



City of Seattle

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

**RECOMMENDATION
OF
THE WEST SEATTLE DESIGN REVIEW BOARD**
Meeting Dates: March 12, & April 2, 2009
Report Date: April 20, 2009

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

Project Number: 3007764 & 3007765
Address: 4706 California Av SW & 4203 SW Alaska St
Applicant: Joseph Hines, Weber+Thompson Architects, for Conner Homes

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. The applicant has applied 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 six 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.

Early Design Guidance meetings on this proposal were conducted on April 10, 2008 and again on May 29, 2008.

Recommendation Meeting, March 12, 2009

Board members present: David Foster, Chair
Christie Coxley
Deb Barker
Joseph Hurley
Vlad Oustimovitch (for Brandon Nicholson, on leave)

Land Use Planner present: Michael Dorcy

ARCHITECTS' PRESENTATION

The presentation by the development team began with a brief recapitulation of what had been presented at the two Early Design Guidance meetings regarding an analysis of the vicinity and the developer's intentions for the two sites separated by the north/south alley that bisects the block between California Avenue SW and 42nd Avenue SW. It was still the intention to obtain 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. To this end, it was explained, an application for a partial subterranean alley vacation has been made to the Seattle Department of Transportation and a formal presentation of the proposal had been made to the Seattle Design Commission on November 20, 2008, at which time the Commission unanimously

approved the urban design merits of the proposal. In doing so, the Commission encouraged the design team to consider, among other elements, the following:

- wider sidewalks along all street frontages of the project to allow nodes or eddies to allow pedestrian rest opportunities;
- continuous connection of mid block pedestrian flow;
- respite opportunities along the frontage of the project, as well as enhancing the nodes at alley entries;
- more retail spillage into the alley;
- A greater pedestrian buffer from the traffic along California Avenue.

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, as had been shown at the two Early Design Guidance meeting, was still contemplated as coming off 42nd Avenue SW, toward the southern limit of the structure facing that street, thus requiring the granting of a departure from development standards and a recommendation of approval from the Board. Parking for approximately 362 vehicles would be provided in the conjoined garage.

Special features of the overall development still included 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 proposed extending retail uses along each of the pedestrian corridors, but, in response to the Board's guidance at the Early Design Guidance meetings, was no longer proposing alley entrances to retail spaces.

The developer, Charlie Connor of Connor Homes, began the presentation by explaining the importance for the project of taking parking access from 42nd Avenue SW. He also noted that in response to concerns from merchants who shared the alley that the alley would be rerouted across the site to 42nd Avenue SW during the early phases of construction in order to provide uninterrupted alley access to the merchants who depend on the alley for regular deliveries.

Next, architect Peter Greaves of Weber+Thompson Architects; presented on behalf of the design team, explaining how other elements of the Board's Early Design Guidance had been incorporated into design. Primary among these was the massing of the structure intended for the corner of SW Alaska Street and California Avenue SW. The members of the Board had expressed agreement that in order to gain their recommendation of approval of the overall design of the project the applicant would have to present a design that demonstrated a dramatic shift in the massing of this western building. The design team, in order to be in harmony with the guidelines selected to be of highest importance for the success of the project and the explicit guidance of the Board at the two Early Design Guidance meetings, were presenting the massing of the structure on the western site conceived as three distinct components. The first was a four story brick-clad "building" rising above and co-extensive with SW Alaska Street and extending between California Avenue SW and the alley to the east. This façade of this "building" would run along California Avenue SW at the property line for a distance where it would distinctively conjoin with a second portion of the structure, continuous at the property line, comprised of a retail frontage, of a single story but substantially tall to align with the existing retail frontages south of the site. A distinct element of the overall massing was a third portion of the overall

structure, set back from both SW Alaska St and California Avenue SW at the points where it took rise above the other two massing elements.

