

Policy Briefing Memo



City of Seattle
Edward B. Murray, Mayor

Date: August 18, 2015
To: PLUS Committee members, Council staff
From: Dave LaClergue, DPD (733-9668)
Subject: U District Urban Design update

Briefing Objective:

To review ongoing planning work in the U District. Upcoming Council decisions will include Comp Plan amendments (September 2015) and zoning changes (early 2016). Major issues in the community are open space, balancing growth with neighborhood identity, and housing affordability.

Background:

Changes are underway in the U District. Since 2011, the City has been working closely with neighborhood groups, UW, and other stakeholders to prepare for light rail (2021), shape development, grow businesses and jobs, support a diversity of residents, and integrate neighborhood amenities as the district grows and changes.

This has been a broad community process that includes active participation through the [U District Partnership](#) as well as hundreds of meetings with neighborhood groups and individuals.

Project outcomes include (See Appendix 1 for partial timeline):

- 1) An [Urban Design Framework](#) (UDF), led by DPD, establishes a shared vision for urban design, development, public spaces and other features of a dense and healthy transit-oriented neighborhood. (Complete, 2013)
- 2) [A Business District Strategic Framework](#) sponsored by OED's *Only in Seattle* program. (Complete, 2013)
- 3) The newly formed "[U District Partnership](#)" organization that will continue to lead neighborhood events and initiatives in coming years. (Various City grants 2012-present, BIA approved 2015)
- 4) [Green street concept plans](#) to coordinate pedestrian and landscape improvements along key streets. Includes a curbless festival street, to be incorporated in Sound Transit's station design. (Complete, 2015)
- 5) [Environmental Impact Statement](#) to evaluate a range of possible zoning/development scenarios. (Complete, 2015)

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- 6) [Open Space forums and plan](#) update to identify strategies for meeting the neighborhood's open space needs. (Draft in public review)
- 7) [Comprehensive Plan amendments](#) to update the Future Land Use Map and goal/policy language to reflect recent outreach. (Recommendations at Council September 2015)
- 8) Zoning amendments to increase height around the light rail station, customize development standards, apply new housing and public space programs. (DPD drafting recommendations for public review in late 2015)
- 9) Neighborhood Design Guidelines, to be completed after the zoning is adopted.

The City's work in the U District includes substantial cross-department collaboration. From early 2011, the project has integrated work by DPD, SDOT, OED, DON, Parks, Police, and other departments. Continued coordination between departments is an important way for the City to show good faith to the neighborhood going forward.

Key themes we've heard:

For the most part we've heard agreement on the following points...

- The U District needs investments and growth, but people also value aspects of the existing character of the neighborhood. This requires a careful balance.
- To reduce impacts to existing housing stock and capitalize on public investment, concentrate growth near light rail and campus (south of NE 50th St.) – reduce the spread to the north and avoid rezones to single family areas.
- Encourage new housing and amenities to serve a broader mix of residents. In addition to students, provide options for seniors, families, professionals. Maintain and expand affordable housing options along with market-rate residences.
- Improve the quality and variety of buildings. People criticize much of the current development as being homogenous, bulky, out of scale, and lacking community benefits.
- Upgrade the “public realm” of the neighborhood. Create new parks and open spaces, improve the sidewalks and bike routes, and provide better management of existing parks.
- Make sure transportation improvements (light rail, buses, pedestrians, bikers, cars) are coordinated for a better system over time.

Aside from support for these fundamentals, we've heard a wide range of opinions on appropriate building heights, density, open space, and housing. DPD is taking these conflicting perspectives into consideration as we draft zoning recommendations.

Comp Plan amendments:

DPD has transmitted Comp Plan amendments for Council consideration in September 2015. These map and language changes reflect input over the past several years, and some of the changes relate to zoning changes DPD will recommend in late 2015 or early 2016. Specifics include:

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- Expanding and contracting the urban center boundary in some locations. The total size of the urban center would stay the same, but areas would be added and taken out based on specific neighborhood requests (see Appendix 2).
- Re-designating some areas from multifamily residential to mixed/use commercial. These changes would help the map better reflect existing uses and respond to some desired zoning changes (see Appendix 2).
- Updating goal and policy language to get rid of obsolete terms and concepts from '98 neighborhood plan, and to reflect more recent community priorities like the "innovation district" and a central plaza.
- Remove highly detailed provisions that are better addressed through zoning and design guidelines.

