

# Grand St Commons/Mt. Baker Housing Vacation

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Mayor

**Samuel Assefa**  
Director, OPCD

**Brianna Holan**, Chair

**Justin Clark**, Vice Chair

**Kim Baker**

**Elizabeth Conner**

**Azzurra Cox**

**Mark Johnson**

**Rick Krochalis**

**Amalia Leighton**

**Vinita Sidhu**

**Elaine Wine**

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## Commissioners Present

Brianna Holan, Chair  
Justin Clark, Vice Chair  
Elizabeth Conner  
Azzurra Cox  
Mark Johnson  
Rick Krochalis  
Amalia Leighton  
Vinita Sidhu  
Elaine Wine

## Commissioners Excused

Kim Baker

## Project Description

Mt. Baker Housing Association, an affordable housing developer based in Seattle's Rainier Valley neighborhood, is proposing to vacate an alley between S Grand St. and S Holgate St. in the North Rainier HUB Urban Village. If the vacation is approved, the applicant will develop over 200 units of affordable housing at the 60 percent area median income (AMI). The development will include a variety of unit sizes from studios to three bedrooms. The building will be a part of a larger 3-block development developed in conjunction with Lake Union Partners. The developments are located along Rainier Ave S between S State St and S Holgate St, and include ground level commercial and office space as well as market rate and affordable housing.

The alley proposed for vacation runs north to south in the block bounded by Rainier Ave S, S 22nd Ave, S Grand St, 23rd Ave S, and S Holgate St. The public benefit that is being proposed is a plaza in the ROW bounded by Rainier Ave S on the west, the property line of the alley vacation block on the east, and the property line of the block north of the current Grand St on the north.

## Meeting Summary

This was the Seattle Design Commission's (SDC) third review of the Grand Street Commons Alley Vacation project. The purpose of this meeting was to provide the first formal review of the Public Benefit package, as required by the City Council Street Vacation policies (Resolution 31809). (Preliminary comments on the package were provided at a subcommittee meeting on November 5, 2020.) The SDC did not vote on the Public Benefit package at this meeting, but provided recommendations for further development of the proposal. The SDC will review the Public Benefit package again at a future meeting.

## Recusals and Disclosures

None

**February 4, 2021**

1:30- 3:50 pm

**Project Type**

Alley Vacation

**Phase**

Public benefit

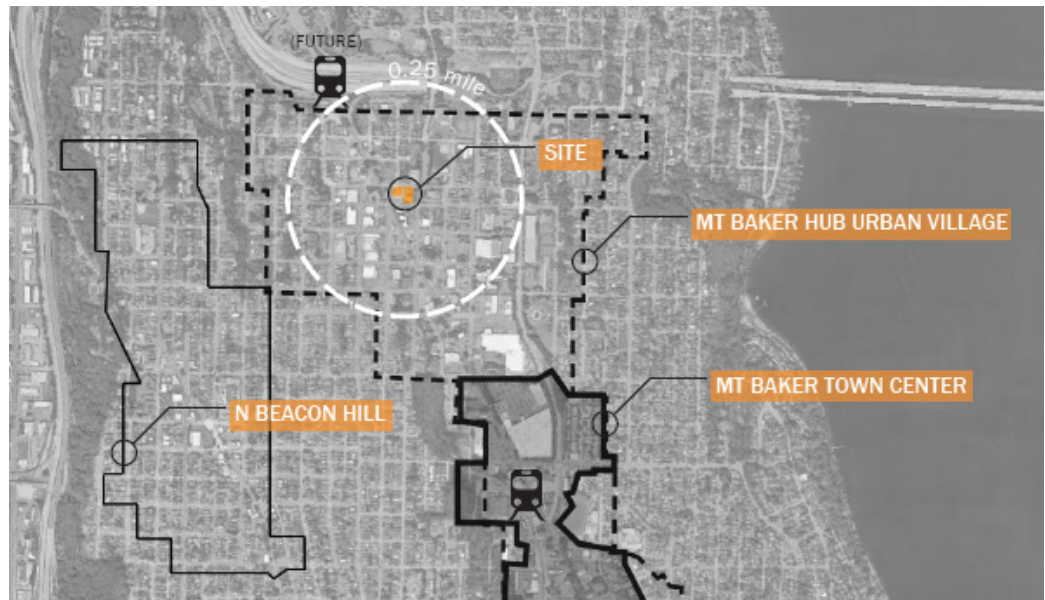
**Previous Reviews**[11/5/20](#), [11/21/19](#)**Presenters**Conner Hansen  
Mt. Baker HousingQuanlin Hu  
Mt. Baker HousingKris Snider  
HewittMelissa Wechsler  
Runberg Architecture Group**Attendees**Barry Baker  
Mt. Baker HousingBeverly Barnett  
SDOTReese Cowan Stewart  
HewittStefanie Dirks  
Runberg Architecture GroupThaddeus Egging  
KPFJoe Ferguson  
Lake Union PartnersPatrick Foley  
Lake Union PartnersMoir Gray  
SDOTJoy Jacobson  
FASBrendan Lawrence  
Lake Union PartnersRandall Olsen  
Cairncross & HempelmannMatthew Porteous  
HewittDavid Sachs  
SDCIJonathan Williams  
SDOT

