

MEMORANDUM

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT DEPARTMENT



February 4, 2026

TO: Mayor and City Council
CC: David Miles, Director
Caleb Hood, Deputy Director
FROM: Brian McClure, Long-Range Planning Supervisor
RE: Downtown Overlay District and Design Guidelines Discussion

Purpose

The purpose of this memorandum is to confirm the phased approach for establishing a Downtown standards overlay and to request Council direction for staff to move forward consistent with that approach.

Background

The Downtown area contains multiple zoning districts arranged in inconsistent patterns. As a result, development standards are often applied inconsistently relative to a broader Downtown vision. Compounding this issue are existing standards that some feel do not fully support the Destination Downtown vision or the expectation that Downtown functions as a single place with shared public-realm characteristics.

Staff has been evaluating a more structured approach that improves clarity, predictability, and consistency while retaining existing zoning entitlements.

Recommended Framework: A Phased Approach

Staff recommend proceeding with a three-phase approach that intentionally separates the creation of a regulatory tool from decisions about where it applies and what standards it contains.

This approach is summarized as:



Phase 1: Tool — Overlay Enablement (Citywide)

Phase 1 focuses on enabling code only.

- Amend the Unified Development Code to authorize overlay districts citywide;
- Establish administrative clarity and hierarchy;
- No map changes;
- No Downtown-specific standards.

This phase creates the framework without changing how development is currently reviewed.

Phase 2: Geography — Downtown Overlay District

Phase 2 focuses on where the tool applies.

- Establish a Downtown overlay boundary through a zoning map amendment;
- Robust public notice and hearing;
- Underlying zoning and existing standards remain in effect.

If Phase 2 is adopted prior to standards, the City needs to clearly define the interim review process so development review is clear.

Phase 3: Standards — Standards and Subareas

Phase 3 focuses on what applies.

- Define Downtown subareas, transects, or frontage types;
- Develop Downtown-specific design standards;
- Conduct robust stakeholder engagement, including property owners, designers, and developers;
- Standards anticipated to be implemented primarily through the Architectural Standards Manual.

No design standards would be implemented without a separate Council action.

Council Direction Requested

Today, staff is requesting Council:

- Confirm the three phased approach (Tool, Geography, Standards); and
- Direction to proceed with Phase 1, Tool, enablement and preparatory work for Phases 2 and 3.

Key Reassurances

- Existing zoning entitlements are retained;
- No design standards are adopted at this time;
- Council retains decision points at each phase;
- Engagement will extend beyond technical review and include key stakeholder groups.

Next Steps (High-Level)

- Continue internal refinement of **Tool** (Summer 2026)
- Align with Urban Renewal and stakeholders on **Geography** (Fall/Winter 2026)
- Broad engagement and development of **Standards** (Summer 2027)
- Return to Council at appropriate milestones for direction and approval.

Attachments

A. Downtown Design Review 2026.

This is an evolving document that provides some additional context and considerations as staff work through this process with City Council and the Meridian Development Corporation, but is working and not final.

Attachment A: Downtown Design Review 2026.

Working Downtown Design Review Process 2026

The purpose of this project is to better define and convey desired architectural and site related design review elements in the downtown Meridian area.

PROPOSED CONCEPT:

Based on Council’s discussion with Meridian Development Corporation (MDC) representatives on August 26, 2025, and general support for more context-sensitive design standards in the downtown area, staff propose to initiate a phased approach to address longstanding limitations of zoning-based design regulation.

The proposed approach intentionally separates:

- creation of a regulatory tool,
- identification of the applicable geography, and
- development of specific rules and standards.

This sequencing allows work to proceed incrementally, demonstrate progress, preserves Council decision points, and avoids adopting standards prior to completing technical analysis and stakeholder engagement.

CHALLENGES TO ADDRESS

Current design standards are not downtown specific and lack consideration for

- overlapping zones, district, and boundary names that aren’t “area consistent”;
- application of design regulation by zoning instead of by area (“downtown”);
- craftsmanship and design detail features desired in the downtown area;
- importance of the rail corridor;
- historical elements;
- an already developed environment with no plan to transition;
- increased vertical height and condensed massing;
- consideration for interrelated building and site design;
- integration and requirements for outdoor urban spaces; and
- enhanced people first pedestrian environments.

PROJECT HISTORY:

The current Architectural Standards Manual (ASM) was approved in 2015 and replaced the previous City of Meridian Design Manual. The ASM is comprised of express standards, generally quantifiable, and oriented around a framework that is intended to establish a minimum level of effort. It does not, and was never intended, to guarantee “good” design.

