

Block 89 – 111 Westlake Ave N

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Director, DPD

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Shannon Loew, Vice Chair

Bernie Alonzo

Brodie Bain

Lee Copeland

Thaddeus Egging

Grant Hromas

Martin Regge

Ellen Sollod

Ross Tilghman

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Commissioners Present

Osama Quotah, Chair
Shannon Loew, Vice Chair
Lee Copeland
Thaddeus Egging
Grant Hromas
Ellen Sollod
Ross Tilghman

Commissioners Excused

Bernie Alonzo
Brodie Bain
Martin Regge

Project Description

Vulcan is petitioning to vacate the subterranean portion of an alley in the block bounded by Denny Way, Westlake Ave N, John St and 9th Ave N. The Block 89 site is at the juncture of the South Lake Union and Denny Triangle neighborhoods. The applicant proposes a full-block, mixed-use development on two parcels separated by a 16-foot-wide unimproved alley. The development would include 460,000 square feet of residential, 422,000 square feet of office space, and 30,000 square feet of ground-floor retail space in four buildings on the site as well as several at-grade open spaces.

The subterranean vacation would facilitate construction of a shared below-grade parking garage for 836 vehicles and allow the applicant to reduce parking ramping, consolidate loading and services in a centralized location below grade, and decrease the depth of excavation. The right-of-way area below grade that would be vacated is 5,760 square feet. The applicant proposes to create a pedestrian walkway on the remaining alley surface that would require a separate permitting action by SDOT.

Meeting Summary

The Design Commission approved the urban design merit phase of the vacation petition with a vote of 6 to 1. The Commission recognized that subterranean vacations are unusual and pose certain challenges for the City due to its obligation to maintain and prevent future impairment of the remaining right-of-way. The Commission will consider the proposed public benefit package at its review of this project. Approval of both urban design merit and public benefit constitute the Commission's recommendation to SDOT to approve the vacation. The City Council makes the final decision on whether to vacate the alley.

Recusals and Disclosures

There were no recusals or disclosures.

