



City of Seattle

Gregory J. Nickels, Mayor
Department of Planning & Development
D. M. Sugimura, Director

**DESIGN GUIDELINE PRIORITIES
OF
THE WEST SEATTLE DESIGN REVIEW BOARD**

Meeting Date: April 10, 2008

Report Date: April 28, 2008

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

Project Number: 3007764 & 3007765

Address: 4550 38th Av SW & 4203 SW Alaska St

Applicant: Joseph Hines, Weber Thompson Architects, for Conner Homes

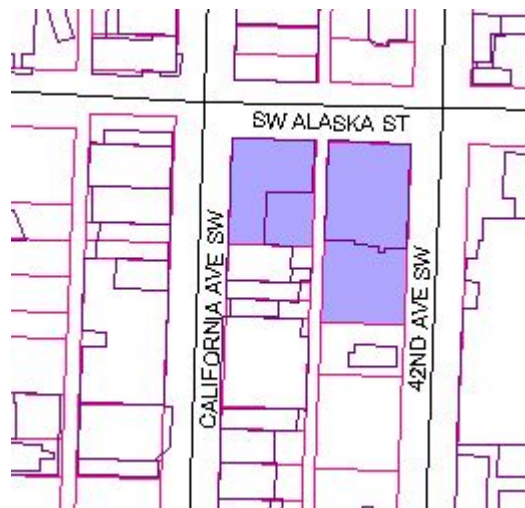
Board members present: Deb Barker, Chair
Christie Coxley
David Foster
Joseph Hurley
Brandon Nicholson

Land Use Planner present: Michael Dorcy

VICINITY AND AREA DEVELOPMENT:

The development site consists of two parcels, one (16,675 square feet) at the corner of SW Alaska Street and California Avenue SW, the other, larger (28,750 square feet) parcel at the corner of SW Alaska Street and 42nd Avenue SW. The two parcels are separated by a north/south running alley connecting SW Alaska Street and SW Edmunds Street. It is the intention of the applicant to apply for a partial alley vacation in order to provide a single, underground parking garage beneath two proposed above-ground structures.

The zoning for both sites is Neighborhood Commercial 3, with an 85-foot height limit (NC3-85). There is a pedestrian zoning overlay that affects the entire west parcel and which extends along the north forty-four feet of the east parcel. Currently there are structures on each parcel which are proposed for demolition in order to accommodate the envisioned development.



The applicant proposes to develop two mixed-use buildings above a common underground parking structure. The west building, with a footprint of approximately 13,300 square feet, would contain five stories of residential units over one floor of retail at sidewalk level. The east building, with a footprint of approximately 25,800 square feet, would contain six floors of residential units over a retail base. The entire development would contain 208 residential units. Parking for approximately 362 spaces would be provided below grade, with access to the parking garage proposed off 42nd Avenue SW.

Each of the above-grade structures would be held back from their respective south property lines in order to accommodate cross-block pedestrian corridors. The cross-block pedestrian corridor connecting the alley with 42nd Avenue SW would complement and expand the pedestrian corridor which is part of the Harbor Properties project under construction on the adjacent property to the south.

The proposed development lies within a swath of 85-foot allowable zoning height extending a block on either side of the commercial spine of California Avenue SW. Until recently actual development up to the allowed height limit has been minimal and sporadic (the nine-story Alaska House, just to the north on 42nd Avenue SW across SW Alaska Street, and which has stood there for 30 years, is an exception). More recently, several projects extending to the zoned height limit are under construction or proposed for construction in the general vicinity. Nevertheless, despite this activity, California Avenue SW still remains characterized by a ribbon of one and two story commercial buildings with relatively small footprints. This articulation, scale and massing, of urban form remains for many residents of the area emblematic of not only the traditional but the desired commercial main street appropriate for the West Seattle neighborhood.

ARCHITECTS' PRESENTATION

The presentation by the development team began with brief analysis of the vicinity and site and an explanation of the developer's intentions to apply for a partial, subterranean alley vacation from City Council to allow the parking garage to extend beneath an alley that would be improved and remain open to traffic. While access to loading berths for each of the separate above-grade structures would be taken off the alley, general access to the parking garage would be taken from 42nd Avenue SW, toward the southern limit of the structure facing that street. This would require the granting of a departure from development standards and a recommendation of approval from the Board.

Although the western parcel enjoys the same zoning height limit of 85 feet as the eastern site, it is the developer's intention to extend the western structure at the corner of SW Alaska Street and California Avenue SW only to five stories rather than the allowable six stories. The eastern structure would extend to six stories. Together the structures would be expected to provide approximately 208 residential units. Parking for approximately 362 vehicles would be provided in the conjoined garage.

Special features of the overall development would include cross-block pedestrian corridors at the south ends of each of the proposed structures. The corridor between 42nd Avenue SW and the alley would conjoin a passage already being provided as part of the Harbor Properties project

now under construction. The Conner Homes development proposes extending retail uses along each of the pedestrian corridors as well as along the ground level of the alley within each of the structures.