Figure 1: Project location

**Summary of Presentation**

Conor Hansen and Quanlin Hu of Mt. Baker Housing Association, Melissa Wechsler of Runberg Architecture Group, and Kris Snider of Hewitt, presented the Public Benefit proposal for the Mt. Baker Housing Alley Vacation project (see figure 2). The project team provided an update on community engagement methods and outcomes, followed by responses to previous recommendations from the SDC. Information about the connections across Rainier Ave S and 23rd Ave S was presented.

The project team then presented the proposed public benefit package, the key feature of which is a public plaza (see figure 3). They started by describing the ROW conditions and plans at this location. They explained the roadway realignment proposal for 22nd Ave S, including possible conflict points for pedestrians and vehicles as well as the proposal for the retention of three trees on what is currently a traffic island. A description of both the vacation and no vacation options were also provided to show how the proposed S Grand realignment will provide two separate public plazas associated with the Mt Baker building and the Lake Union Partners development to the north. The design of the realigned Grand St had been refined since the last presentation to include a raised curbless roadway that would provide a continuous plaza surface across the space. Since the last presentation to the SDC, the proposal was refined to narrow the roadway to 20 feet in width and the parking zone was shortened from 30 feet to 20 feet in length, and parking was designated to be short term only. Bollards and textured street ramping provided transition to the regular roadway system. If 22nd Ave S is closed the plaza would provide 12,000 sq ft of contiguous open space for events and programming.

The location of a possible bus stop at the north west corner of the plaza was presented. It was noted that this was the preferred location by SDOT because of the overhead weather protection afforded by the new development project.

The proposed hardscape patterning within the plaza is inspired by local Native American cattail mats. In response to SDC and public comment to provide additional buffer between the project and the street, additional planting areas were included along Rainier Ave S. Durable plants were selected along with the specification of low planter rails to provide additional protection for the plants in this urban environment. Allium was selected to hint at the Italian and agrarian heritage. Although many of the proposed trees are located in planting



ITEM	ESTIMATED COST	HOW IT BENEFITS THE NEIGHBORHOOD
PEDESTRIAN OPEN SPACE	> \$1 million	The current design proposes to improve 265% the amount of right-of-way required of the project. The improvements reduce the area dedicated to cars and create a large public plaza to enhance the pedestrian environment, providing twice as much pedestrian space as would otherwise be required.
ACTIVATING USES	\$250,000	In response to community feedback, several amenities are proposed to help activate the public plaza spaces, including a water feature and varied seating options. These amenities encourage use of the plaza and provide a place for neighborhood residents to gather. The water feature can be shut off to expand usable open space for larger gatherings and events.
COMMUNITY EXPRESSION	\$150,000	Budget allocated to work with community groups to incorporate culturally relevant elements into the plaza design.
SUPPLEMENTAL LIGHTING	\$125,000	Adding pedestrian level lighting enhances the safety and security of the neighborhood and makes the plaza space usable for a longer period of the day. The overhead elements are sculptural and help create a sense of place during daylight hours.
TOTAL	> \$1.5 million	Total development budget allocated to public benefit.
Office of Housing Public Funding	(\$4.7 Million)	Total savings provided to the City of Seattle Office of Housing by combining two buildings into one via an approved alley vacation.