November 20, 2014

2:00 – 4:00 pm

Type

Subterranean Alley Vacation

Phase

Urban Design Merit

Previous Reviews

none

Presenters

Sharon Coleman Vulcan

Patrick Gordon ZGF Architects

Allyn Stellmacher ZGF Architects

Kris Snider HEWITT

Attendees

Ali Aranda resident

Beverly Barnett SDOT

Greg Bell Vulcan

Rachel Ben-Shmuel Vulcan

Lyle Bicknell DPD

Jan Campbell SLU Community Council

Lindy Gaylord Seneca Group

Holly Golden HCMP

David Heater Ankrom Moisan Architects

Jackie Hensy ZGF Architects

Magda Hogness DPD

David Kelley Ankrom Moisan Architects

Pearl Leung Vulcan

Scott Lien Vulcan

Alan Loche ZGF Architects

Bertha Martinez ZGF Architects

Melody McCutcheon HCMP

Garry Papers DPD

Whitney Pearce ZGF Architects

John Pehrson resident

Jeff Peterson Coughlin Porter Lundeen

Matthew Porteous HEWITT

Megan Pryor ZGF Architects

Eric Ritchey ZGF Architects

Tobin Thompson ZGF Architects

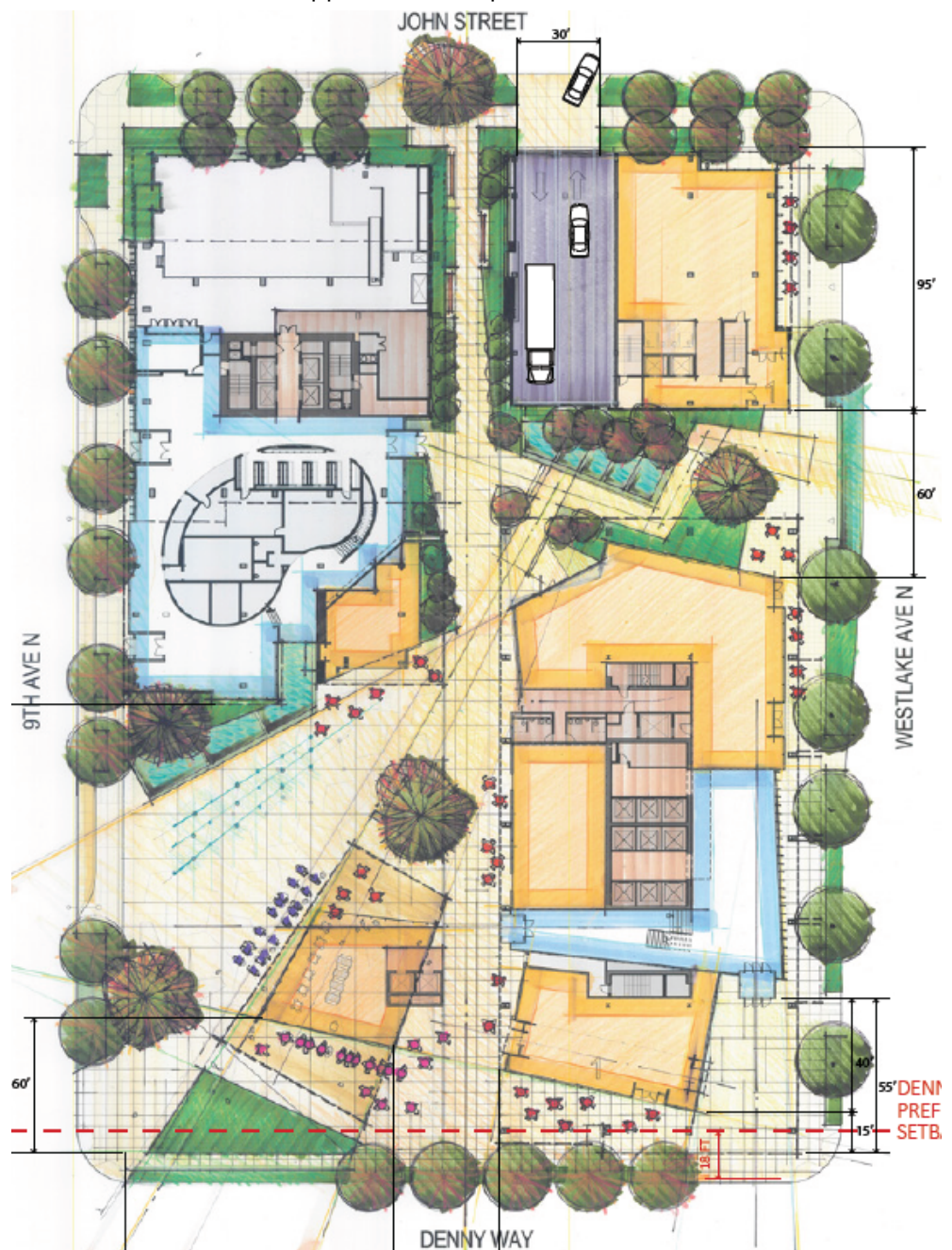
Mike Woo Vulcan

Summary of Presentation

Sharon Coleman introduced the two schemes that the team is developing, with and without the subterranean vacation. She summarized the team's rationale for the vacation proposal and identified the following results of the vacation:

- Consolidated garage and loading functions
- Enhanced pedestrian environment in the alley
- Coordinated on-site public space
- No change in floor area ratio (FAR) or building massing

Patrick Gordon described the project site, identified its location at the border of South Lake Union and the Denny Triangle, and showed the existing conditions of the alley in question. He cited the various codes, policies, and neighborhood and streetscape plans that have guided the project design. Mr. Gordon summarized the team's meetings with the Design Review Board (DRB) and explained the vacation and no-vacation schemes. He specifically noted that, under the vacation proposal, all loading and parking access would occur at a single curb cut on John St that DPD approved in a separate decision.