This process was implemented at a time when the State was concerned with the design review overreach of other cities. Some believed that cities have too much discretionary authority in combination with poorly articulated design goals or standards, resulting in too much uncertainty, time, and cost for the development community. Meridian’s solution was to have measurable standards, and that improved consistency of review regardless of individual staff perceptions or views. This process has generally worked as intended, though with the scale of activity in the City, there are always outliers. Problems generally arise from applicants not

meeting standards, and not wanting to justify or describe alternative measures through the integrated design standards exception (DSE) process. All standards were intended to require compliance with DSE, but this has failed; staff are pressured and regularly approve much less than the minimum through DSE.

CURRENT PROCESS

Design review is an administrative process typically coordinated by current assistant planners, and sometimes current associate planners. There is no discretionary review unless a standard is not being expressly met and an applicant requests a DSE. In greenfield projects, this is usually not an issue as the Mayor, Council, and Planning and Zoning Commission typically see elevation and concept drawings through the public hearing process for subdivisions, plats, and conditional use permits.

Where this process varies significantly is in traditional neighborhood districts (e.g. – downtown), and in other infill and redevelopment conditions and particularly in commercial areas. Notable exceptions for public hearing review of large projects include:

- Most commercial projects with existing zoning entitlements.
- For multifamily and vertically integrated projects, and in traditional neighborhood districts, such as Old Town (O-T) or Traditional Neighborhood Residential (TN-R) zones, where no conditional use permit (CUP) is required for multi-family

These exceptions have historically been intentional, prioritizing and incentivizing meaningful projects in desired areas, and believing (or hoping) that other process review efforts would ensure positive outcomes. Administrative review carries far fewer risks for developers than discretionary review and is typically much more streamlined in overall project timelines.

Even in projects in the above conditions, where a CUP for other developer “asks”, such as additional height allowance, other influences affect review and oversight of these applications. While the findings for a CUP are fairly extensive when considering compliance with both Unified Development Code (UDC) zoning performance standards and Comprehensive Plan text and policy, developer and political pressures often limit consideration to the specific ask only. Detailed review of other impacted and related areas, such as parking or architectural design review, should be more consistent and comprehensive.

WORK PLAN

Community Development would manage and coordinate this work, with targeted consultant support anticipated for public engagement and standards development. Staff recommend a phased approach so that work is discrete, transparent, and incremental. Council may consider and approve phases independently rather than as a single comprehensive action.

Because the Architectural Standards Manual (ASM) is adopted by reference, certain interim direction could be provided through the ASM if needed; however, code changes are required before overlay-based standards can be implemented as conceived.

The recommended framework is summarized as:

Phase 1: Tool → Phase 2: Geography → Phase 3: Rules

PHASE 1: TOOL, CODE FRAMEWORK (OVERLAY ENABLEMENT)

PURPOSE

Phase 1 establishes the overlay tool in City Code. This phase is structural and enabling only.

SCOPE

This phase would:

- establish overlay districts as a recognized zoning mechanism;
- clarify how overlay standards would interact with base zoning and citywide standards;
- integrate overlays into existing administrative and map amendment processes.

This phase would not:

1. establish any overlay boundaries;
2. apply to any specific area of the City; or
3. adopt any new design standards.

A NOTE ON OVERLAY VS. MASS REZONE.

An overlay approach for the downtown area, that needs to be identified and defined, is the *most immediately viable* approach to establishing consistent architectural and site development standards downtown, without a blanket rezone to the O-T zoning district. A blanket rezone would not be effective without also making changes to the Comprehensive Plan and Future Land Use Map for the following reasons:

- planning areas do not align between the Comprehensive plan and downtown visioning work, and would not be any more effective within some of MDC's identified areas of focus such as those identified as "Neighborhood Enhancement"
- the City could not rezone areas to O-T that are outside of the Old Town Future Land Use area identified in the Comprehensive Plan; and
- while O-T zoning may work more broadly in many areas, it also allows by-right uses and intensities that work in opposition to some of MDC's focus areas.

Old-Town zoning applied to existing uses with other zoning currently, such as I-L, would also allow some existing and undesired uses (long-term) to continue indefinitely without having to make changes to come into compliance. Said another way, O-T is a less restrictive perk, and non-conforming uses would be granted extra levels of grace (e.g. – setbacks), where long-term (whether a current owner or the next) they need to transition to other uses and then be "gifted benefits". Staff generally believe that a mass rezone would be "best", but its also less realistic to accomplish.

PHASE 2: GEOGRAPHY, DEFINE DOWNTOWN (OVERLAY BOUNDARY)

PURPOSE

Phase 2 applies the overlay framework to a defined Downtown geography.

SCOPE

This phase would:

- establish a Downtown overlay boundary through a zoning map amendment;
- retain all underlying zoning districts and entitlements;
- initiate focused engagement related to boundary refinement and context.

No Downtown-specific overlay standards would be adopted at this stage.

INTERIM APPLICATION

If Phase 2 is adopted prior to the adoption of overlay standards, development within the Downtown overlay area would continue to be reviewed under existing zoning and the ASM. The overlay would exist as a framework only until standards are adopted.

