

**COMMISSION ACTION FORM**

**SUBJECT: ZONING TEXT AMENDMENT TO CHANGE CAMPUSTOWN BUILDING HEIGHT STEP-BACK.**

The City's current Campustown Service Center zoning standards establish a maximum height of 30 feet for those portions of buildings that are within 15 feet of the right-of-way of three street blocks: Lincoln Way between Hayward and Stanton Avenues and Welch Avenue between Lincoln Way and Chamberlin Streets. (See Attachment A Location Map) On August 27, 2013 the City Council initiated a zoning text amendment to revise this standard. Campustown Service Center zoning principally allows for commercial uses, but also allows for residential uses above the ground floor in a mixed-use building. This report explains this "step-back" requirement and why it was established. It also describes the proposed zoning text amendment and why the City Council initiated it.

**BACKGROUND:**

The area around the University campus is generally described as the University Impacted Area. The Land Use Policy Plan describes the area south of University campus as being made up of districts, each with a distinct character, well defined by building use, type, scale, setting, intended activity level, and other characteristics. It further states:

*At the core, in the Campustown Service Center, buildings will be the largest and residential densities will be the highest, supporting lively commercial activity at the street level. Building placement, design, and materials reinforce a dynamic, pedestrian-friendly neighborhood character. (P. 51)*

**One of the primary objectives of land use policy in the area south of the University campus (Campustown) is to seek intensification and to guide new infill development so that it is compatible with existing development.** The Land Use Policy Plan calls for compatibility standards to guide the design integration of new development with existing development. Compatibility standards address scale, height, exterior materials, rhythms, and other building elements.

A Sub-Area Plan for the University Impacted Area included an inventory conducted in 2003 and 2004 of all buildings and property within the areas south and west of campus. The inventory and analysis identified a Center Commercial District in which 85% of all buildings were two stories or less in height and most were located at the right-of-way line with a zero set-back. It was determined that these characteristics contribute to the "pedestrian-friendly neighborhood character" of this commercial area. In other words, the buildings along the street form the boundaries of urban space of a size that

promotes and encourages people to walk as a means to go from place to place within the district. (See Attachment B for a graphical summary of the findings and conclusions of the planning for this area.)

In the several years immediately prior to this sub-area planning effort, two large residential projects were built: the Cyclone Plaza at 200 Stanton and the Legacy Tower at 119 Stanton. Legacy Tower is the tallest building in Campustown at 114 feet. Each project provides more residential units at higher densities than had ever been developed previously. Public input throughout the sub-area planning revealed that many people believe that these tall buildings significantly altered the physical character of the area. Furthermore, if this development pattern continued, it was feared that a “canyon effect” along the streets could result. In addition, experience from these new structures showed that people in the living units adjacent to the streets could throw objects onto pedestrians as a potential safety hazard.

Public and stakeholders who provided input to the sub-area plan included neighborhood associations, ISU staff, Campustown business and property owners, students and the general public. Viewpoints from this input included the following perspectives:

- Support for the larger buildings,
- Concern that the capacity for new residential use in the area may have been reached due to traffic, parking and intensity concerns,
- Concern that tall buildings may change sun/shade and wind conditions, affecting the quality of the pedestrian environment,
- Concern that further height restrictions could reduce the feasibility of residential buildings, due to the relatively shallow depth from the street of some lots, and
- Some who feel the larger buildings are out of place.

In response, the sub-area plan states the following:

*Along Lincoln Way between Stanton and Hayward Avenue and along Welch Avenue between Lincoln Way and Chamberlain Street, as building height increases to the maximum, the building face should step back from any street right-of-way line.*

Since adding a step-back standard would reduce the buildable volume available for each property, the Plan also stated that the maximum building height would be increased from seven stories to nine stories, approximately 115 feet.