Three alternate massing models for the site were briefly presented to the Board. The first option established a strong five-story presence at the corner of SW Alaska Street and California Avenue SW while providing a substantial notch at the residential levels within the southeast quadrant of the structure. The eastern structure was “C”-shaped above the retail base with the void facing to the east.

The second option differed from the first primarily by providing an “E”-shaped massing (with a shortened middle arm) and providing the void to the alley, with the opposite façade solidly aligned with 42nd Avenue SW.

The preferred third option showed each of the structures holding their edges at the street corners, with substantially more linear, jagged courtyards facing each other at the alley, and with slightly greater modulation along the California Avenue SW and 42nd Avenue SW upper level facades. As in the other options, the western structure kept itself at only five stories of residential units above the retail base.

Public Comments:

There was sizable representation of members of the public who attended the meeting, many with concerns regarding the compatibility of the proposal, especially the western building, in height, bulk and scale with the existing build-out and urban form along California Avenue SW. Public comments solicited from the public included the following:

- Concern that the height of the proposal would go against the “small town feel” that is the cherished expectation of California Avenue SW;
- The massing of the building and the proposed height was “too great” for West Seattle and out of line with existing patterns of development;
- Concern that, because of the sizes of the designated retail space, the expectations of the developers ran counter to the neighborhood’s predilection for small, locally-owned businesses; “smaller retail, more entries”;
- The California Avenue SW façade needs to tier back at the upper levels so as not to overwhelm pedestrian comfort;
- SW Alaska Street needs the enhancement of seating and artwork, as well as plantings and the pleasant rhythm of multiple, regular entries from the sidewalk;
- Questioned the desirability of providing a cross-block connector from the alley to California Avenue SW;
- Concern about the mix of pedestrians and vehicles on alley, especially since the project would not control the whole alley—the Harbor Properties project just to the south will be using the alley for access and egress;
- There is an excessive focus on the problematic pedestrian alley environment that is “romantic” and may be unworkable; the focus needs to be on California Avenue SW where the massing and scale issues are significant;
- The two structures should not be treated as twins conjoined at the hip; they “should be treated as cousins, and could even be distant cousins”;

- “Horried by the height”;
- Show people in scale with the proposal the next time around;
- Materials, especially at the pedestrian level, should be of prime importance;
- Concern (by representative of local Chamber of Commerce) that too much is being made of small, locally owned businesses since there was a demonstrable need for some larger retail spaces in the area that would provide greater employment opportunities to residents of West Seattle.

Board’s Deliberations:

After considering the analysis of the site and context provided by the proponents and hearing public comment the Design Review Board members identified by letter and number those siting and design guidelines found in the City of Seattle’s *Design Review: Guidelines for Multifamily & Commercial Buildings* which they considered to be of highest priority for this project.

DESIGN GUIDELINES

A *Site Planning*

A-1 Responding to Site Characteristics

The siting of buildings should respond to specific site conditions and opportunities such as non-rectangular lots, location on prominent intersections, unusual topography, significant vegetation and views or other natural features

The Board cited this guideline, noting the “prominent intersection” component and picking up on the motif articulated by several members of the public that this was “the most important and prominent location in West Seattle.

A-2 Streetscape Compatibility

The siting of buildings should acknowledge and reinforce the existing desirable spatial characteristics of the right-of-way.

If the project were to pursue the alley activation idea to any extent, setbacks, recessed entries, modulation, landscaped spaces adjacent the alley at alley level and not just at a terrace level well above the actual alley plane would be essential to making it work successfully.

A-3 Entrances Visible from the Street

Entries should be clearly identifiable and visible from the street

Members of the Board thought less emphasis should be given the residential entries; explore whether the project would benefit from a shift of residential entries to SW Alaska Street.

A-4 Human Activity

New development should be sited and deigned to encourage human activity on the street

Members of the Board noted that the outside street perimeter of the project was much more important than the alley activation. In general, the Board was less than enthused by the idea of alley retail spaces and activation. Nor did they speak favorably of the pedestrian corridor being proposed between California Avenue SW and the alley. They expressed the opinion that it broke up the desired continuity of retail entrances along California Avenue SW and, if a viable desirable item, needed to be located further south in the block.

A-8 Parking and Vehicle Access

Siting should minimize the impact of automobile parking and driveways on the pedestrian environment, adjacent properties and pedestrian safety.

A-10 Corner Lots

Buildings on corner lots should be oriented to the corner and public street fronts. Parking and automobile access should be located away from corners.

The guidelines above were all chosen by the board to be of highest priority. Human activity on the street should be promoted by the interface of sidewalk and the retail spaces (and the interface of sidewalk grade and interior space was essential for success here). Activation of California Avenue SW, SW Alaska Street and 42nd Avenue SW sidewalks should be a priority.