Public Comment

Having asked some clarifying questions of the design team, the Board then opened the meeting to comments from the public. Comments included the following:

- an “overall good project” for the Junction;
- approval of the small-scale retail being proposed;
- should “spur” much-needed improvements in existing retail;
- retail spaces should incorporate windows and doors that could be opened widely in summertime; should include outdoor tables and chairs;
- still too massive and will destroy small-scale character of neighborhood;
- missing character and historical continuity that could be incorporated into the architectural details of the proposed structures; brick not enough; needs pattern and interest;
- 42nd Avenue SW vehicular access will conflict with pedestrian safety and comfort and is too close to the cross-block connection between 42nd And the alley;
- the building at SW Alaska and California “too monolithic,” “too boxy,” “sterile,” needs modulation of some kind.

Board Deliberations

Members of the Board noted that the design had responded to several concerns voiced previously by both Board and the community, but they were also agreed that there was still lacking a treatment of details, especially those that would impart character at the retail, pedestrian level. The Board further noted the inability to add further discussion and deliberation time since they had to exit the Library by 8:00 PM sharp. Given this constraint and a number of unresolved issues, it was the Board’s desire and recommendation that the applicants return for another recommendation meeting.

Recommendation Meeting, April 2, 2009

A second Recommendation Meeting was held on Thursday, April 2, 2009, at the West Seattle Community Church, commencing at 6:30 PM. Although this meeting lasted in excess of three hours, the Board was again unable to provide the Department with a Recommendation or a Recommendation with conditions regarding the development proposal.

In attendance were Board members: David Foster, Chair
Deb Barker
Christie Coxley
Joseph Hurley
Vlad Oustimovitch

Land Use Planner present: Michael Dorcy

Jim Westcott of Weber+Thompson Architects presented for the design team and reminded the Board and the public that, per the Board's directives, the presentation would focus on the architectural detail of the proposed "west" building. The presentation kept to its promise with some attention paid the street-level, pedestrian/ retail areas along both California Avenue SW and SW Alaska Street and more attention given the upper box portion of the building and in particular the balconies facing onto California Avenue. A variety of colors, shapes and textures applied to the balconies were said to "break down the mass" of that façade while adding an element of "fun" to it.

A colors and materials selection was on display and was presented with comments from the architect. Materials will include colored, flat and textured cementitious panels as well as different colors of brick.

The Board was reminded of the request of a departure to take vehicular access from 42nd Avenue SW, with the architect pointing to the future pressures upon the alley, especially since future development adjacent the alley anywhere within the remaining two thirds of a long block facing onto California Avenue "would have no choice but to enter a garage from the alley."

Public Comment

After asking several clarifying questions regarding the presentation, the Board opened the meeting to public comment. A representative of the West Seattle Junction Association noted the organization's opposition to locating a residential entry on California Avenue SW, since they were desirous of a complete contiguity of retail fronts along that façade. This was seconded by a spokesperson for the Junction Neighborhood Association who said that moving the residential entries to SW Alaska Street was "incredibly important." Another member of the public expressed the opinion that the proposed sidewalk widths were insufficient on both street fronts. At least a couple of comments demurred regarding the proposed balcony treatments and others lamented the modernist aesthetic displayed and the lack of any effort to architecturally blend the structure with the "older style" that exists there.

Board Deliberations

The Board moved widely over a number of issues but appeared to be relatively agreed regarding the following:

- they were not opposed to the "modernist aesthetic" and were leery that a thoughtless introduction of "older" design elements might result in the kind of ornamental appliqué that they already found troublesome on the upper "flat box" of the structure; they appeared to be in general agreement that the old/new interplay could be generated most effectively in the individual treatments of the new street-level retail spaces;
- they did not find the California Avenue SW residential entry as essentially disruptive, in contrast to the view expressed by some members of the public;

Granting a departure for locating the entry/exit for vehicular parking on 42nd Avenue SW was agreed to by three of the five Board members.

The Board agreed, however, that another "focused" Design Review Board Recommendation Meeting would be required to resolve the one remaining important issue of the upper massing of

the west building. Specifically, the applicants were asked to address and present some alternatives to the large, “flat” upper box. A successful solution would include, but not be limited to, carefully examining and presenting alternatives in:

- coloring,
 - modulation, to break up the flatness of the upper box.
 - creating a distinctive relationship between the upper floor and cap of the upper box to the rest of the mass of the box, and
 - integrating the upper mass more effectively with the “brick” building and the retail, one-story bar of the structure that connects with the existing retail facades to the south of the site.
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