**Based upon the Sub-Area Plan process, in 2006 the City Council approved the current zoning development standards for the core of the Campustown Service Center that set a maximum height of 115 feet and require a step-back of 15 feet for a building to be taller than 30 feet (approximately two stories) along the portion of the Lincoln Way and Welch Avenue frontages within that core. In an area that has traditionally contained mostly one and two-story buildings, this step**

**back standard for building height reduces the visual impact of new, taller buildings from the street.**

### **NEED FOR AMENDING STEP-BACK REQUIREMENT**

The effects on building design were anticipated at the time of their approval, as evident in the accommodation of allowing for more height to compensate for the requirement. However, the standards were written in anticipation of taller buildings that would be significantly higher than their surrounding uses. The effect of the standard is to either require a whole building to be set back 15 feet from a street or to place the first two floors at the street and then step back all upper floors. This creates a choice of creating either ground level usable space with a full setback to maximize building layout efficiency or to design the building with modified structural support to allow for an upper floor step back and more building area on the ground floor.

Kingland Systems has purchased most of the buildings in the 2400 block of Lincoln Way (excepting Cranford Apartments) and the two properties immediately south extending from Welch to Stanton. Kingland Systems is a software and computer services company located there and needs to expand its space. The site would have frontage along Lincoln Way, Welch, and Stanton. It intends to construct a 3-story, 75,000 square foot commercial building. First floor would be entirely commercial. Kingland will occupy the second level and is finalizing arrangements to lease the third level to Iowa State University. Kingland Systems requested City Council initiate a review of the third-story step-back requirement for commercial buildings in an effort to more efficiently meet the design needs of constructing office space. The costs of stepping back a building for one floor of the building is not cost effective for their approach to redeveloping the site.

Kingland points out that a building only three stories high will not contribute to a canyon affect and that Lincoln Way does not have buildings on the north side. Also, no residential use is proposed. Kingland states that the building will have other specific design elements that break up the structure and present an appearance of multiple buildings. A variety of exterior materials are proposed that are compatible with surrounding architecture. The roof height will be lower than the Cranford Apartments to the east.

### **PROPOSED AMENDMENT:**

On August 27, 2013, City Council considered various options to pursue in initiating a modification to the building height step-back requirement. This included considering additional design standards for pedestrian related features, eliminating requirement along Lincoln Way frontage only, allowing a three-story commercial building with no step back for all properties in Campustown, or allowing a three-story commercial building with no step-back for a site with frontage along Lincoln Way, including side streets. (See Attachment C for full descriptions)

**The City Council referred to staff Option 5 of exempting commercial buildings with a site on Lincoln Way that are three stories or less from the step-back requirement. This option would allow for corner properties along Lincoln Way to also have relief from the requirement along side streets, such as Stanton, Welch, and Hayward. (See Attachment D Proposed Change to Zoning Text)**

**ALTERNATIVES:**

1. The Planning and Zoning Commission can recommend that the City Council approve the proposed draft amendment to exempt from the step-back standard buildings of 3 stories or less that do not have residential uses and are located on sites that have frontage on Lincoln Way.
2. The Planning and Zoning Commission can recommend that the City Council approve the proposed draft amendment language with modifications.
3. The Planning and Zoning Commission can recommend that the City Council not adopt the proposed text amendments.
4. The Planning and Zoning Commission can request that staff provide specific additional information and further consider the proposed text amendment.

**RECOMMENDED ACTION:**

The required step-back in building height is an important tool for providing for more intense development in the core area of Campustown, while maintaining the character of the area. However, buildings of three stories do not come near the maximum allowable height and are much less likely to have the impacts associated with a “canyon effect” than originally anticipated. Additionally, with the width of Lincoln Way and the open space of the University on the north side of the street, the character of the urban space is quite different from Welch Avenue and other streets within Campustown that are more confined. The proposed height of three stories is also not excessively greater than the right-of-way width on Welch Avenue, which is 66 feet, creating reasonable space to building height ratio. There is a valid safety concern for pedestrians along streets in Campustown if there are many dwelling units directly above them; standards for residential development should reflect this concern.

