

Overview of Article V and the Arts Commission

Article V of the City Charter addresses Arts and Culture within the Executive Branch of city government. The Arts Commission is one of several commissions whose members are nominated by the Mayor and Board of Supervisors. These members represent cultural and arts interests based on their personal areas of interest and professional expertise. They are respected and knowledgeable individuals, serving as volunteers in civic design matters that affect arts and culture. A key responsibility of Civic Design Review (CDR) is to guide the project applicants in relation to arts and culture. This is not a function of an administrative department.

Impact of Assigning Civic Design Review to the Planning Department

Shifting Civic Design Review from the Arts Commission to the Planning Department fundamentally changes the executive review process by reducing direct community input. The decision-making process must stay with CDR. This reassignment has several consequences:

- CDR is unique in its approach relative to conventional design reviews. CDR is based upon the desire to reflect the physical and cultural identity of the city's multi-cultural communities. It does so through peer reviews and one-on-one dialog with project applicants which progress from the initial concept through design development and final construction documentation. An administrative department is not structured to allow this level of engagement between community representatives and project designers.
- Delegating CDR to an advisory role disregards the value of direct peer-to-peer dialog and interaction between CDR members and project designer(s) and adds a layer of bureaucratic process which runs counter to the notion of streamlining the approval process.
- Community members would no longer participate in the design review of civic buildings.
- Commission members who currently serve voluntarily on CDR are professionals in architecture and landscape architecture. They possess the expertise and experience required for civic architecture reviews, as they are practicing, licensed professionals.
- The Planning Department may lack the necessary licensed professionals on staff to perform design reviews as mandated by the city charter under the Arts

Commission's duties. Addressing this gap would likely require additional staff and increase costs.

- The Planning Department may not have the required city residency for staff performing design reviews. This could undermine the long standing commitment of ensuring city residents' concerns are directly represented in the review of civic projects.

Comparing Approaches: Arts Commission vs. Planning Department

Retaining Civic Design Review within the Arts Commission places emphasis on design and public art quality, while moving it to the Planning Department would prioritize integration with land use, housing, and infrastructure decisions. Each approach affects who sets priorities, the speed of project completion, and how design tradeoffs are managed.

Pros of Retaining CDR with the Arts Commission

- Strong design and art expertise: CDR is mandated by the charter to be within the Arts Commission, whose committee consists of design professionals, including architects and landscape architects. The culture and decision-making processes of the commission are therefore focused on achieving high standards in design quality and public realm outcomes.
- Clear mission surrounding the public realm: The program's mission centers on improving capital projects on City property, enhancing the public realm, respecting the natural environment, and serving the public interest. This approach reinforces a specialized, design-first perspective rather than balancing multiple non-design objectives.
- Institutional linkage to public art and cultural goals: The Arts Commission also oversees public art and cultural policy. This allows CDR to coordinate building and streetscape design with public art, cultural equity, and neighborhood cultural priorities—areas a conventional planning agency might not prioritize.

Cons of Moving CDR to the Planning Department

- Weaker direct linkage to public art and cultural policy: Transferring CDR out of the Arts Commission risks weakening its connection to public art programs, cultural equity policies, and the expertise in art-in-public-places that currently informs civic project design.
- Risk of design being subordinated to throughput: Planning agencies are often pressured to process entitlements quickly and meet production or permit targets. In

such an environment, a relocated CDR function could be compelled to accept compromises in architectural and public realm quality to adhere to schedules.

- Legal and governance complexity: CDR's role is explicitly defined in the City Charter and Administrative Code as an Arts Commission responsibility. Moving it would likely require changes to these legal frameworks, potentially sparking political debate over decision-maker appointments, fee usage, and preservation of independent design expertise.

Considerations on Review Timelines

- Risk of added workload without extra capacity: Planning agencies are already responsible for meeting ambitious state and local housing production and permit timeline targets. Executive directives have required significant reductions in permitting timelines through process changes and resource allocation. If CDR responsibilities were moved without additional staff or process redesign, design review could become another queue within Planning, possibly shifting rather than reducing total review time.
- Potential for more complex, not fewer, conditions: Planning reviews must balance land use, transportation, historic preservation, and neighborhood concerns. This can increase the number and complexity of conditions placed on projects. Incorporating CDR into the Planning Department could accelerate scheduling but might still result in multiple rounds of plan revisions to reconcile design, zoning, and community issues. As a result, applicants could experience similar or only modestly improved overall timelines unless the transition is accompanied by strict limits on iterations and clearer design standards.

Respectfully submitted,

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