

Grand St Commons/Mt Baker Housing Alley Vacation

Jenny A. Durkan
Mayor

Rico Quirindongo
Interim Director, OPCD

Justin Clark, Acting Chair

Adam Amrhein

Kim Baker

Elizabeth Conner

Azzurra Cox

Jill Crary

Mark Johnson

Amalia Leighton

Vinita Sidhu

Elaine Wine

Michael Jenkins
Director

Valerie Kinast
Strategic Advisor

Aaron Hursey
Planner

Juliet Acevedo
Administrative Staff

**Office of Planning and
Community Development**
Seattle City Hall
600 4th Avenue, 5th Floor
Seattle, WA 98124

TEL 206-684-0435
FAX 206-233-2784
seattle.gov/designcommission

Commissioners Present

Justin Clark, Acting Chair
Kim Baker
Elizabeth Conner
Azzurra Cox
Mark Johnson
Amalia Leighton
Vinita Sidhu

Commissioners Excused

Non-Voting Commissioners Present

Adam Amrhein
Jill Crary

Project Description & Background

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) fourth review of the Grand Street Commons Alley Vacation project. The purpose of this meeting was to review the Public Benefit package, as required by the City Council Street Vacation policies (Resolution 31809). After the presentation and discussion, the SDC voted, 7-0, to approve the public benefit proposal for the Grand Street Commons Alley Vacation with several conditions and recommendations.

Recusals and Disclosures

None

May 6, 2021

1:30 - 3:30 pm

Project Type

Street Vacation

Phase

Public Benefit

Previous Reviews[2/4/21](#), [11/5/20](#), [11/2/19](#)**Presenters**Conor Hansen
Mt. Baker HousingKris Snider
HewittNatalie Quick
QuickMelissa Wechsler
Runberg Architecture Group**Attendees**Beverly Barnett
SDOTReese Cowan Stewart
HewittStefanie Dirks
Runberg Architecture GroupSarah Eddy Thies
Lake Union PartnersThaddeus Egging
KPFFPatrick Foley
Lake Union PartnersKC Hermsen
HewittQuanlin Hu
Mt. Baker HousingBrendan Lawrence
Lake Union PartnersRandall Olsen
Cairncross & HempelmannMatthew Richter
OACJonathan Williams
SDOT

Figure 1: Project location

Summary of Presentation

Melissa Wechsler, of Runberg, Conor Hansen, of Mt Baker Housing, Natalie Quick, of Quick, and Kris Snider, of HEWITT, presented the public benefit proposal for the Grand St Commons Alley Vacation project. The team provided information on the project, which is a joint venture between Lake Union Partners and Mount Baker Housing, as well as information on the context of the site within the neighborhood. The total project includes the development of three mixed-use multifamily buildings, with two market rate multi-family buildings being developed by Lake Union Partners and one affordable multi-family building being developed by Mt. Baker Housing. Mt. Baker Housing is petitioning to vacate an existing alley to maximize the number of affordable units that can be included on their project site. They described the alley that they are requesting to vacate and explained that this would allow them to build 45 more affordable housing units because of design efficiencies. (see figure 1)

The team then explained the necessity of the joint venture between Mt Baker Housing and Lake Union Partners. Along with developing two of the multi-family buildings, which will also include onsite affordable housing units to meeting MHA requirements, Lake Union Partners has also committed to participate in the cost of executing the public benefit package voluntarily.

The team then provided responses to recommendation items the SDC provided at the last review. They stated that several changes had occurred since the previous review, including that SDOT had responded to request for a shared street, a consultant had been hired to facilitate the community expression piece, and the developers had entered into conversations to provide affordable space for the Cultural Space Agency PDA.

The team then showed that the project will provide improvements that prepare the site for a future pedestrian crossing over Rainier, in response to the recommendation from the SDC and with input from SDOT.

The project team discussed specific elements included in the public benefit proposal. The team presented information related to the proposal for a curbsless street between Rainier Ave S and 22nd Ave S. They described that anticipated traffic volumes and initial input from SDOT influenced the proposed design, width, and location of the curbsless street, which is currently