B Height, Bulk and Scale

Projects should be compatible...and provide for transitions

There is an inherent potential conflict between any new development and the existing pattern in the neighborhood of lower residential and commercial buildings built on smaller parcels of land. There is an established fabric in the area and this new development should continue to demonstrate sensitivity to that fabric and, given the zoned development potential, to provide for refined transitions in height, bulk, and scale. The Board noted that while tall buildings were not inherently evil, the existing context and urban form of California Avenue SW needed to be addressed seriously and the deference given that context—in terms of continuity of datum points, upper level setbacks, vertical and horizontal modulation, etc.—would be key to the success of the project. This guideline, together with C-1, cited below, are the two guidelines of highest priority, among those noted of highest priority, for achieving a successful design outcome on this development site.

C Architectural Elements and Materials

C-1 Architectural Context

New buildings proposed for existing neighborhoods with a well-defined and desirable character should be compatible with or complement the architectural character and siting patter of neighborhood buildings.

In this instance the goals of complementarity and compatibility will certainly have to consist of deferential gestures that address issues of height, bulk and scale in an effective manner.

C-3 Human Scale

The design of new buildings should incorporate architectural features, elements and details to achieve a good human scale

The Board noted that the project should explore opportunities to achieve a good human scale, especially the way various entrances address the different street fronts.

C-4 Exterior Finish Materials

Building exteriors should be constructed of durable and maintainable materials that are attractive even when viewed up close. Materials that have texture, patterns, or lend themselves to a high quality of detailing are encouraged.

Architectural materials, scale and details should be integrated within a building whose concept is appropriate for the site and its surroundings as well as its programmatic uses. The Board was not prescriptive regarding materials, but would expect to see a choice of durable and sustainable materials and to be presented with samples of proposed colors and materials at a subsequent recommendation meeting. The new development, the first of its kind and size within the immediate vicinity will be setting the precedent and establishing the desirable characteristics for other developments to follow.

D Pedestrian Environment

D-1 Pedestrian Open Spaces and Entrances

Convenient and attractive access to the building's entry should be provided. To ensure comfort and security, paths and entry areas should be sufficiently lighted and entry areas should be protected from the weather. Opportunities for creating lively, pedestrian-oriented open space should be considered.

D-8 Treatment of Alleys

The design of the alley entrances should enhance the pedestrian street front.

D-11 Commercial Transparency

Commercial storefronts should be transparent, allowing for a direct visual connection between pedestrians on the sidewalk and the activities occurring on the interior of a building. Blank walls should be avoided.

D-12 Residential Entries and Transitions

For residential projects in commercial zones, the space between the residential entry and the sidewalk should provide security and provide for a visually interesting street front for the pedestrian. Residential buildings should enhance the character of the streetscape with small gardens, stoops and other elements that work to create a transition between the public sidewalk and private entry.

The above guidelines were cited by the Board as being of highest priority without any further guidance offered.

E Landscaping

E-2 Landscaping to Enhance the Building and/or Site

Landscaping, including living plant material, special pavements, trellises, screen walls, planters, site furniture and similar features should be appropriately incorporated into the design to enhance the project.

Landscaping should be designed with the goal of realizing the prioritized guidelines, should soften the edge conditions where appropriate, and should contribute to attractive and usable open spaces.

Departures from Development Standards:

The design team noted that they had identified one departure from development standards that would be needed: from SMC 23.47A.032A, which requires parking access from the alley when the lot abuts an improved alley. The Board noted that they would like to see some alternative vehicular entry options presented at the next Design Review Meeting.

Staff Comments:

Projects requiring Design Review must address the community design guidelines in the *West Seattle Junction Urban Village Design Guidelines* as well as the Citywide Design Guidelines. The applicant is directed especially to “West Seattle Junction Context and Priority Design Issues” as discussed on p.iii and “Height, Bulk and Scale Compatibility” and “Architectural Character” as discussed on p.v. This is in addition to the West Seattle Junction Design Guidelines A-2, B-1, and C-1 which have particular applicability.

As noted in *West Seattle Junction Design Guidelines*, the differential between the current zoning in the Junction and the existence of one-to two-story commercial buildings within the commercial core along California Avenue SW is bound to cause potential conflicts between new development and the existing built environment. Since the value articulated in the *Guidelines* is “to preserve and continue the small town quality in new development...through the siting, massing and design of new buildings,” its realization requires “more refined transition in height, bulk and scale” than is normally the case. The West Seattle Design Review Board has recommended to the Department of Planning and Development that the applicants return for another Early Design Guidance meeting at which time the design team will demonstrate alternatives for providing “more refined transitions in height, bulk and scale” for the building located at the corner of California Avenue SW and SW Alaska Street.

DPD concurs in this recommendation and request, provided the meeting focuses on proposed alternative designs showing refined transitions in height, bulk and scale for the California Avenue SW structure. The meeting should also include the presentation of further analyses and explorations into alternative vehicular entry options as specifically requested by the Board. The applicant should be free to present, along with the above requested design alternatives, any other elements of the design development they feel would be informative for the Board.

It is the expectation of DPD that subsequent to the next Early Design Guidance meeting the applicant will proceed to further design development, which includes a demonstrable response to the guidelines and guidance noted above, as well as to the guidance that will be forthcoming, and to a Master Use Permit application. Subsequent to a successful application, the proposal will be returned to the Design review Board for a recommendation of approval meeting.