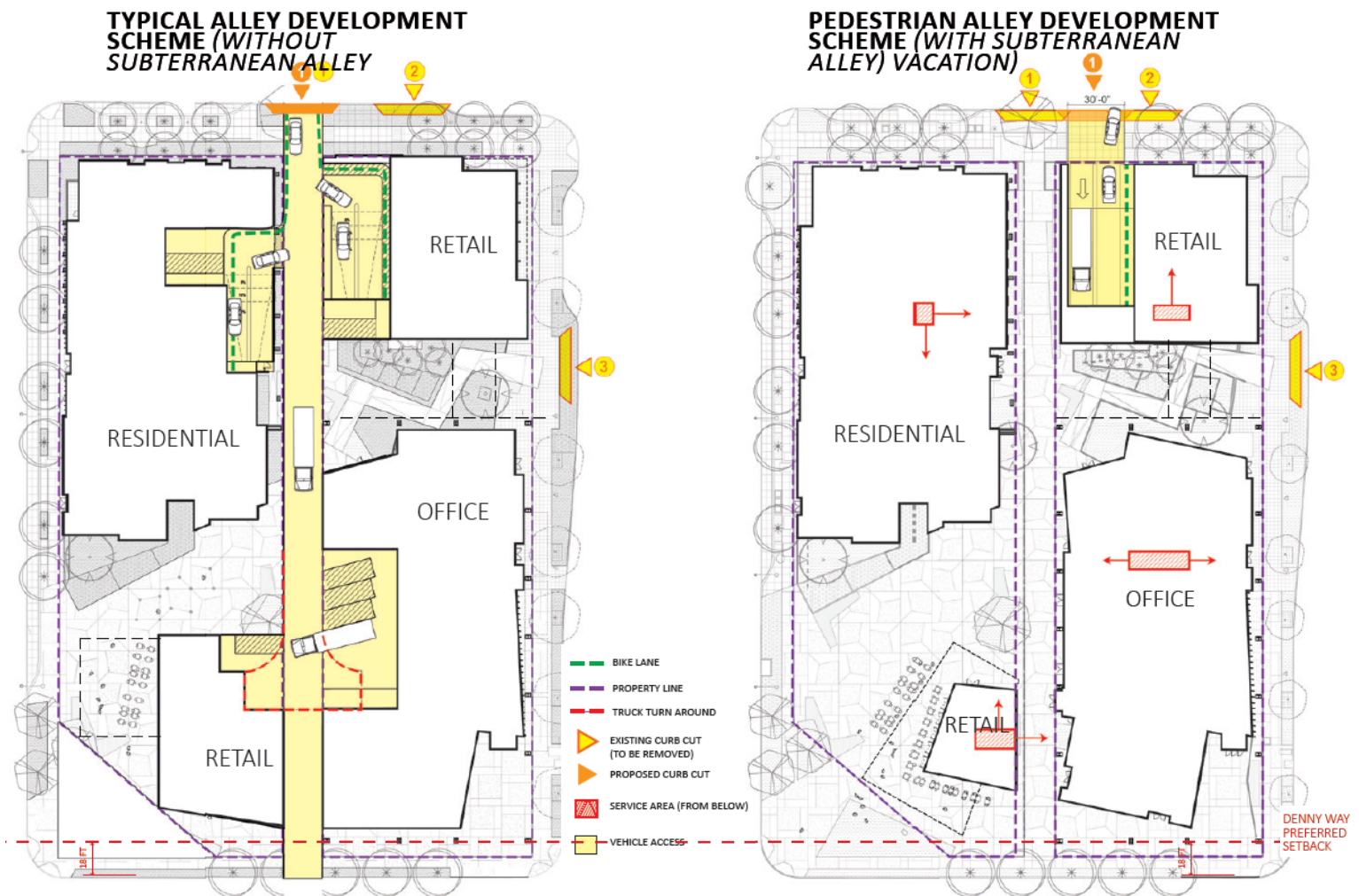
Site plan for the proposed design with the subterranean alley vacation.

Allyn Stellmacher then proceeded through a series of diagrams that compared the vacation and no-vacation scenarios for the following factors:

- Vehicle access
- Pedestrian access
- Retail
- Open space
- Urban design

The full presentation is [available on the Design Commission website](#).

Kris Snider described the treatment of the street frontages and the alley in both scenarios. Finally, Mr. Stellmacher summarized the benefits of the vacation for the applicant and for the public. He explained the rationale for the subterranean rather than full alley vacation petition, noting that a full vacation would produce an additional 40,000 gross square feet of FAR that the team would distribute on the southwest portion of the site in place much of the proposed open space.