Figure 2: Public Benefit proposal matrix

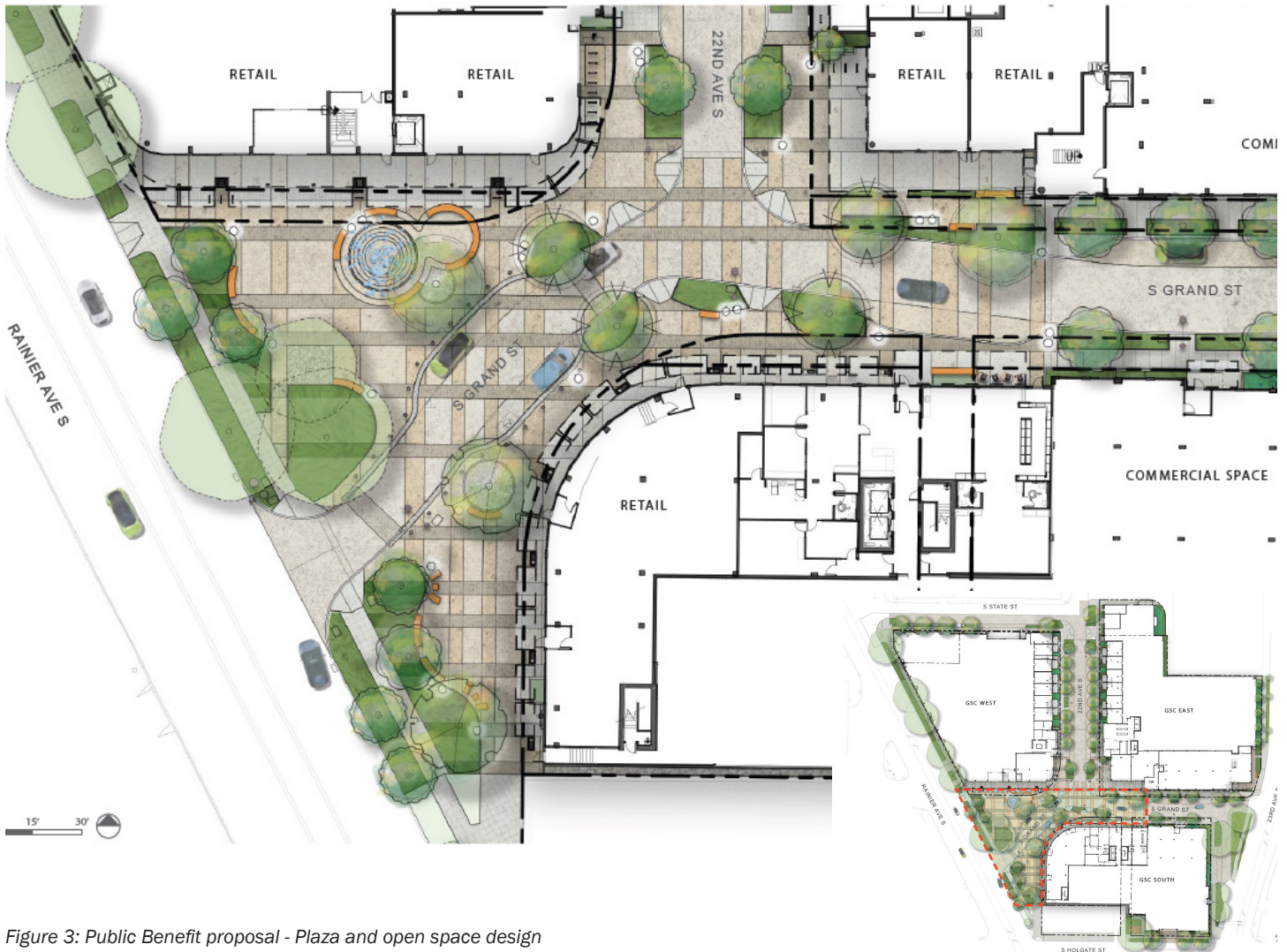


Figure 3: Public Benefit proposal - Plaza and open space design

beds surrounding the perimeter of the plaza, a few trees are located near the street edge and are surrounded by a flex-pave material.