**Staff therefore recommends that the Commission act in accordance with Alternative 1, which is to recommend that the City Council approve the proposed draft amendment to exempt from the step-back standard commercial buildings of 3 stories or less that do not have residential uses and are located on sites that have frontage on Lincoln Way.**

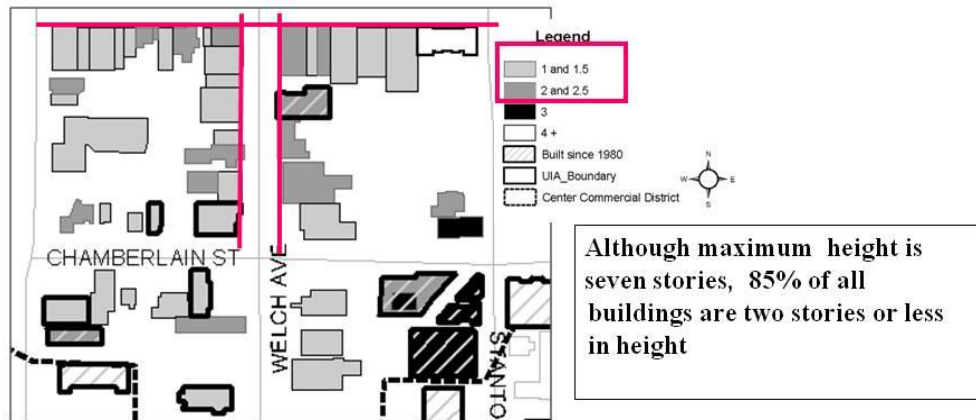
## Attachment A Location Map



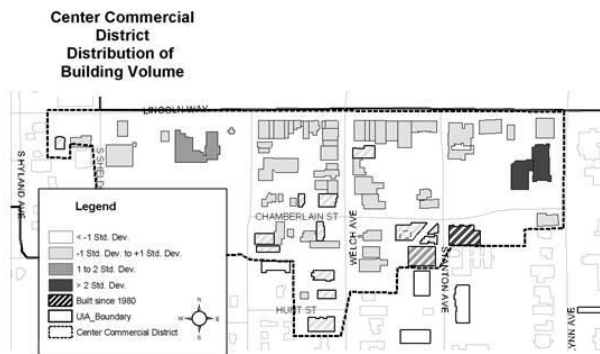


## Attachment B – Summary of Building Height and Step-back Standards

### Building Height in Center Commercial District



These buildings, placed at the street rights-of-way create a distinctly pedestrian scale at the center of this district.



