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15 March 2007

City of Richmond
1401 South Marina Way
Richmond, California 94804

Via Email

Attn: Gayle McLaughlin, Mayor

Re: **Resignation as a Member of the City of Richmond Design Review Board**

Dear Mayor McLaughlin:

Last night I announced, with regret, that I had decided to resign as a member of the Design Review Board. This decision is based on my belief that it is time for new people to be involved in the process of design review and to allow me more time to pursue other interests. As I expressed to the Board members, I will sorely miss working with each of them every two weeks. Over the years, we have become like a family that was trying to make Richmond a better place to live.

To formalize my decision, I am submitting this resignation letter to you, effective immediately.

It has been a pleasure to serve the citizens of Richmond, first as a member of the Public Development Review Board for six years, and then as a member of the Design Review Board for more than seven and one-half years. I have seen the design review process change from being non-existent, to applying only to small pockets of the City under Controlled Development, to the creation and operation of the current Design Review Board, and finally, to the recent decisions made by the City Council on 20 February 2007 to change the system yet again.

In resigning, I would like to share some thoughts and observations that you may find useful:

City Council Liaison • On the evening of 20 February 2007, we experienced another example of our elected officials making decisions based on anecdotal stories without sufficient background. Until just recently, when two Council members sat in on our meeting in the back of the room for several minutes, I can only remember two other times in my seven and one-half years on the Board when any Council member has ever attended a DRB meeting (and one of those times the Council member was an applicant for a remodeling to his house). One would think that Council members would want to have some first hand experience with the DRB and its process before deciding to change it.

In the future, I believe it would be appropriate to have a City Council liaison attend the proposed Planning and Design Commission meetings at least monthly. This would allow the lines of communication to remain open and clear between the two organizations. A City Council liaison and the Commission could directly share issues of mutual concern without a lot of bureaucratic nonsense. An item entitled "Council Liaison Communication" should be added to the standard agenda to allow this communication exchange to occur.

Design Guidelines and Public Participation • With respect to the creation of design guidelines for both central Richmond (by 31 March 2007) and for all other areas in Richmond at a later date, bravo! The Design Review Board has asked for these guidelines since its inception. This request has gone through at least four Planning Directors and only now, with Richard Mitchell as Director, are we seeing some progress. He should be commended for his efforts to finally move forward. Now, the Council should allow him the time to properly do his job before assigning some arbitrary time limit.

I cannot stress how important it is to involve the public in the review of any design guidelines. It is equally important to involve members of the proposed Planning and Design Commission and the design community to test the guidelines for their ability to be implemented. Several public hearings should be held. The public has traditionally been mistrustful of design review. Guidelines will help the decision makers to be less subjective and more consistent. That, in turn, may help the public to achieve a better understanding of the design review process and to be more trustful of their local government.

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In addition, because design has so much to do with the visual environment, any guidelines should be tested and re-tested to see that they achieve their desired goal. Members of the Commission who have had "down-in-the-trenches" design review experience should be consulted. Design professionals who frequently provide design services for public and private projects in Richmond should also be consulted. In this way, perhaps a consensus can be built to make the guidelines more acceptable and useful to all.

Administrative Design Review • Nine or ten years ago, several of us were involved in a series of public meetings regarding the formation of the design review process. At that time, there was a severe mistrust of the City Staff's ability to consider all of the issues involved in some applications. In order for the public to agree to give up on Controlled Development and to accept the new Design Review process, as it evolved, the number of exemptions to design review were very limited. Then, a few years ago, the exemption thresholds were increased and the zoning administrator process began. At that time, this change was a major breakthrough.

Can another breakthrough occur now or will the public feel like they have no say in what goes on around them in their neighborhood? Obviously, as the idea of additional administrative design review goes further, the public education and participation process must be continued for the idea to have any strength and support. Many hearings should be held to allow the public to provide comment before any increases to the number of design review exceptions go back to the City Council.

Design Review Board and Planning Commission Merger • Certainly, if the Design Review Board and Planning Commission are to be combined, there must be an increase in the "over-the-counter" Staff review and approval of small projects because, as is, the combined work load will be impossible to accomplish in any sensible time frame. Currently, the DRB meets twice a month with a typical agenda of 10 to 12 items. A typical meeting, with seven members, runs from 6:00 PM to 9:30 PM and sometimes later. After three and one-half hours, things get a little rummy. We consider everything from the rear yard additions to the renovation of the historic City Hall. Some items take 2 to 3 hours to discuss and decide on. Add this to a currently typical Planning Commission agenda, and I wonder how anyone will be able to rationally participate. Therefore, it is clear that the work load that is subject to the public hearing process must decrease or the new Commission will be extremely overloaded. However, this is in direct conflict with the idea of continued public participation.

Additionally, consideration should be given to what is involved in running a nine member commission. I was chairperson of the DRB (with seven members) for several years and always wished that there were fewer folks. As you know, it is difficult to have nine members, all of whom have comments, and still conduct a meeting that will end at a reasonable hour. I suggest that a smaller membership of less than nine be adopted. I suggest that you solicit folks who currently serve on the DRB and Planning Commission who might be willing to step down in the interest of more efficient meetings.

Meeting Compensation • The idea of \$50.00 per meeting (maximum \$200/month) compensation is not very productive. None of us serve on the various boards and commissions for money. We do it because we care what is happening in our City. Typically, in any given month, for the two normal DRB meetings, I have spent about 20 to 25 hours in preparation and meeting time. That works out to less than \$4.00 per hour, which is far less than minimum wage. Why bother? The money would be better spent on more pressing issues in the City.

Two final thoughts for your consideration as the planning and design review reorganization process moves forward:

1. As one of my colleagues has said many times, design review in the City of Richmond will always be a work in progress. It will never be settled and final. It will always carry some level of controversy with it because that is the nature of any subjective process.
2. It has always been my belief that design review does not necessarily result in better design, but that it at least results in less bad design. Richmond will always need "less bad design" and we can only hope that maybe someday the City will get "better design" through its political process.

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Thank you for your kind attention as I have rambled on. As always, please do not hesitate to contact me at (510) 232-1232 should you have any questions and/or comments.

Sincerely,

Michael Woldemar & Associates, Incorporated



Michael Woldemar
Architect

Attachments: None.

CC: Eileen Whitey, Chairperson, DRB
Ted Smith, Design Review Board
Diane Bloom, Design Review Board
Robert Avellar, Design Review Board
Jonathan Livingston, Design Review Board
Donald Woodrow, Design Review Board

Virginia Finley, Chairperson, Planning Commission

Tom Butt, City Council Member
Bill Lindsey, City Manager
Richard Mitchell, Planning Director
Mary Renfro, Assistant City Attorney

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