

March 17, 2025

Dear members of the Senate Committee on Housing and Development

I am writing this testimony to object to language in SB974-1 Amendment “Section 12 (5)” on page 10 and “Section 13 (5)” on page 11, **eliminating design review for housing in Oregon.**

I had a 47-year career in Downtown Portland as a designer with one of Oregon’s largest architectural firms. I took several projects through Portland’s design review process over that time. All were made better by design review. I now sit on the Portland Design Commission (since 2018) as an unpaid volunteer.

1. Level Playing Field

Example: Applicant A (developer + architect) proposes a new building on Main Street. He/she knows design review and Portland’s design guidelines. His/her project is readily approved and built.

Applicant B wants to develop a new building across Main Street from Applicant A’s building. If Applicant B knows and expects to go through design review, he/she will benefit from the quality of Applicant A’s building and vice versa.

Alternatively, Applicant B knows his/her project will likely not meet the design guidelines and **under SB974-1, chooses to avoid design review.** Outcome: his/her new building **compromises the established value** of Applicant A’s building and potentially the value of the community.

Design review creates a level playing field where all applicants meet the same design expectations and create value. Portland’s Pearl District is a prime example of how an entire neighborhood built under design review creates robust value, a variety of designs and a place where people want to be. And it includes market rate and affordable housing.

2. Density/proximity

Portland directs its growth to centers and corridors. These are places of high density residential-retail-work and are in close proximity. When you build at high density and close proximity, the **compatibility between adjacent projects is critical.** Design review and guidelines ensure projects fit together successfully. The core of our guidelines is about each project fitting in, being friendly at street level and being built out of materials that hold up to our climate.

3. Community

Design review in Portland is our best venue for community comment on a new project. It **allows participation but doesn’t prohibit approvals.** It’s a safeguard to ensure every project meets the same design guidelines and enhances community.

4. Zoning code

Zoning codes try to anticipate a variety of conditions in different, proposed buildings. These codes don’t always fit perfectly with some projects. Design review’s authority in Portland’s code allows **discretion:** when a project’s overall design better meets the ‘intent’ of the guidelines and the purpose statement of the code standards on balance, design review can grant modifications to strict compliance with specific codes. It’s a win-win for applicants and community.

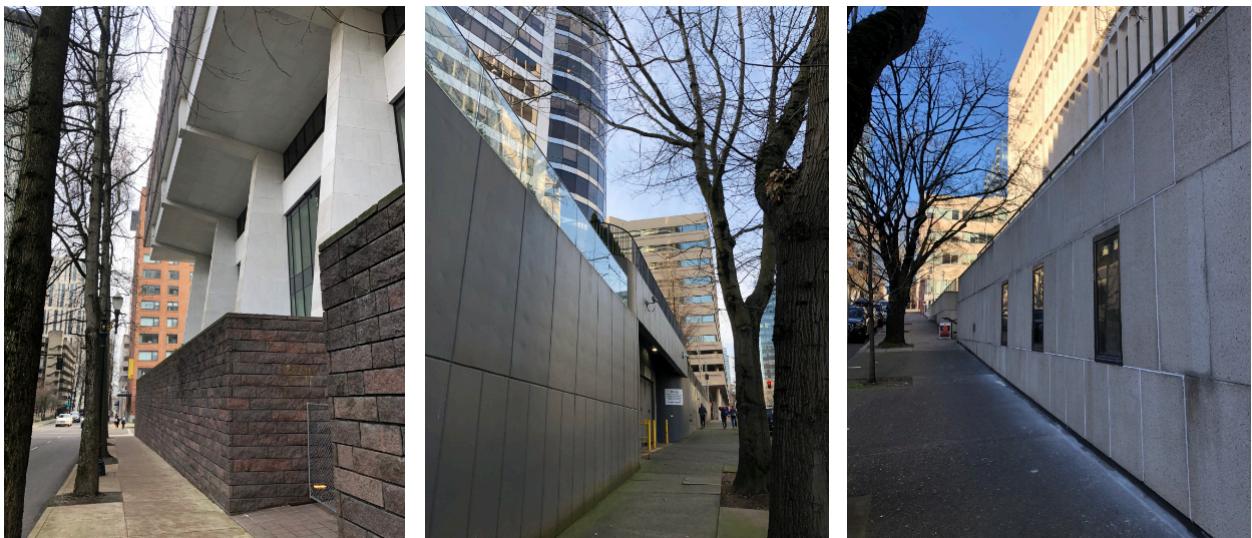
5. Impediments to development

Housing is the project type we need to focus on in the next decade. Design review is pro-growth. Do not eliminate design review for new housing in Portland. Instead, focus on the real impediments to new development including:

- High cost of land
- High interest rates
- High cost of materials (and potential impacts of tariffs) and labor
- Continuing efforts to overcome Portland's current image problem – public safety, clean public spaces, programmed activities, new businesses, etc.
- How to tweak our tax system to incentivize development on inner parcels that have sat vacant for decades.

Thank you for your work and attention to this issue.

Brian McCarter, Chair – the Portland Design Commission
Fellow – American Society of Landscape Architects, Emeritus
American Institute of Certified Planners, former/retired



1950 -1972: Development in Portland ***before design review***



1972 - Present: Development in Portland ***with design guidelines and design review***



Three recent affordable housing projects in Portland that met design review guidelines, were approved and are either built or under construction.