RATIONALE

Separating geography from standards allows boundary questions and policy alignment (including coordination with MDC visioning work and the Future Land Use Map) to be resolved without prematurely committing to regulatory outcomes.

PHASE 3: STANDARDS AND TRANSECT FRAMEWORK

PURPOSE

Phase 3 establishes what applies within the Downtown overlay.

SCOPE

This phase would include:

- identification of Downtown subareas or a transect framework to address transitions in intensity and character;
- development of Downtown-specific architectural and site design standards;
- robust stakeholder engagement, including property owners, developers, design professionals, MDC, and the general public.

This phase is anticipated to be implemented primarily through a new Downtown section of the ASM, with targeted UDC amendments as needed.

RATIONALE

Downtown redevelopment occurs in a largely built environment where zoning-based standards alone do not adequately address context, transitions, or the interrelationship of buildings and site design. A hybrid approach — enabled by an overlay and informed by transect logic — allows flexibility at the edges and clarity in the core, without abandoning existing zoning structure.

RELATIONSHIP TO PRIOR VISIONING AND MDC WORK (CLARIFIED)

Work completed through Destination Downtown and related MDC efforts provides important context and insight but does not function as regulation. Phase 3 would intentionally translate relevant elements of adopted plans, policy direction, and stakeholder feedback into clear, measurable standards suitable for implementation through City Code and the ASM.

STANDARDS DEVELOPMENT (MORE DETAIL)

Development of Downtown-specific standards will follow a structured and transparent process that emphasizes meaningful involvement while maintaining clear decision-making authority.

The intent of this process is to inform technical standards, not to achieve consensus on every element of design regulation.

Role of Engagement

Stakeholder and public engagement will be used to:

- identify areas of alignment and concern;
- test assumptions about feasibility, transitions, and implementation;
- improve clarity and predictability of proposed standards; and
- surface unintended consequences early in the drafting process.

Engagement is intended to inform staff recommendations and Council decisions, not to substitute for them.

Distinction Between Policy Direction and Technical Standards

The City will distinguish between:

- policy questions (e.g., overall Downtown vision, desired character, general priorities), and
- technical standards (e.g., frontage requirements, dimensional thresholds, transparency ranges, transition logic).

While policy direction may be shaped through broad engagement, technical standards must ultimately be based on:

- professional analysis,
- development feasibility,
- urban design best practices,
- and consistency with adopted plans and code structure.

This distinction is necessary to avoid decision paralysis and ensure standards are implementable.

Transparency and Ethics

Throughout Phase 3, staff will prioritize transparency by:

- clearly identifying what is being proposed, revised, or removed;
- documenting how feedback is considered and incorporated;
- explaining where and why staff recommendations diverge from stakeholder input.

No single stakeholder group will be afforded decision-making authority, and engagement will not be structured to produce binding outcomes outside of Council action.

Avoiding Consensus-Based Regulation

The City does not intend to develop Downtown standards through a consensus-based process.

While broad input is critical, regulatory standards must be:

- clear,
- measurable,
- enforceable, and
- consistently applied.

In cases where viewpoints conflict, staff will rely on adopted policy, technical analysis, and professional judgment to advance recommendations rather than deferring decisions indefinitely.

Decision Authority and Accountability

Draft standards will be developed by staff, with consultant support as appropriate, and will be advanced to Council for consideration.

Council retains final authority over adoption of standards and subareas. Engagement activities do not replace this authority and will be clearly framed as advisory.

Relationship to Prior Visioning Work

Prior Downtown visioning efforts, including work conducted by Meridian Development Corporation and other partners, will be considered as contextual input.

Elements of those efforts may inform standards where they are consistent with:

- City policy direction,
- feasibility considerations,
- and the regulatory framework established through the overlay.

Visioning materials will not be adopted wholesale as regulation.

SUPPORT MATERIAL A: STANDARDS DEVELOPMENT PROCESS (NARRATIVE)

Development of Downtown overlay standards would follow a structured, staff-led process intended to balance transparency, meaningful involvement, and timely decision-making. The process is designed to inform technical standards development while avoiding open-ended or consensus-based outcomes. Engagement activities are intended to surface issues, test feasibility, and improve clarity, but not to substitute for professional judgment or Council authority.

Initial work would include broad outreach to Downtown property owners, residents, and other interested parties to identify key issues, priorities, and areas of concern. This outreach would focus on understanding how existing regulations function in practice, where predictability is lacking, and where greater coordination is desired. Feedback collected through this phase would be documented and used to inform preparation of a draft framework, rather than serving as a standalone decision-making input.