Zoning proposal:

Existing zoning is a blend of multifamily residential and neighborhood commercial zones, with heights ranging from 35'-85' (see Appendix 3). The preliminary draft zoning recommendations would focus more of the neighborhood's future development in the core, adjacent to light rail, campus, and existing highrise. New zoning would be predominantly mixed use, with heights up to 240' and 320' in places (see Appendix 4). Heights would stay the same or relatively low on the Ave, to help preserve the street's special role as a pedestrian shopping district and hub of cultural life.

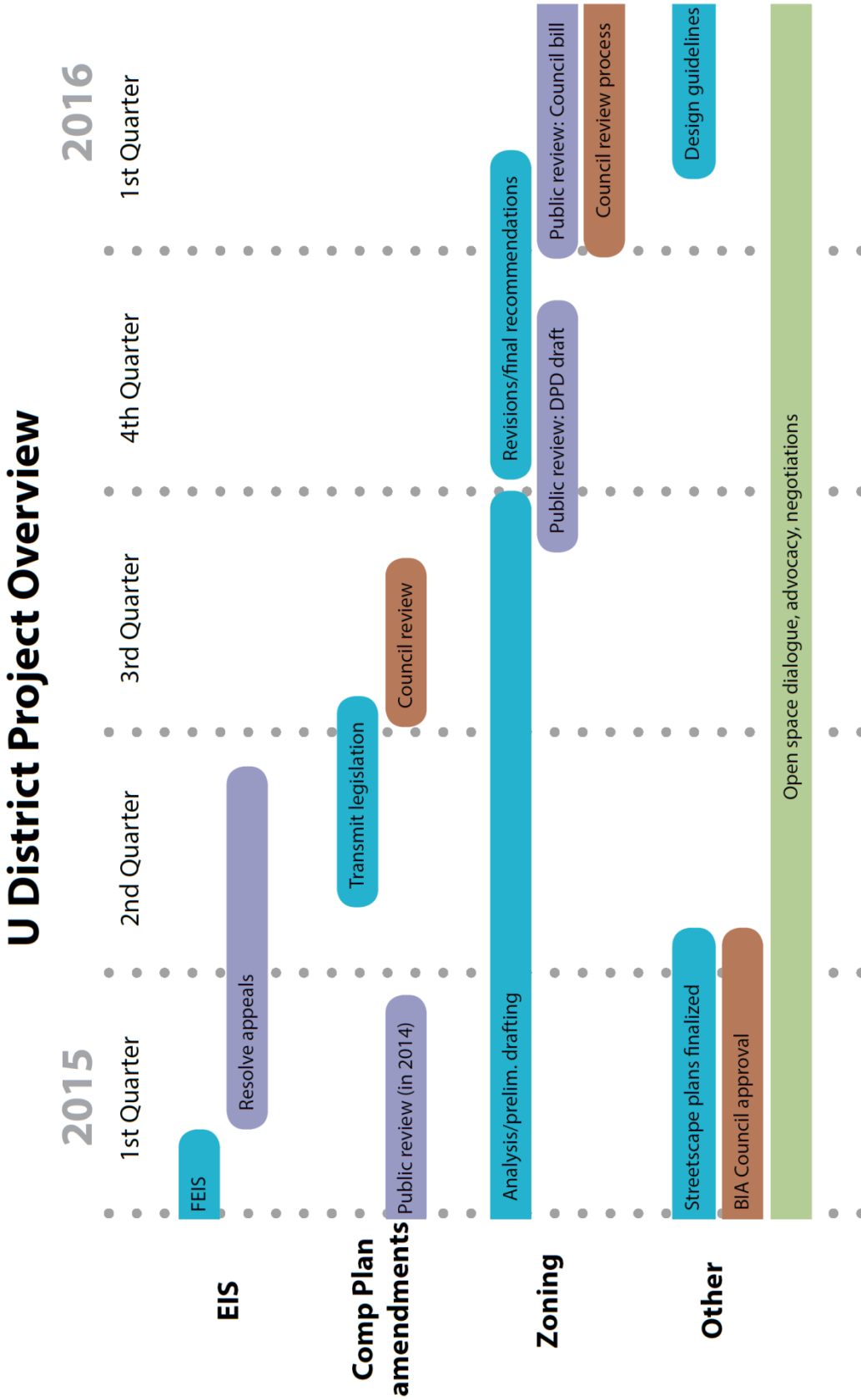
Additional height/floor area would come along with new incentive zoning and affordable housing requirements (consistent with HALA), as well as detailed development standards. In particular, tower spacing, street level standards, and various setback provisions will influence the future buildings of the U District.