Figure 2: Updated Design Proposal

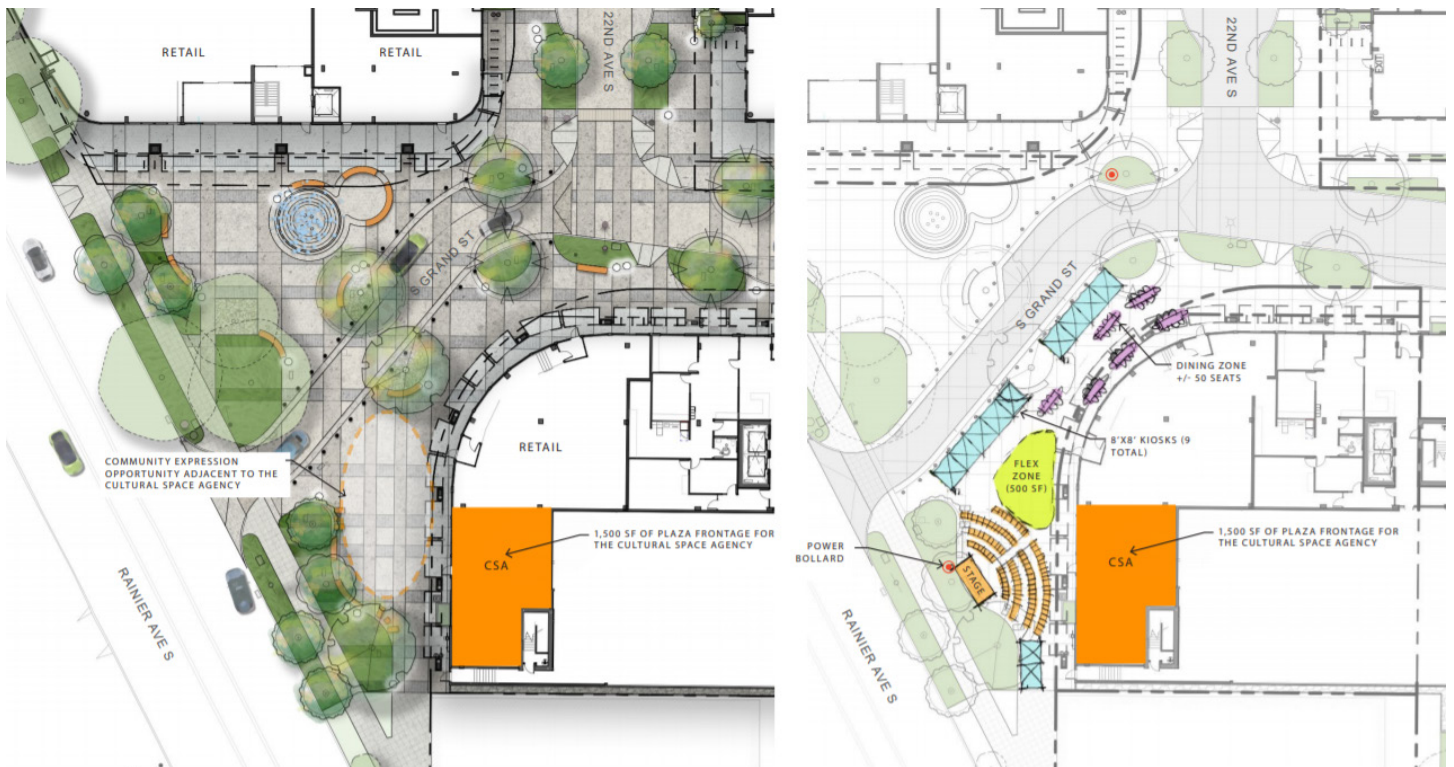


Figure 3: Updated design proposal - Plaza, event space, and Cultural Space Agency location

designed to include a one way street with parking on one side. They also explained that they find the street important to the project for visibility of the retail and for general wayfinding to the new residential buildings for tenants, visitors, emergency vehicles and carshare pick-ups. The current design proposal for the curbsless street includes a 14 foot wide one-way travel lane with on street parking. This width will require a deviation from the fire department standards, who may require more. The street will be curbsless between Rainer Ave S and the intersection of 22nd Ave S. The updated street design will increase the size of the southeastern plaza. Additional design changes include expanding the sidewalk width along Rainier to 8 feet and added a gap in landscape at the south side of shared street at Rainier to allow pedestrians to easily enter the plaza. Both of those changes were requested by Urban Design at SDOT. (see figure 2 for more detail)

The team then discussed design updates to the proposed plazas. Both the north and south plazas include pedestrian amenities such as seating, lighting, trees, and other plantings. The north plaza also includes a water feature that can be turned off so the space can be used for events. Programming diagrams were presented for how the plaza could be used for various sized events and the team described requirements for closing the street for larger events. The SDC had recommended identifying locations for storage spaces and utilities to support events, and the team explained that providing access to power was the more practical means to support events.

