

DAG strongly urges sufficient funding for Philadelphia's Department of Planning & Development

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For decades, and despite valiant efforts and many successes, Philadelphia's planning, development and housing agencies were largely faced with managing the city's seemingly inexorable decline.

Now, the fundamentals are altogether different. The city's population is growing. Many languishing neighborhoods are seeing new investment. Construction abounds.

The charge before Philadelphia's new Department of Planning & Development, created in 2015 by a public vote and implemented in 2017 by the Kenney administration, is now to manage growth and, with it, new challenges including gentrification, affordable housing, historic preservation, persistent poverty and, of particular concern to the Design Advocacy Group (DAG), high-quality urban design.

Doing so requires sufficient resources. As the administration prepares its annual budget, DAG urges that adequate funding be allocated to enable DPD to fulfill its potential to guide the city at this critical juncture.

As Philadelphia continues on its upward economic trajectory and its population grows, the city faces a once-in-a-generation opportunity to shape its progress to benefit all its residents in all neighborhoods through a coordinated and cohesive approach to planning and development.

The DPD is uniquely positioned to do that. Comprising the Art Commission, Philadelphia City Planning Commission, Development Services, Division of Housing and Community Development, Historical Commission and the Zoning Board of Adjustment, DPD touches virtually every aspect of planning and regulating growth in the physical city.

Yet many of its operational units are seriously underfunded.

While no single agency can be credited with creating the city's current growth, the Planning Commission has indisputably laid a groundwork in recent years, with a new comprehensive plan, a new zoning code and a renewed focus on neighborhoods and housing revitalization.

Yet the commission remains seriously understaffed, with a third fewer planners than under the Street administration. In 2015, DAG found that Boston, with a population considerably less than half of Philadelphia's, had 40% more staff

in its combined planning and redevelopment agency. San Francisco's Planning Department had 55% more per capita staff than our own.

Philadelphia's Planning Commission staff is efficient and productive, but it cannot keep up without adequate staffing levels. especially with the critical, big-picture work currently before it, notably the community-engaged planning effort that affects literally every block in the city. Sixteen of 18 Philadelphia2035 district plans, the city's comprehensive plan, are completed, providing a blueprint for development and serving as the basis for exhaustive revisions to the city's outdated zoning maps. The staff is now working with other agencies to implement these recommendations, including City Council for the zoning remapping. This work is essential for responsible growth, redevelopment and preservation. The commission is also charged with commenting on many of the steadily growing number of development proposals. More planning professionals are urgently required.

The Art Commission is similarly under-resourced. Charged with approving the design of all construction on city property or funded with city money, along with reviewing public art, it has a staff of one.

Inadequate resources at the Historical Commission are well documented. Much smaller cities with far fewer historic resources are consistently better funded and staffed. The commission was able to add two preservation planner positions last year – which DAG strongly supported – but the commission is still hard-pressed to fulfill its ongoing work of reviewing and processing building applications, to say nothing of the public education and outreach it is also charged with.

DAG and its sister organizations, concerned with quality urban design, preservation, fair housing and more, frequently critique the decisions and actions, or inaction, of the DPD. As watchdogs and advocates, that is as it should be and it will continue.

But at the same time, DAG fully recognizes how urgently DPD and its operational units require sufficient funding – now – in order to rise to the vast number of urgent challenges before them as the city emerges from decades of torpor. Only DPD is in the position to coordinate a citywide approach to smart and deliberative growth with effectual planning, quality design and sound implementation.