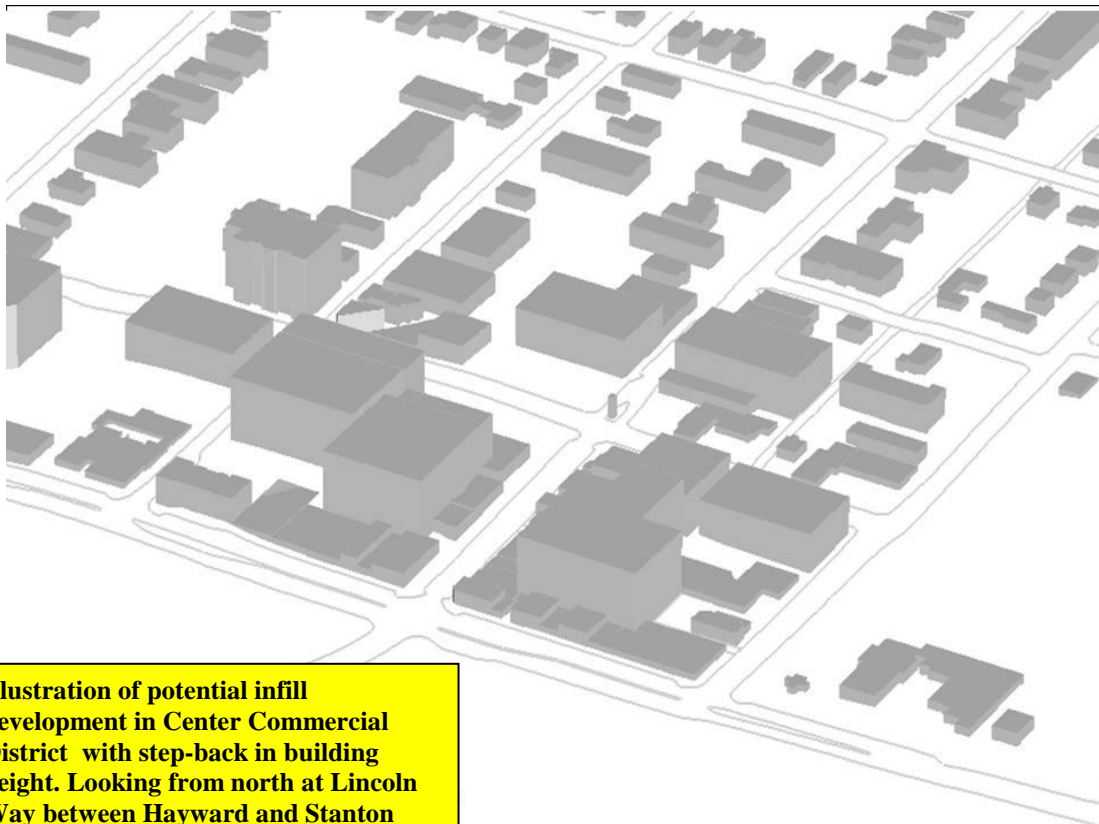
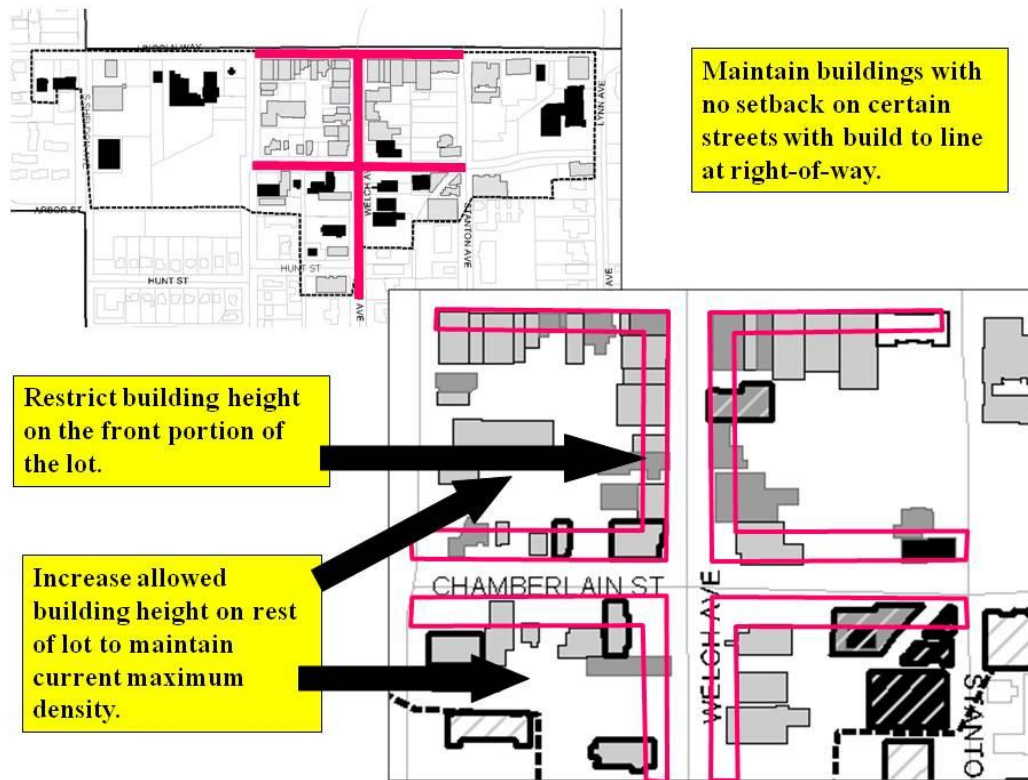
Recent and future development consistent with the city's land use and zoning policy will continue to significantly alter the physical character of the district.