Following initial outreach, staff would convene a limited technical advisory group. The advisory group would be a small, invitation-based body composed of architects, builders, brokers, and related professionals with direct experience in Downtown or comparable infill development contexts. Selection would emphasize participants with a working understanding of urban site constraints, redevelopment economics, and regulatory implementation, rather than general interest or advocacy positions. The group is not intended to function as a representative body, but as a technical forum to pressure-test draft standards prepared by staff. Participation in the advisory group does not imply endorsement of the final standards or confer decision-making authority. Broader outreach to the larger development community would be in addition to the advisory group.

A qualified consultant may be retained to support facilitation, technical analysis, and synthesis of feedback. The consultant's role would be to assist in refining standards, identifying areas of agreement and disagreement, and providing professional recommendations regarding calibration and implementation. Final standards would be drafted by staff, informed by engagement and technical review, and advanced to Council with clear documentation of how input was considered. Adoption of standards and subareas would occur only through a separate Council action, consistent with the phased approach.

SUPPORT MATERIAL B: CONTEXT

INITIAL DESIGN OBJECTIVE/STANDARD NEEDS:

The following are some initial areas for design objectives/standards to address, and that are not considered in the general context of the City but which may be helpful in the downtown area. These are perhaps more nuanced than what is needed to decide on next steps, but may be helpful in thinking about the problem.

- All sides of a building are important and should be addressed regardless of roadway typology or location of public facilities/open space. The exception may be interior lot lines and/or facades that are not visible.
- More context in design objectives/standards are important.
 - What does the street block look like today and in the future?
 - What is the “District” vision?
 - How does this fit into the Downtown vision?
- There should be something that encourages eliciting the idea of certain materials, construction, age, and of quality, without always requiring specific materials or construction types in all conditions. Some materials may still need to be prohibited, like current standards, either in total or some portion of a façade.
 - The Keller building for example has no brick and is very modern, and has very little historical nods, but people still feel like it has some historical context or at least fits in. What influences that downtown “vibe” in its design, which in reality and at face value, is in stark contrast to discreet product types and architectural styles often referenced?
- There is greater need for more emphasis on details and transitions of surfaces and materials.
 - Generally, windows should have lintels or ledges, windows should be trimmed, mechanical should be integrated, more details should be included at pedestrian level, and parapets needs more than just flashing absent other areas of focus.
 - Need to require more variation in brick rows, fascia or rake molding, cornice work, different siding types, and other details commonly ignored but which elicit the timeless aspect and craftsmanship expected in historic areas.
- Need more residential controls. There are too many duplexes without any character or sense of place, and that lack site improvements, such as sidewalks.
- Delineation or suggestions of discreet units for commercial spaces. Perhaps a mega block building could or should in some cases, looks like smaller adjacent buildings?
- Clarify site and architectural design of public spaces.

PROJECT CONCERNS/OPPORTUNITIES:

The following are concerns and opportunities that may be helpful to consider or to at least be cognizant of.

- A huge influence of architectural character is site design. The ASM currently does very little of this.
 - How do we relate or reference to adopted streetscape standards, and what are the triggers?
 - Why have we been missing sidewalks with new townhomes? That’s the reason for the downtown street plan; curb, gutter, and other streetscape would be better coordinated, but sidewalks was seen as essential for filling in gaps and incrementally improving access.
- **Can we force an automatic administrative design review check, and require oversight process in lieu?** No option. For example, if they have certain associated or previous requests,

such as a CUP for height, or other zoning exception/alternative compliance such as parking or setbacks. The purpose here being to give more oversight to elected officials for certain development configurations or metrics.

Automatic Administrative Review Check	Pros	Cons
Oversight Committee (such as design review)	The current process exists, and tweaks may be feasible with better defined criteria that are not optional.	The current process is almost never used. Unless the oversight committee rejected an application, Council would still not have any direct oversight. Timing essential; project cannot move forward until Committee review and approval. Concurrent permitting review doesn't exist prior to design review except for land development (infrastructure). Same for Public Hearing.
Public Hearing	This would provide greater oversight, without impacting all projects. Could better consider interrelated considerations such as site design, parking, alternative compliance, and whether public funding is included. May be possible to use in conjunction with a committee.	This will require additional time and cost for projects, and may be a disincentive in some cases. If also used with a committee, will require very strict timeline and review sideboards to avoid drifting into Council or P&Z purview.

- What sort of caution flags should we be looking for?
- **I don't think we can globally tie anything to MDC since most of the Old Town land use area is within an expiring URD and the boundaries keep changing.** We could maybe require comments from the URD as a check-list item when applicable, to ensure they've been consulted. That may not require any actual changes if we use express standards. A committee or Council could also direct additional discretionary design review with MDC; would need to define circumstances.
- Similar to the previous, neither HPC or Planning Commission are equipped.
- **Project needs to retain perspective.** Too much discretionary review and too many additional requirements, will be a redevelopment disincentive. All things in good measure.