Various types of lighting were proposed to create a sense of safety and to add character. This included pedestrian lights, reminiscent of an onion bulb on a soft arc/"stem", as well as planning for future seasonal lighting of trees. Power was provided in the plaza for activities. Seating will be located in both parts of the plaza, and the north side will contain a water feature. Funds were set aside to provide additional community expression in the southern part of the plaza.

The team then went over the public benefit matrix and presented the value of the public benefit items.

### Agency Comments

**Beverly Barnett**, SDOT, expressed appreciation to Mt Baker Housing for providing additional affordable housing units as a result of the vacation, and in particular the provision of larger units. Beverly stated that while the public benefit policies do not allow for affordable housing units to "count" as public benefit, it can be considered when comparing what the public loses against what it gains. Beverly then commended the good progress made on the plaza but noted that concerns had not been eliminated. Beverly noted again that the street realignment undermined the plaza by bisecting it and eliminating the possibility of providing one large contiguous open space. Beverly also expressed concern again about the potential for commercial/retail spillover into the adjacent plaza because these private uses would not support a plaza that would feel welcoming to all members of the public.

**Laurie Olson**, Office of Housing, thanked the SDC for their passion but raised strong concerns about the additional costs to the project of having to provide additional public benefit. Laurie stated that increasing cost of the public benefit could jeopardize the project. Laurie then reminded commissioners that the project must achieve the goals of the housing levy and MHA and pointed out that this was a mixed market rate and affordable model that would revitalize a blighted area.

### Public Comments

The SDC received written comments before the meeting from Todd Lyon, a neighbor, Heather Fitzpatrick of Wellspring Family Services, and Chettie McAffie of Central Area Youth Association, all in support of the vacation of the alley.

### Summary of Discussion

Commissioners discussed ongoing concerns about the barriers to reaching the plaza safely from neighboring areas west of Rainier Ave S and east of 23rd Ave S. They asked that the team and SDOT consider possible solutions and that the project be designed to facilitate future improvements if they cannot be implemented with this project. As the value of the plaza as a key element of the public benefit package is closely associated with the ability to access this space, removing barriers for pedestrians to cross both 23rd Ave S and Rainier will be important to the plaza's success.

Commissioners discussed concerns about the Grand Street roadway reconfiguration. If the plaza continues to be bisected by the roadway, Commissioners advised that the curbless street design be revised to extend as far as possible to the east and the west to reduce the barrier between the two plazas. This might include refinements to geometries, reduction of parking, use of landscape instead of bollards, and continuous paving. Commissioners then asked the team to develop scenarios for how the plaza would be configured for smaller and larger events. The design should be refined to support these various event scenarios but also everyday use. Above all, the design should minimize the divide that the road creates and unite the two parts of the plaza.

Commissioners discussed concerns about the proposals to integrate cultural expressions into the public benefit package, including details of the plaza designs. The Coast Salish patterning was well detailed and an interesting approach, but had not been vetted by cultural representatives. Commissioners noted the lack of design details or overall approach to reflect the African American history and heritage of the neighborhood or the site. They asked that the proposed "community expression" area located at the SW corner of the plaza

area abutting the Mt Baker housing site to extend across the whole plaza and that specific features and expressions be brought into the design to make this a welcoming space that reflects the communities of this particular place. If this could not be achieved with the designs presented to the SDC then a strong framework for how it would be achieved would need to be presented in order to assure that the public benefit will truly serve the community in this location. The Commission suggested that not only art be used to establish community expression but that other components of the design, such as the configuration of spaces, and choices of plants, furnishings, color, and materials, be employed.

Commissioners then reiterated their concerns about the perceived integration of commercial space with the public realm. The Commission was glad to hear the developers speak about strategies to support local and BIPOC owned businesses. The Commission recommended the project team consider providing cultural space that would be an activating factor that is supportive and welcoming to those communities that the vacation policies ask projects to target.