The team presented plans for bringing cultural identity and public art to the space. The framework for consultant selection and scope of work was described and the team reported that they were considering consulting with a group led by a woman of color who lived in the area. They explained that the guidance would be to see the whole plaza as a potential area for art, in response to the SDC comment to not limit cultural expression to just one area. They also stated that part of this public benefit item would also include provision of affordable, condominiumized space to the City's Cultural Space Agency (*see figure 3 for more detail*). The team then discussed details about the two-year schedule for designing and installing cultural elements. The team stated that their intention is to complete a framework and vision before City Council. The allocated budget for the cultural expression and art program would not pay for the art management consultant, which will be funded separately. Potentially, the art consultant would work with the artists and organization in the Cultural Space Agency space.

Along with provided on-site space for the Cultural Space Agency, the team also stated their commitment to leasing non-anchor tenant retail space to minority owned small businesses.

Agency Comments

Matthew Richter, OAC, The space being provided to the City's Cultural Space Agency, which I am currently helping to set up provides an exciting opportunity. We will be vetting the project through "The Constituency," the acting community-based board of the Cultural Space Agency. The space in the Mount Baker Housing building will be a place where cultural communities of color in the neighborhood can work to stabilize and celebrate their presence in the neighborhood.

Beverly Barnett, SDOT, Good progress has been made on the public benefit. It appears the applicant and SDOT operations are negotiating a solution for the 22nd roadway through the plaza that does not close it completely but allows only limited vehicular traffic in support of the retail and wayfinding. Jonathan Williams, SDOT will provide more detailed comments on that.

The cultural expression idea and cultural PDA space are amazing and the City Council will likely agree. The level of detail of the public benefit proposal is still of concern. Also, the right-of-way enhancement dollar amount appears to still be inflated. We will need to understand the level of improvements Lake Union Partners is responsible for on the streets north of the plaza in their development before knowing what can be counted toward public benefit. The pedestrian signal infrastructure does not rise to level of public benefit.

Jonathan Williams, SDOT, We appreciate the wider sidewalks on Rainier. The City traffic engineer and operations didn't support the two-way curbless street deviation request for the section of 22nd Ave S between Grand St and Rainier. This street segment is not integral to vehicular circulation in area. This right-of-way would be used best exclusively for pedestrian circulation. We will continue to entertain a street here though in the form of a one way concept but need to receive and evaluate a new proposal from applicant.

Public Comments

None

Summary of Discussion

Overall, The SDC expressed appreciation for the progress that had been made and supported the level of public benefits. Commissioners agreed that conditions were needed given that several public benefit items had not been fully developed yet. The Commission supported the four conditions that had been developed by City Staff and the project team prior to this meeting, which provided assurance that the SDC would have further opportunity to review certain public benefits when they have been further developed.

The Commission then discussed the updated location and design of Grand St, which bisects the plaza as well as updated information provided by SDOT stating the possibility that the road could be eliminated. The necessity of the road was discussed, and, while most believed that there was value in retaining it to support the retail businesses, there were differing opinions of the necessity of the road to break up the open area of the plaza. There was agreement that if the road were to be removed, the organization of the space and design of the plaza would need to be reconsidered. Commissioners then encouraged the team to consider refining the design of the road as much as possible to facilitate safe pedestrian movement where vehicles will be traveling and maneuvering. They asked that alternatives to bollards be used to define the travel route for cars, such as trees or plantings. The Commission then commended the project team for expanding the expanded vegetated buffer near Rainier Ave S. Commissioners said that the team was responsive to earlier comments provided by the SDC having a visual and sound barrier would be fundamental to the usability of the space by the community.

The SDC then discussed refinements to the plaza design. Commissioners appreciated the use of programming diagrams to better understand how the space would be used. Commissioners expressed appreciation for extending the plaza paving eastward along Grand Street, because it would integrate the public space better with the overall development and draw people to the plaza. Commissioners also appreciated the addition of power outlets.

The SDC then discussed equity. The provision of cultural space, commitments to leasing to minority businesses, and the cultural identity art infusion into the plaza were noted as measures that would forward equity. Commissioners were glad to hear that Lake Union Partners was hoping to lease upwards of 75% of non-anchor retail space to minority businesses, based on their previous project. While they are not public benefits by definition, Commissioners wanted to see the commitment to leasing to minority businesses, and the additional affordable units that were possible because of the vacation, documented with the public benefit table. Being captured this way would demonstrate the importance of these factors, which the vacation policies note as possible to be considered when deciding on public benefit.