Comparison of vehicle access in the no-vacation (left) and vacation (right) schemes.

Agency Comments

Beverly Barnett expressed several concerns about the proposed vacation. Ms. Barnett acknowledged that the applicant is able to choose the type of vacation desired but emphasized that, if not a full vacation, any remaining right-of-way must remain available for the full range of public purposes. While there are no current or near-term future utilities planned for the alley, the City is obligated to prevent against future impairment of public purposes. According to Ms. Barnett, a subterranean vacation should begin six feet below grade to preserve space for unforeseen future utility purposes. In Ms. Barnett's opinion, the proposed design fully incorporates the alley into the project. While the applicant had stated that the vacation scheme does not include additional FAR, Ms. Barnett noted that this is not the issue. Instead, the concern is that the two halves of the project do not work without incorporation of the alley. Given the pedestrian connections, lobbies, and retail spaces in the proposed design, the alley would be

such an integral element that it could not be separated out without detriment to the project. The proposed alley amenities would require a revocable permit in the case that the City needs access to the right-of-way. As managers of the right-of-way, the City has to consider precedence. In Ms. Barnett's view, if the Petitioner wants to accomplish the proposed design, then it should apply for a full vacation. Otherwise, the alley surface must be clearly delineated as a public space.

Garry Papers stated that the project has gone before the West Design Review Board. He stated that the DRB has purview over all of the private development and that the vacation scheme shown today responds to a lot of the guidance from the DRB. Specifically, the DRB was interested in the degree to which the project reads as welcoming to the public, and Mr. Papers stated that he already sees good evolution here. Mr. Papers also recounted that, in coordination with SDOT, DPD reviewed a separate application for a curb cut for parking and loading access from John St (a Green Street) as opposed to from the alley as required by code.

Public Comments

John Pehrson stated that he lives in South Lake Union three blocks from site. He supports the subterranean vacation petition because he believes it meets the letter and spirit of the South Lake Union Urban Design Framework. Mr. Pehrson stated that the John St curb cut makes sense in this location. He believes the vacation scheme provides better plazas and spaces for people, more retail to draw people in, and more open space that connects Bell St. While many projects have "tunnels" into interior plazas, he applauded the southwest plaza area would be open to the sky. Mr. Pehrson said he is a member of the South Lake Union Community Council (SLUCC) Board, which reviewed and approved the proposal in July 2014.

Jan Campbell stated that she is a member of SLUCC Task Force, whose goal is the creation of diverse spaces and resources within SLU. The Task Force promotes a model urban community in which government, developers, and businesses work together with the community to meet needs. What excites Ms. Campbell most about this project is that it achieves a lot of the Task Force's objectives. She appreciates that the alley would have spaces that look out onto Denny Park and supports creating a linkage between the Whole Foods plaza at Denny and Westlake to Denny Park and Lake Union Park. She supports the subterranean alley vacation proposal and hopes the City will work closely with this particularly design team to support community needs.

Ali Aranda stated that she has lived at the nearby Enso building with a view over this site since December 2009. She said the proposed open space is exactly what she would ask for. Ms. Aranda stated that her building is similar to the no-vacation proposal shown today but worse; it is scary to be a pedestrian in an alley with cars and trucks. In her mind, the vacation scheme invites residents to take back the park. She looks forward to looking down on the plaza at 9th Ave and Denny Way. As a pedestrian and neighborhood resident, Ms. Aranda said her biggest concern is safety. She wants a place where she can hang out, and she would trade her individual amount of right-of-way in order to get the vacation proposal.

Summary of Discussion

The Design Commission acknowledged that subterranean vacations are somewhat uncommon and present certain opportunities and challenges as a result. From an urban form perspective, the Commission appreciated that the platting alley would remain and retain the existing parcelization. They requested that the team work with utility stakeholders and return with additional information about the current and future utility needs for the right-of-way.

The Commission saw potential for the southwest open space to be a successful civic space but suggested more attention towards making the north end of the alley feel public. While there was support for the effort to activate the alley for pedestrians, the Commissioners recommended that the team explore how setbacks, furnishings, plantings, paving, lighting, and materials can reinforce that the alley is an urban public space.