Note that additional capacity is not needed to accommodate growth over the next 20 years – this proposal is primarily about shaping growth to better address community concerns and priorities. DPD anticipates releasing recommendations for public review sometime in the fall of 2015, and transmitting legislation to Council in early 2016.

Open space planning:

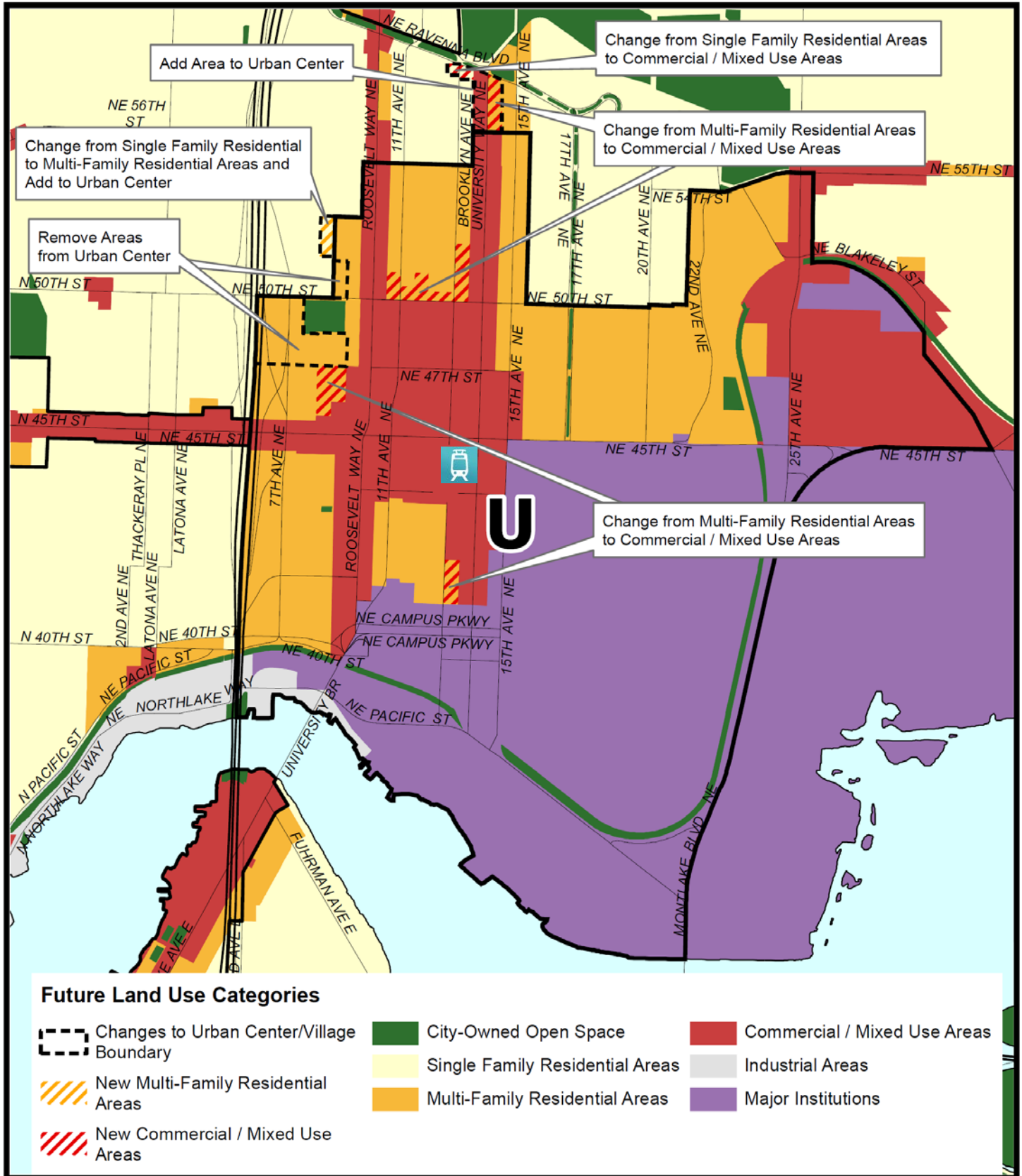
Many in the neighborhood have advocated for a centrally located plaza, which would help address the neighborhood's long-standing desire for more public space. Some have concerns about maintenance and management of existing and future open spaces. DPD and Parks have helped sponsor a series of public forums on open space, and a draft Open Space Plan is currently out for review. See Appendix 5 for possible plaza locations – conversations between the City and area property owners are underway.