The primary goal in the Center Commercial district should be to preserve and extend those characteristic that make it an active, lively pedestrian-oriented place with a variety of uses and spaces.



## Attachment B – Summary of Building Height and Step-back Standards





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Example of building with step-back in height in Champaign, Illinois

Alternative: Use of materials, building form, windows, doors, and details in the bottom two or three stories should create pedestrian scale and encourage activity.





**Attachment C**  
**Excerpt of Step-Back Amendment options from City Council Report 8-27-2013**

Option 1. No action, leaving the current standard in place, and step-back the building.

Kingland Systems can avoid the cost of the step-back by placing the front of the building 15 feet from the right-of-way. However, this will reduce available area for parking in the rear of the building which is required by the prospective tenants.

Option 2. Initiate a zoning text amendment with design standards for building façades that create interest at the street level and pedestrian scale.

This approach recognizes the differences between each project and, with general standards and architectural review, can allow needed flexibility for buildings that are not as tall or do not have residential units. This approach could replace the step-back standard or be an option for projects where the step-back standard is not appropriate. It would require a discretionary design review process for implementation.

Option 3. Initiate a zoning text amendment deleting the step-back requirement for the block facing along Lincoln Way only.

With the width of Lincoln Way and the open space of the University on the north side of the street, the character of this urban space is quite different from Welch Avenue and other streets within Campustown that are more narrow. To promote compatibility with existing buildings in the area, design standards as described in Alternative 2 could also be required within zoning.

Option 4. Initiate a zoning text amendment revising the step-back standard by increasing the allowable height to allow a maximum of three stories without a step-back for all properties in Campustown, while prohibiting residential units on the third floor.

The current requirement of a step-back for buildings over 30 feet, or two stories, is based on the predominant building height in the core area. There is no “correct” height standard, as its appropriateness may vary by context. Rather, the principle is to limit the height at the street face so that it is not greater than the right-of-way width, which on Welch Avenue is 66 feet. This option would apply to all buildings within the area specified in the Code and appears to satisfy the safety and scale issues associated with tall buildings at the street right-of-way. The 15 foot step-back requirement would be maintained for buildings over three stories, or for projects with residential uses.

Option 5. Initiate a zoning text amendment revising the step-back standard to 3-stories for all buildings on sites that have frontage on Lincoln Way and prohibiting residential units on the third floor.

This would allow corner properties along Lincoln Way to have building facades extend down Welch and Stanton without a step-back. The 15 foot step-back requirement would be maintained for buildings over three stories. It would not affect the majority of Campustown properties; and would meet Kingland Systems’ interests.

**Attachment D – Proposed Change to Zoning Text  
Excerpt from Table 29.809(3)**

	means of access from a public street or alley may have one driveway from the street of up to 20-ft in width.
Minimum Height	25 feet
Maximum height in portions of CSC bounded by: Lincoln Way Stanton Avenue Hunt Street Hayward Avenue	115 feet
Maximum height within fifteen (15) feet of the right-of-way lines of: Lincoln Way from Hayward Avenue to Stanton Avenue Welch Avenue from Lincoln Way to Chamberlain Street	30 feet <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-top: 10px;">           Except buildings of three stories height or less with frontage on Lincoln Way and without residential use         </div>
Maximum Height in all other locations	75 feet.
Parking Allowed Between Buildings and Streets	No
Windows	More than 50% of the area of primary or secondary façade between