Finally, the Commission discussed the implications of the City retaining ownership of the alley surface and the range of functions alleys typically



Perspective looking south from John St down the alley.

accommodate. They asked the applicant about potential conflicts if the City eventually wanted access to the alley for any number of reasons. There was concern among some Commissioners that the proposed retail spaces spilling out onto the alley and the design of the alley space could 1) make it difficult for the City to access and use the alley if necessary or 2) effectively privatize the function of the right-of-way. The Commissioners encouraged a public, civic, and flexible design in order to mitigate these concerns.

Action

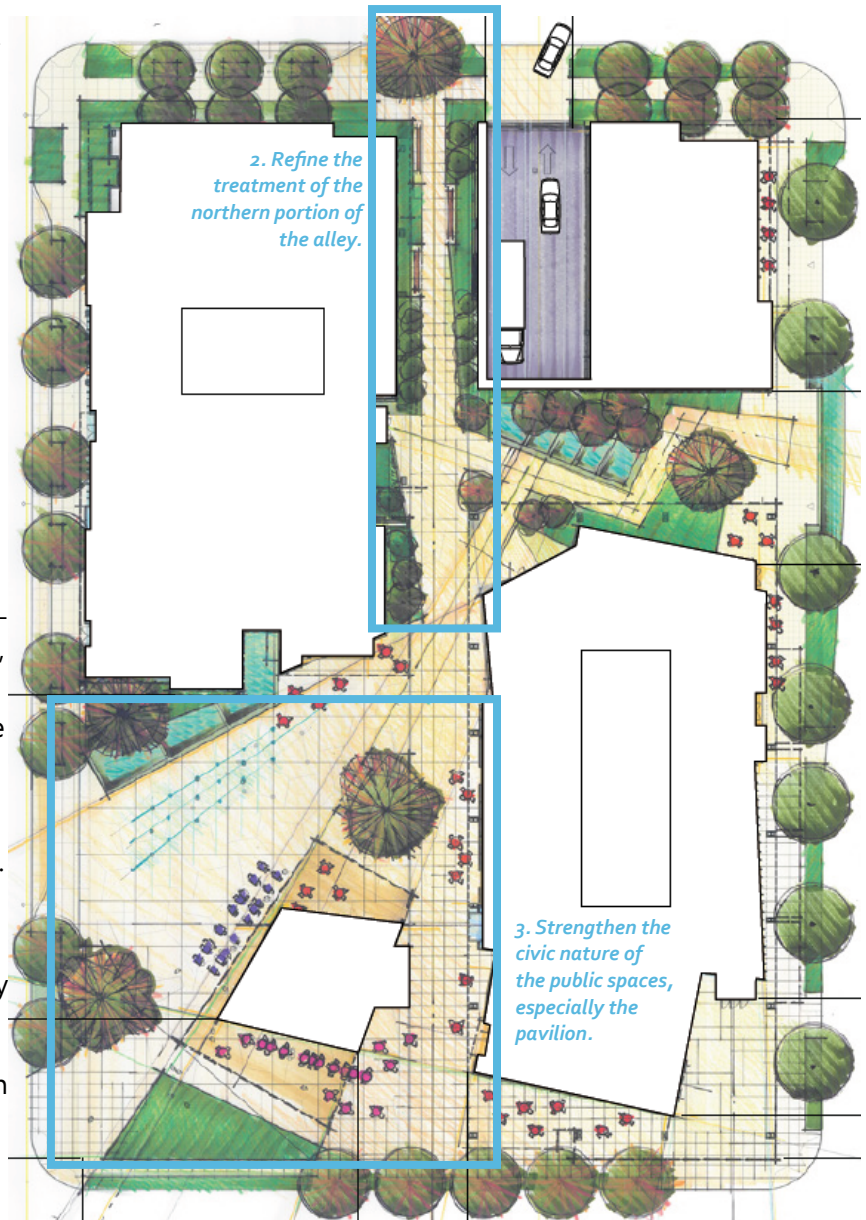
The Design Commission thanked the project team for the presentation of the subterranean alley vacation proposed in the block bounded by Westlake Ave N, Denny Way, 9th Ave N, and John St. The Commission appreciated several aspects of the proposed design, especially the opportunity for connections to Bell Street and Denny Park.

