Proposed Zoning Code Amendments Reduce the Public’s Right to Know about Tree Preservation

Dear Council Members and Planning Commissioners -

There are two proposed zoning code amendments coming before the Planning Commission on September 11, 2019 that significantly reduce transparency and accountability in the preservation of Redmond’s most cherished resource – a “green,” forested environment – even as increasing the City’s percentage of tree canopy is being prioritized. These amendments should be deferred for consideration at the Planning Commission until a current Parks and Trails Commission initiative on tree canopy is completed.

The proposed changes recommend deletion of tree preservation plans from Plat Recording and Notices of Applications. The rationale cites provisions of the Community Strategic Plan that “these amendments are consistent with the Housing Choices priority of the Community Strategic Plan that focuses on reducing development cost as a mechanism to make housing more affordable.”

These tree preservation plans are the only way the public can learn of proposed developments that impact their community. Also, the tree inventories they contain enable calculation of environmental benefits lost as result of development. Notice of Application and planning notices in general are already difficult to locate and provide public comment. (Hence my continuing advocacy of a position bridging Communications and Planning Departments that can create a “push” of vital development information to the citizens of Redmond.) Further, a key part of the Community Strategic Plan Inclusion Program Vision envisions means for all citizens to “influence City policy and direction,” a provision that these two proposed zoning code amendments subvert.
In providing comments on the Draft Strategic Plan Housing Choices priority I stated that "streamlining the zoning code, speeding permit processing, "increasing regulatory predictability" and increasing density in return for more affordable housing should not give license for developers to minimize the public notice and review process."* It would appear that a less transparent process in underway that should be corrected.

Thank you for your consideration.

Tom Hinman

Redmond Resident

*Full text of my comments on the Draft Strategic Plan inclusive of Housing Priority and the need for better community engagement/outreach is at the attachment.
What else should the Council consider as an additional community priority (block 1)?

**Community Engagement/Outreach – Development Awareness**

Better communication coverage of development projects in Redmond and the opportunity for the community to “influence City policy and direction” is a long standing need that deserves to be addressed as a stand-alone element of the Strategic Plan. Citizen Surveys consistently list transportation and growth/overdevelopment/overpopulation as their top concerns, yet it is difficult to perceive responsiveness to public comments on these critical topics. The following is adapted from testimony germane to this glaring Strategic Plan flaw that I provided to the Council in the context of the last budget cycle:

To quote the Community Involvement Consultant Findings presented to the Council on November 27, 2018, the “Community Poll top response (65%) was not being certain that giving their input matters in decision-making.” I have to say that, with the exception of tree canopy, that has certainly been my experience in dealing with the City of Redmond for over six years. The accountability and transparency of public process in Redmond would be much more evident if there is actual two-way dialogue rather than soliciting public comment on land use and budget issues which are then listed on a matrix and not addressed in substance.

As the Consultant Findings state, the City does great on the “fun stuff” but has weaknesses where the “hard stuff” is concerned to include “closing the loop after community provides feedback and communicating how public input will be used in decision making.” Further, a staff poll in the same report states that inputs are “most often shared with Council vs. sharing back with the community” and that there is internal confusion over who is leading public engagement. (See also recommendations in the Redmond Community Involvement Guidebook, page 2, particularly item 7 “Community members should know how their input and feedback was used in the decision-making process.”)

These findings justified my strong recommendation that the Communications and Marketing Administrator position proposed in Offer #65 (Community Engagement/Outreach portion of Diverse & Connected Community) be created and funded. To wit “The need for all City Departments to engage more effectively, dynamically and innovatively with the public is consistent with feedback received from the community and the City Council. This additional position will provide the community with neighborhood outreach and project-specific engagement for the Overlake, Downtown and Marymoor Village neighborhoods….This will allow the City to have one main point of contact both internally and externally for communication.” Filling this position would assist the Planning Department (who does the minimum amount of required public notification) and supplement the Communication Division’s historical emphasis on “softer” communications announcements that focus on matters of Citywide interest. (For example, much could be learned from the public comment process regarding the proposed Seritage development.) As suggested in the Offer and in the above findings on community involvement, such an emphasis is overdue.

Beyond the staff communications function, the Council, as the public-facing portion of Redmond’s leadership, needs to be more dynamic and interactive in responding on-the-record to matters addressed in public comment. I know that Council members recognize this issue based on entries in the last budget “parking lot” and on remarks when the community engagement report was received. I have similarly provided (unaddressed) inputs on how Council Procedures/Public Participation could be improved, to include use of the ombuds function beyond “customer service.”
**Housing**
The objectives for workforce and deeply affordable units, use of the MFTE tool and search for incentives are exciting if a bit aspirational. Please stipulate inclusion of 2-3 bedroom “family” products wherever possible. Streamlining the zoning code, speeding permit processing, “increasing regulatory predictability” and increasing density in return for more affordable housing should not give license for developers to minimize the public notice and review process, force the staff into hasty analysis of traffic impact (Seritage) or design guidelines (One Marymoor Park) or compel premature decisions from City Council.

**Environment**
A Climate Action Plan to gather data and set targets has been discussed for 5 years. A dedicated FTE has broad community support and was approved the last budget. Hiring qualifications, job description, reporting/authority, resources, etc. drag on. How come? Is there a transparent public recruitment process ongoing to form an external steering committee? How can a person become a member? How will community outreach and education programs be established? By whom? Add K4C partnership to the plan.

**Technology and Information Services**
Standardized management methodologies seems like an obvious objective. Smart Cities sounds like a good idea. What is it exactly?

**Cultural Inclusion**
A welcoming attitude engaging our diverse cultural community is central goal worthy of emulation by others. But, the Program Vision also includes means to “influence city policy and direction,” which is a distinctly different topic and out of place per initial comments above.

**Infrastructure**
Infrastructure has several urban design strategies - cutting use of single occupant vehicles, growing Walkability (similar to 10-minute communities) and reduced parking near light rail (also noted in Housing Choices). There is a tension between lack of parking for the community-at-large near stations and the TOD philosophy that is not well understood and should be better articulated to the general public.

**Any other comments or question on Strategic Plan to share? (final block)**

Citizen Surveys can be useful tools in determining sentiments among self-selected members of the public. I am presuming that these responses, plus those of the more formal telephone surveys, are the data that is intended to drive decision making. How many meaningful responses constitute a threshold for decision? What is the statistical validity of this data, particularly since it is cited as Performance Measures of many budget items? How is the budget process linked to the Strategic Plan?