic standards, developers require more elevators in buildings, and the 8.8 percent sales tax on construction in Washington make projects here cost more than Vancouver, San Diego or San Francisco.

"With taller buildings, we have an opportunity for excellent design," said Justen. "We have a great opportunity for achieving a much better outcome."

Michael McGinn of the Cascade Chapter of the Sierra Club said his group "strongly supports the increased residential growth" that the up-zoning could bring.

Under the proposal, developers who build to the proposed maximum height and floor area ratio levels would need to follow core and shell requirements set by the LEED ratings system. Buildings would have to meet or exceed Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design's minimum "certified" level.

Market-rate housing and commercial buildings could be built to the maximum height if developers contribute to the city's transfer of development rights program.

Kate Joncas, president of Downtown Seattle Association, said the up-zones would mean a more vibrant downtown. "Now is the time to put these changes in the development code," she said.

Christine Palmer, preservation advocate for Historic Seattle, requested that the city complete an inventory of possible historically significant buildings as part of the zone change process.

"The one thing we know is that growth will be coming," said Diane Sugimura, director of the Department of Planning and Development. "This proposal will help and manage that growth."

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