With a **vote of 6 to 1**, the Commission approved the urban design merit of the petition to vacate the subterranean portion of the 16-foot-wide north-south alley between John St and Denny Way with the following conditions:

1. Work with SDOT and all utility stakeholders to determine the minimum necessary depth between the surface of the alley and the top of any below-grade structure to accommodate all planned or potential utility uses. This should be resolved and approved by SDOT before proceeding with the Commission's public benefit review. While we recognize that there are no current may be no future utility needs for this right-of-way, the Commission acknowledges that diminishing area for services and infrastructure is a challenge for the City.
2. Demonstrate how setbacks, sightlines, and placement of landscape elements in the alley reinforce that the right-of-way is a public space and would allow it to perform as a fully serviced alley if necessary.

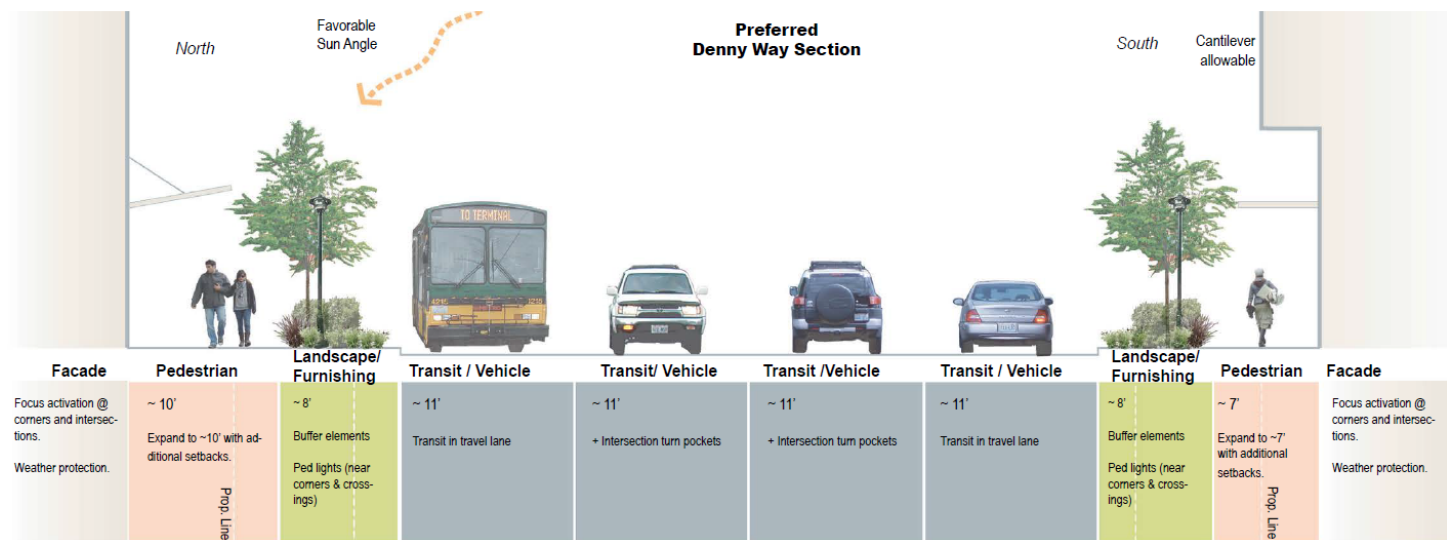
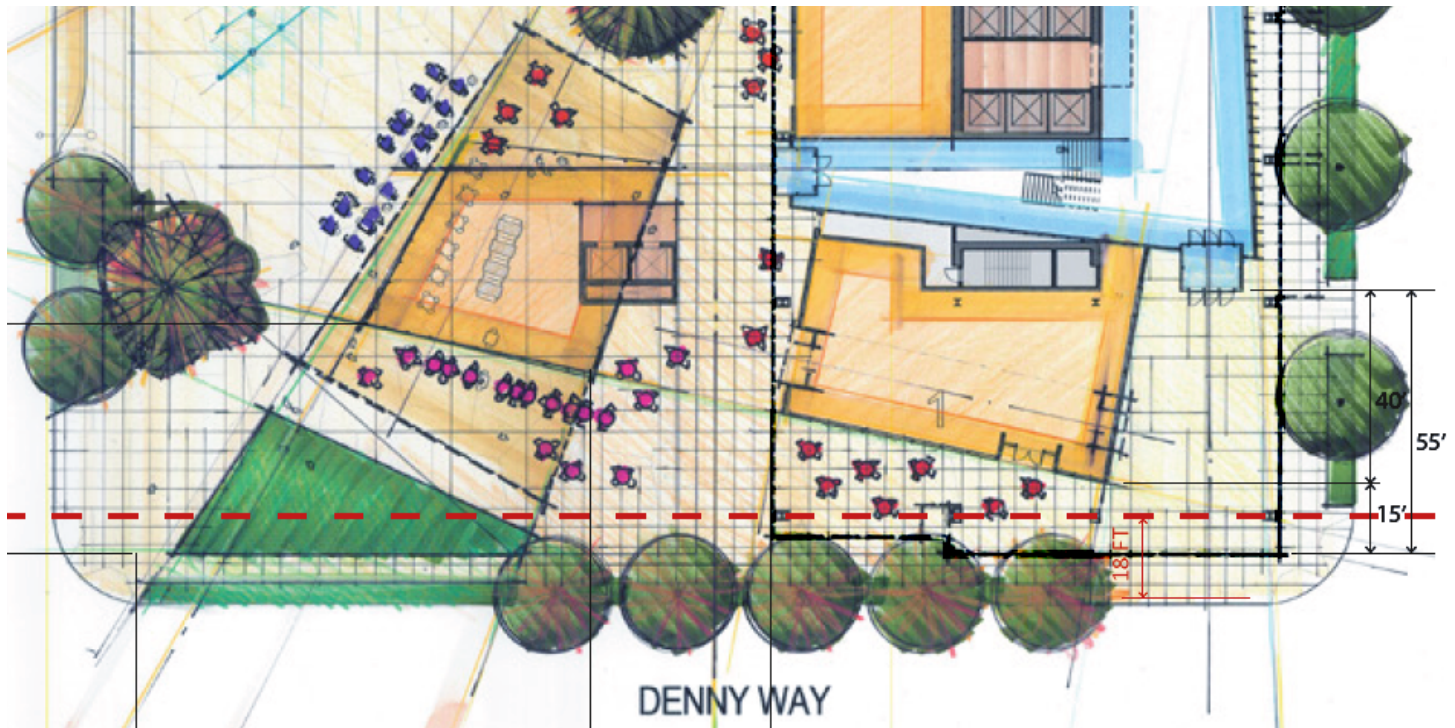
The Commission also made the following comments and recommendations for the project:

