

MEMORANDUM

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT DEPARTMENT



September 2, 2026

TO: Mayor and City Council
CC: David Miles, Director
Caleb Hood, Deputy Director
Ashley Squyres, MDC Administrator
FROM: Brian McClure, Long-Range Planning Supervisor
RE: Downtown Overlay and Architectural Standards Update

Staff last discussed the Downtown Overlay and Architectural Standards Manual with City Council on May 12, 2026. Since that time, staff have incorporated previous Council direction and continued developing the project. All three project components (previously phases) have advanced. Based on discussion and feedback, staff intend to bring all three project components forward together (instead of separately) for public hearing in line with the project timing. Consolidating the public hearing process will reduce preparation of multiple staff reports, minimize repeated public meeting attendance for interested stakeholders, reduce repeated revisions at multiple points in the process, and allow Council to consider the overall framework as a coordinated, larger package.

For Component 1, enabling code, staff have coordinated with the City Attorney's Office and prepared draft enabling code amendments authorizing the use of overlay zoning within Meridian. Although these amendments could proceed independently, staff plan to bring them forward concurrently as part of the larger downtown overlay package.

For Component 2, defining the downtown overlay itself, discussion drafts have been created to help stakeholders understand the intent of the work. This material is being vetted and revised through the code working group prior to broader public outreach. The code working group includes representatives from public agencies, architecture and planning professions, the Historic Preservation Commission, Planning and Zoning Commission, and the UDC Focus Group. This group has met twice and reviewed several text iterations. Stakeholder discussion has primarily focused on street priority for building orientation, performance standards for elements like frontage or lot coverage requirements, the importance of the area south of the railroad tracks, and historic preservation.

For Component 3, updates to the Architectural Standards Manual, working drafts have similarly been prepared and shared with the standards technical working group. These drafts respond to comments from MDC's original proposed updates to City Council in their Destination Downtown discussions. The Architectural Standards Manual will be retrofitted with a new section providing direction for overlays, specifically the downtown overlay. These updates build upon the City's existing Architectural Standards Manual rather than creating a new document.

Per direction, the updates will remain express standards, those things that are measurable or yes/no. This technical working group has met once, with a couple of meetings cancelled due to holiday and staff being out of the office. Although discussion of the individual changes proposed by staff has been limited, discussion to date has focused on the difficulty of defining high-quality materials, translating “good examples” of downtown buildings into clear approval standards, and historic preservation.

Both the code and standards technical working groups have also discussed the approval process and MDC’s request to tighten administrative design relief, including alternative compliance and design standard exceptions. There is recognition that these processes have not always produced consistent or intended outcomes. At the same time, routing requests that cannot be approved administratively through a full public hearing would add time, cost, and uncertainty while shifting decisions toward greater discretion. That risk is compounded because the standards are intended to establish a minimum level of effort, not to make a discretionary determination of whether a proposal constitutes “good design.” Those burdens may fall unevenly, as larger or more experienced applicants are generally better positioned to absorb additional process and uncertainty than smaller or incremental projects. A paired request has therefore been to explore a limited public-meeting mechanism for secondary review.

Staff anticipate returning to Council for discussion with drafts following the code and standards technical working group process and initial public response. The first two components are in strong, coherent form, with the standards component somewhat further behind. Staff would like to make the materials more widely available for public awareness and review this fall. The project schedule still contemplates beginning the public hearing process in spring 2027.