The Commission expressed its support for adding the Cultural Space Agency space to the public benefit package. Commissioners were supportive of approving the vacation despite this item not being fully developed yet on the condition that the SDC would continue to advise as the agreements progressed. Commissioners were enthusiastic about the potential and value of this type of public benefit to support goals for addressing displacement of BIPOC communities.

The Commission continued to express its concern that the route to reaching the plaza from the neighborhood areas beyond the site was dangerous for pedestrians. There was regret that the safest way to reach the site would be by car or bus, not on foot. Commissioners expressed strong disappointment that, although pedestrian activity is expected to increase along the Rainier Ave S Corridor due to this project as well as adjacent developments, the City did not require a signalized pedestrian crossing of Rainier Ave S. Commissioners raised concerns to SDOT that safe pedestrian connection should be provided if this area is to serve as a gathering space for the greater community.

The SDC then discussed the community expression and art public benefit element. Commissioners were comfortable with approving the vacation despite this item not being fully developed on the assurance that they would be able to advise at a later date. They questioned whether the budget would be sufficient if several artists are engaged, and advised the team to create an art plan that addressed art in the plaza overall. A timeline that allowed for artists to work with the plaza designers collaboratively without being rushed was recommended. Also, the advantages of the plaza designers starting the working relationship early by being part of the artist selection panel were noted. Commissioners expressed the desire to have all art and design elements of the plaza, such as the paving patterns and fountain, coordinated. They recommended that the art facilitator consult with the Office of Arts and Culture as a resource.

Action

The SDC thanked the project team for their presentation of the public benefit proposal. The Commission appreciated the overall progress the project team has made. Specifically, commissioners appreciated the team addressing previous comments, coordination with SDOT, programming studies, commitment to art

space and community expression, increasing the vegetated buffering along Rainier Ave S, and extending the paving patterning further east along Grand St . The SDC voted, 7-0, to approve the public benefit proposal for the Grand Street Commons Alley Vacation with the following conditions:

1. If any substantive changes are proposed to elements of the public benefit package, including funding associated with any public benefit feature, removing, relocating, or changing the type of design features for the plaza or related right of way improvements, the size and orientation of any spaces provided for cultural or artistic activities, or any changes to proposed street furniture, paving, landscape, lighting, or any other similar features, the revisions shall be brought to the Seattle Design Commission for review and approval. The review and approval by the Seattle Design Commission shall occur prior to the issuance of any associated street use permit or a building permit for the Grand Street Commons South development (MUP 3035498-LU) needed to install or implement any such elements.
2. Prior to the issuance of any Certificate of Occupancy for the Grand Street Commons South development (MUP 3035498-LU), the Seattle Design Commission's Executive Director shall review and approve the Letter of Agreement between the Office of Arts and Culture and/or the Cultural Space PDA and the project team to create a condominium of approximately 1,500 square feet for the PDA to use as community-focused spaces that will help activate the public plaza throughout the year.
3. Within 180 days of issuance of a building permit associated with the Grand Street Commons South alley vacation development (MUP 3035498-LU), the Seattle Design Commission shall review and approve the final Cultural Expression and Public Art plan developed as part of the public benefit package for the Grand Street Commons alley vacation project. As part of the development of this plan, a member of the Seattle Design Commission shall be a voting member in the selection of artists.
4. Funds used to create items of cultural expression to be incorporated into the plaza designs shall result in the creation of elements that have a long-term or permanent quality as opposed to items that are temporary in nature.

The SDC also provided the following recommendations:

1. Include a section on the public benefit table page titled "Non-Public Benefit Factors (per Res. 31809 p. 24)" and list the additional affordable housing units that will be achieved because of the vacation, and the aspiration to lease upwards of 75% of non-anchor commercial space to minority owned businesses and organizations.
2. Strongly reconsider the use of bollards to separate the curbless street from the plaza; consider using other elements such as trees, that better integrate with the surrounding environment.
3. If the roadway through the plaza is retained, consider the anticipated vehicular volumes and movements, and adjust the roadway design to improve the safety of pedestrian movement, such as by tightening up radii of vehicular movements as possible.)
4. If the road is eliminated, redesign the plaza.
5. For the future, the City is advised to require pedestrian crossings of arterials such as Rainier Ave S when amenities are planned that will serve the broader community and to link TOD developments to transit stops.
6. Prepare an art plan for the plaza. Define a process with a timeline that allows artists time to develop their work. Provide time and resources for artists and the plaza design team to collaboratively integrate their work.