1. Consider opportunities for green storm-water infrastructure (GSI) as encouraged in the [South Lake Union Urban Design Framework](#), perhaps as part of the public benefit package.
2. Refine the treatment of the northern portion of the alley surface, including paving materials, lighting, signage, and street furniture, so that it feels as urban and public as the rest of the proposed open space.
3. Strengthen the civic nature of the proposed public spaces, especially the pavilion.
4. Identify and present in section opportunities to bring people off the ground plane, as part of the public or private program.
5. Consider various ways to differentiate the ground-plane materials to distinguish the public and private realm. Whatever approach you choose, we would like to understand the logic driving the decision.
6. Present more detail about the lighting scheme for the entire site.
7. We appreciate that the subterranean alley vacation scheme is a sensible alternative to a full vacation particularly because it preserves the existing platting rather than creating the potential for a superblock. We support the proposed massing.



The reason for the vote against was as follows:

Ross Tilghman: While I concur with the sense of the recommendations and believe in sensitivity to the particular needs of this project, I would be much happier if the utilities and other City departments clarified policy to deal directly with the issues this type of proposal presents so that we do not have to make it up as we go. It is a very exciting project and will be a wonderful thing to experience, but I see the alley as effectively privatized. I simply don't see how it connects to other things beyond this block.



Comparison of the ground-floor setback along Denny Way in proposed design (above) and the preferred section from the [Denny Way Streetscape Concept Plan](#) (below).