Appendix 1: Timeline



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Appendix 2: Comp Plan Future Land Use Map amendments

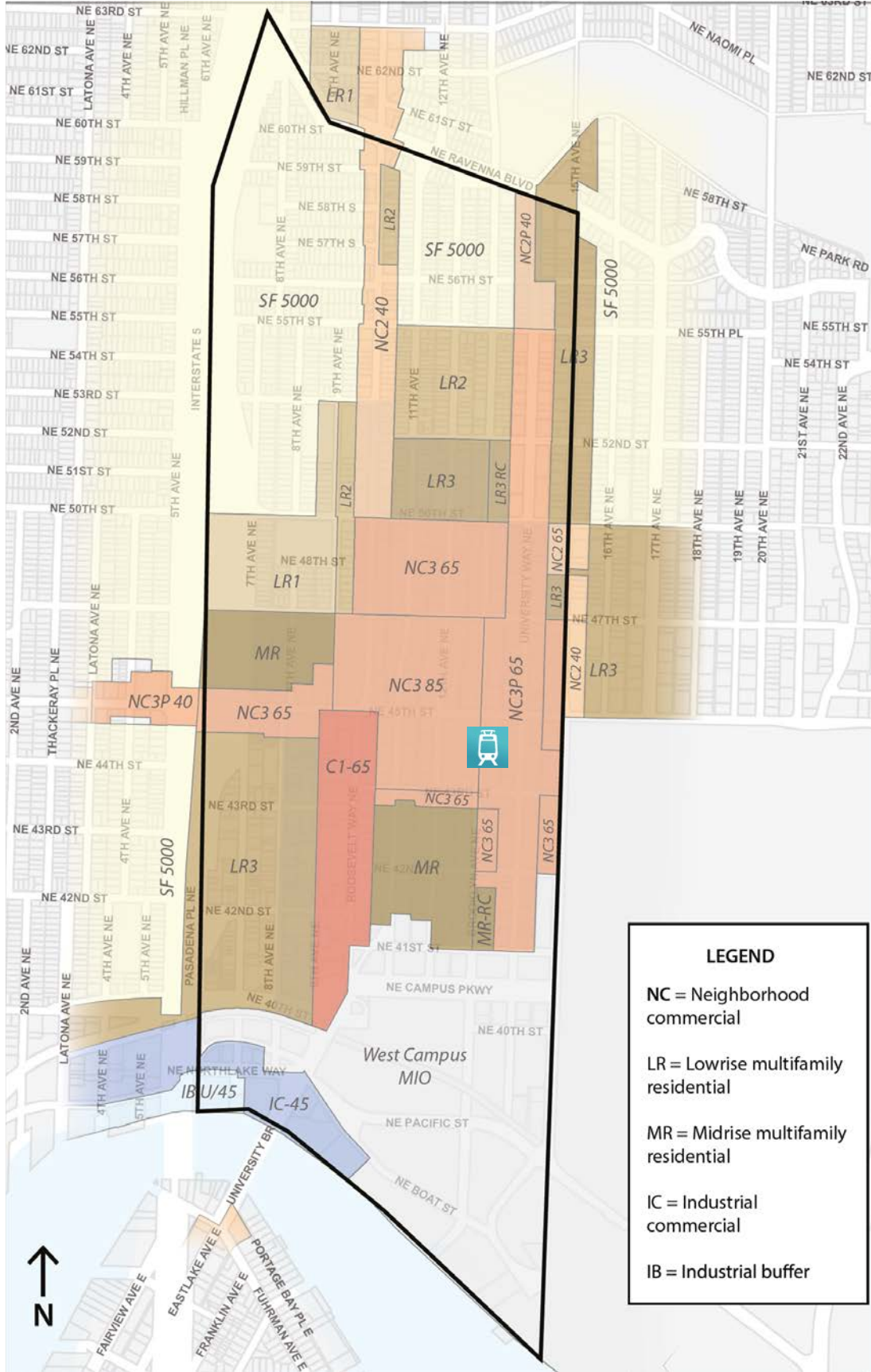


Date: 1/30/2015

Attachment 1 to DPD-U District Comp Plan 2015 ORD

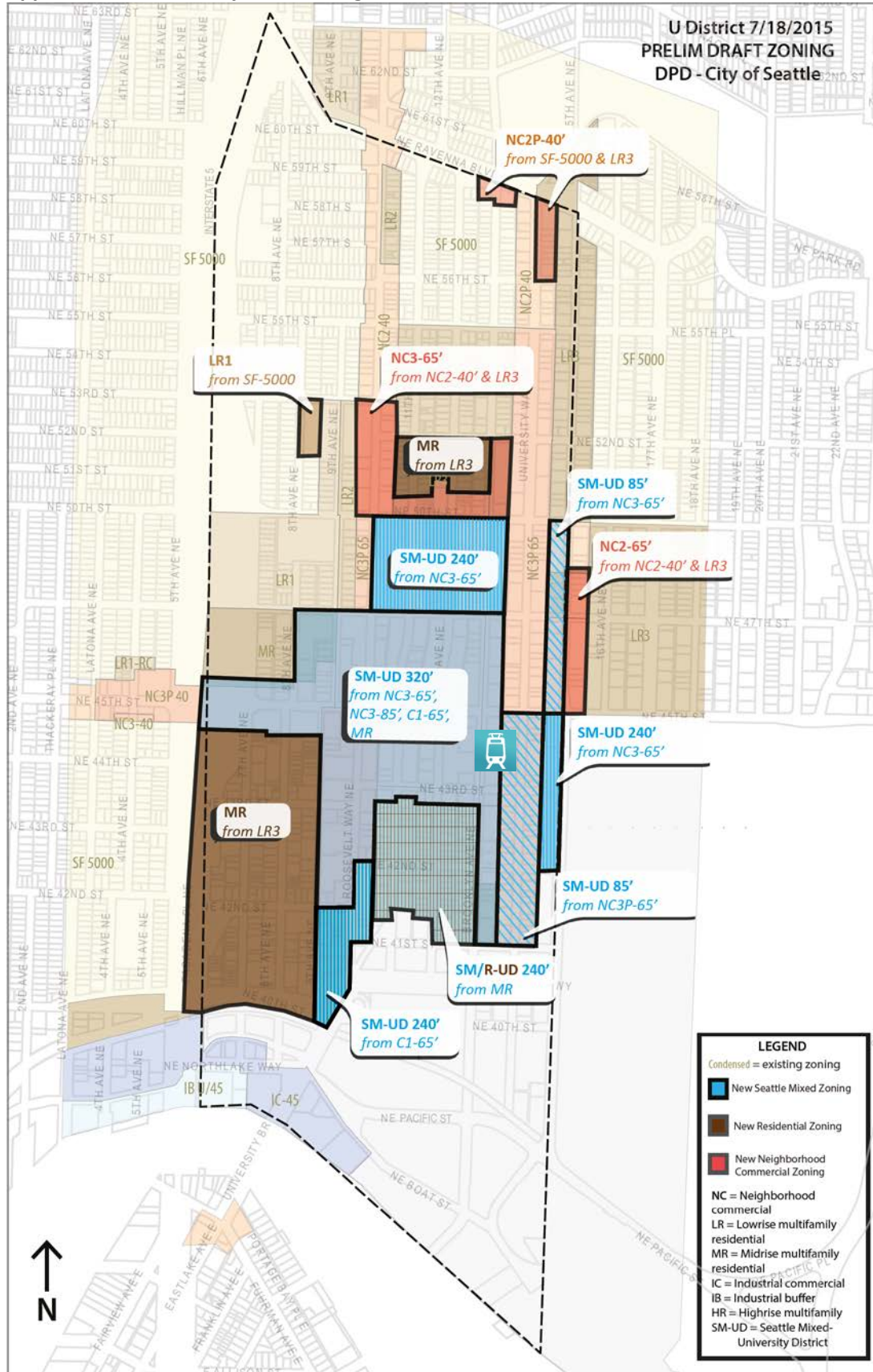
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Appendix 3: Existing zoning



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Appendix 4: Preliminary draft zoning recommendations



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Appendix 5: Potential plaza locations

