PLACE Design Task Force
Memorandum
March 16, 2017
To: Maurice Jones City Manager
Re: Strategic Design and Planning Position

On March 9, 2017 PLACE Design Task Force conducted its second round of discussions on the topic of what has colloquially been called The City Architect position. Though no formal recommendations as to how the City might proceed can be offered by PLACE at this time, we identify numerous principles and guiding values for consideration by the City Manager and Council.

1. The informal name currently being used is both misleading and not altogether representative of the issues at hand. Rather than suggesting that a sole individual in the form of an architect is the correct path forward we advise being more open about the potential decision. There might be a new department, or individuals added to several departments. Skill sets might be better found among planners or urban designers. The entire issue might be best resolved in the form of a commonly held, City-wide attitude about design, zoning and architecture where no new positions are created. Thus we think of the “title” more broadly and have begun to use terms such as; “Strategic Planning”, or “Long Range Visioning” and so forth. We find it is crucial to focus on a city that is Human Centered and Place Based.

2. The presumption is we have a need to be filled not currently served by the City’s structure or approach, that the several departments tasked with our planning objectives are not presently taking on the work of long range planning and design, that they are all but consumed with the work of reviewing plans and maintaining services, that we are reactive rather than proactive, that we are not taking a critical view of what lays ahead nor laying out objectives and methods to create a desirable future for our built environment. Recommendation #27 from the Efficiency Study Report describes the need for a new leadership position addressing these concerns.

3. This presumption is made alongside recognition of the work of the Comprehensive Plan. Whereas that effort is critical to our success it is often viewed as not fully suitable to capture the potential in how we realize the physical space of our public places. More can be done to focus on qualitative assessments, translating the goals of the Comprehensive Plan into “roadmaps” for a successful built environment. The new position or department can be charged with fleshing out the Comprehensive Plan, thinking of it as a living document for the entire City.

4. Emphasis is placed on taking a visionary approach to planning and design. We should establish a way to hold on to this vision and ensure all development adheres to and furthers the desired outcomes. This might involve additional oversight or review on the part of the new position or department.

5. As the City conducts its code audit and considers adoption of a Form Based Code it is recognized that most cities with FBC’s have a Code Administrator responsible for its application and interpretation. The considered position should be viewed as the curator of this code.
6. There are numerous departments already engaged in the work of the city that deal with physical reality. These include, but might not be limited to, Neighborhood Development Services, Engineering, Economic Development, Parks & Recreation, Public Works and the Housing Authority. There are commissions and committees at work as well such as the Planning Commission, Board of Architectural Review, Redevelopment and Housing Authority, Tree Commission, Bike Ped Advisory Committee and PLACE. These groups conduct important work and perform well and coordinate in the form of the Development Review Team and Lead Team Meetings. It is viewed that these ties could be strengthened and the City might enjoy improved outcomes with more emphasis on interdisciplinary objectives.

7. Fitting a new position within our current City structure presents many questions. It might be best to create a position vision within NDS answering to the department head. It might be preferred to create a new Assistant City Manager role where oversight of the various departments resolves in one place of some authority. Another structure involves placing representatives within each department who are responsible for cross-group coordination and reporting. It might be necessary that the department has a direct line to City Council.

8. Engaging the community is paramount to success. Any new position or department must work with neighborhood representatives, developers and design professionals on an ongoing basis. Getting ahead of development is of the highest importance to ensure economic drivers and urban design goals are aligned. Looking at the City as series of neighborhoods with distinct issues and identifying important nodes of opportunity can be an important part of implementation.

Research supplemental to our discussions included discussion with:

Geoff Farrell - Form Based Codes Institute and principal at Farrell Madden.
Justin Filango - Planner, Arlington County
Alice Raucher - University Architect, UVa
Connie Warnock – Assistant University Architect, UVa
Chris Zimmerman – Smart Growth America
Andrew Gast-Bray- Albemarle County Director of Planning
Alex Ikefuna – Charlottesville Director of NDS
Maurice Jones – Charlottesville City Manager
Mike Murphy – Charlottesville Assistant Manager
Lisa Robertson – Charlottesville City Attorney

Additional discussions are planned with:
Marina Kouhry – Duaney Plater Zyberk, Form Based Code Administrator for Kentlands
Marta Goldsmith – Form Based Code Institute
Karyn Gilvarg – Planning New Haven, Connecticut

Submitted March 17, 2017  PLACE Design Task Force