### Action

The SDC thanked the project team for the presentation of the Grand Street Commons Alley Vacation Public Benefit package. Commissioners complimented the team on the further development of the plaza and road design, as well as the importance of the provision of affordable housing to support the community. The SDC did not vote on the public benefit package, but provided the following recommendations to refine key elements of the proposal:

1. Neighborhood Access to Plaza
  - a. Work with SDOT on opportunities to provide east-west pedestrian crossings of Rainier and 23rd Avenue S to S. Grand Street including supportive design features that can be implemented concurrent with this development or in future actions. The goal of this is to improve connections to and from the adjacent community.
2. Curbless street
  - a. Evaluate design attributes for curbless streets against traffic volumes forecast for both the proposed alignment and existing conditions.
  - b. Consult with SDOT on the shared/festival street concept and Vision Zero improvements on Rainier.
  - c. Explore moving the west transition strip closer to Rainier.
  - d. Explore extending the east transition strip through the Grand Street/22nd Ave S intersection
  - e. Create a mix of landscape barriers and bollards.
  - f. Explore reducing space devoted to auto/truck parking.
  - g. Consider long-term maintenance issues of expected traffic volumes on hardscape features.
3. Contiguous and separate open spaces
  - a. Provide studies to program the separate and joined plaza areas for events such as:
    - *Farmers markets*
    - *Performances*
    - *Community events*
  - b. Solicit event permitting requirements, such as how frequently the street can be shut down, at what times, and the extent of traffic management.
  - c. Align landscape areas to support use of space for events.
  - d. Reconsider the location, cost, maintenance, and extent of water element
  - e. Identify locations of storage spaces and utility connections to support events.
4. Hardscape/landscape improvements
  - a. Design the public realm to reflect and support the cultural identity of the place. (See equity below.)
  - b. Engage community and/or individuals in an active role to develop designs that reflect community identity or demographics, and receive compensation for their time as appropriate.

- c. Extend designs for hardscape improvements to 23rd Ave S to the east and 22nd Ave S to the north.
  - d. Reconsider/reimagine role and placement of lighting, including designs that reflect broader neighborhood demographics.
5. Funding for community expression plan
- a. Extend area through the whole plaza; consider areas to the north and within the larger development.
  - b. Develop framework for community engagement that includes targeted populations based on neighborhood demographics.
    - *Identify potential partner organizations, agencies, and individuals.*
    - *Methods of engagement*
    - *Identify elements to be influenced (ground plane, art, furnishings, plantings, event programming, building facades, retail spaces, etc.)*
    - *Strategies and timing of agreed on interventions.*
    - *Long-term stewardship, partnership, and programming framework*
6. Equitable outcomes in program and design solutions
- a. Provide more definition and clarity on the proposed \$150,000 budget for partnering with underserved communities that will use the plaza space.
  - b. Expand design interventions across the whole plaza that accurately reflect community demographics, including the local history of BIPOC communities. Create welcoming community expression with choices in the planting palette, furnishings, paving materials, and other elements, not just applied as art or in the form of programming.
  - c. Work with community groups and agency partners to identify spaces for long-term community-based organizations.
  - d. Work with the Cultural Space Agency PDA and other organizations for partnerships to provide community-based programming and activated cultural spaces within overall development.
  - e. While commercial space allocation and contracting are not eligible to be part of the public benefit package, they can be a consideration of the project's overall public benefit offering, as they provide a long-term commitment to the local marginalized communities. Consider a set-aside of a portion of retail and commercial space to minority and disadvantaged-owned businesses. Partnering with the Cultural Space Agency PDA and other organizations that have existing partnerships with these businesses can also support the financial feasibility of leasing these spaces.
7. Refine the dollar amount represented as public benefit. The cost of the street realignment proposal appears to be a project related cost, and not directly related to the public benefit package. The construction costs should also be accurately reflected as costs independent of the public benefit package. The costs of retaining any existing sidewalk or roadway conditions should also be considered in accurately reporting the true public benefit value.