

PUBLIC SCHOOL DEVELOPMENT STANDARDS ADVISORY COMMITTEE¹

MERCER MIDDLE SCHOOL DESIGN DEPARTURE RECOMMENDATIONS

Project #3039303-SD

September 27, 2022

This report is produced pursuant to the City of Seattle Municipal Code (SMC 23.44.006 F and 23.79: the “Code”). The intent and purpose of this report is to document public comment and make recommendations to the city regarding proposed modifications to development standards to facilitate construction of the new Mercer International Middle School located at 1600 S. Columbian Way, Seattle, WA 98108.



¹ Pursuant to Ordinance 126188, which will remain in effect for the duration of the COVID-19 civil emergency declared by Mayor Durkan in March 2020, the Director of the Department of Neighborhoods is authorized to submit this recommendation report to the Seattle Department of Construction and Inspections in lieu of an advisory committee process.

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Attachment: Mercer Middle School Public Comments

Attachment: SPS Response to the Public Comments

1. Background

1.1 Project Description

On March 23, 2022, Seattle Public Schools (SPS) submitted a request for departures per SMC 23.79.002 for the Mercer International Middle School located at 1600 S. Columbian Way, Seattle, WA 98108. The departure request pertains to building height, setbacks, parking quantity and signage/illuminated reader board.

1.2 Building History

The existing 1958 school currently has 25 portables to accommodate the over-capacity student enrollment. These are intended as a temporary solution; they are difficult to access from the main building and have taken over most of the outdoor playground areas.

The school is set back from the street, hidden behind trees, and feels disconnected from the neighborhood.

The existing building and site lack space and flexibility to meet SPS programmatic needs. There is no on-site playfield, play courts, or any other SPS standard outdoor program element. Currently, Mercer can only use an adjacent public soccer field, which creates scheduling and security challenges.

This project was reviewed by the Seattle Landmarks Preservation Board, who determined not to designate the school as a historic landmark during a meeting on May 19, 2021.



Exhibit 1 Existing Site



Exhibit 2 Proposed Site Plan

The existing vehicular entry is located on the South end of the site, on S. Columbian Way. One of the main pedestrian entries is adjacent to the vehicle entry, and the other on 16th Ave S. However, pedestrians may also access the site on the North side through Jefferson Park.

School buses pick-up and drop-off students along 16th Ave South, while private vehicles use the on-site parking lot.

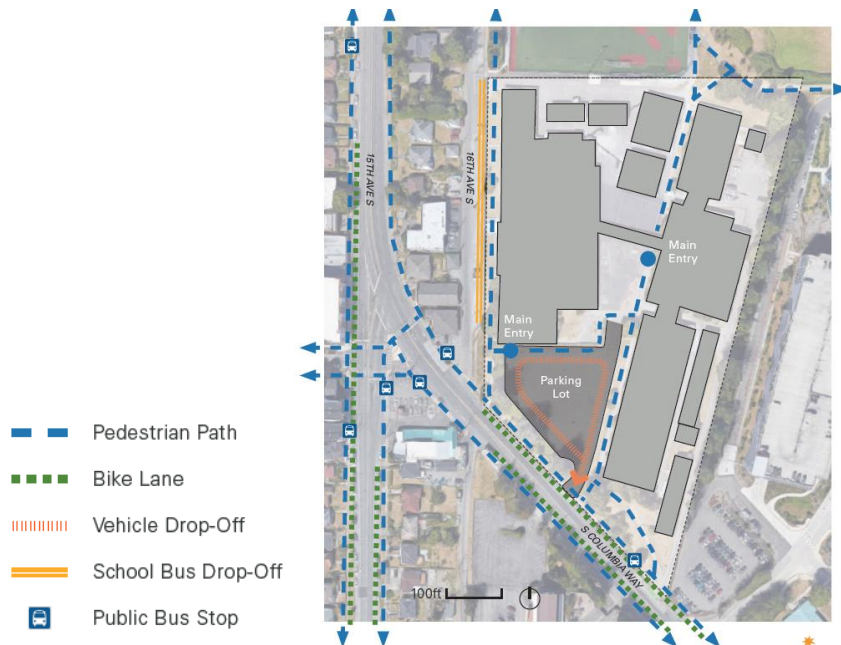


Exhibit 3 Existing Site Circulation



Exhibit 4 Proposed Site Circulation

Over 90% of the site is currently occupied by a building or asphalt paving. Many of the trees are located along the South and East perimeters of the site.

There are existing trees to remain including six as “exceptional” under the City’s tree ordinance. Most of them are located on the South end of the site facing S. Columbian Way. This includes three large atlas cedar trees that are in good condition.



Exhibit 5 Site Analysis - Trees

1.3 Neighborhood Characteristics

Mercer Middle School is in North Beacon Hill, southeast of downtown Seattle. It is in a neighborhood residential zone with commercial and major institution zones to the West and East, respectively.

Nearby neighborhood amenities and services include Jefferson Park (1), Seattle Veterans Administration Hospital (2), MacPherson's Fruit & Produce (3), Beacon Hill Church of the Nazarene (4), and the non-profit Powerful Voices (5).



Exhibit 6 Neighborhood Surroundings

1.4 Requests for Departures and Process

The City administers the Development Standard Departure Process, pursuant to SMC 23.44.006F and 23.79. The Code requires that the Department of Neighborhoods (DON) convene a Development Standard Advisory Committee (hereinafter as “the Committee”) when SPS proposes a departure from the development standards identified under the Code. These standards are popularly referred to as the “zoning code.”

The purpose of the Committee is 1) to gather public comment and evaluate the proposed departures for consistency with the objectives and intent of the City’s land use policies to ensure that the proposed facility is compatible with the character and use of its surroundings; and 2) to develop a report and recommendation to the Seattle Department of Construction and Inspections (SDCI) from DON. (SMC 23.79.008).

In April 2020, City Council passed Ordinance 126072, which temporarily allowed certain land use applications to be handled administratively. These provisions (later extended by Ordinance 126188) were part of a larger City effort to expedite permits, respond to economic challenges,

and address urgent development needs during the pandemic. Thus, the DON Director is temporarily authorized to submit this recommendation report to SDCI in lieu of a public advisory committee process. Absent further legislative action, the temporary provisions will expire 60 days after the Mayor lifts the COVID-19 Civil Emergency Order. The content of the report is informed by public comments solicited and reviewed by DON staff.

Following completion of DON's recommendation report and its transmittal to SDCI, the Director of SDCI will issue a formal report and decision. The SDCI Director will consider the DON report's recommendations and (1) determine the extent of departure from established development standards that may be allowed, and (2) identify all mitigating measures which may be required. The SDCI Director's decision is appealable.

2. Departures

2.1 Specific District Requests

Seattle Public Schools, Mercer Middle School, and the Design Team worked together to develop the following guiding principles to address the project needs and goals. These site-specific goals were created during early design development sessions with the School Design Advisory Team (SDAT). SDAT is formed for each school project, and includes the principal, teachers, community members, student representatives, and key school district officials:

- 1) Learner-Centered Environment
- 2) Personalizing Environment
- 3) Program Adaptability
- 4) Community Connections
- 5) Aesthetics
- 6) Safety
- 7) Collaboration
- 8) Sustainability

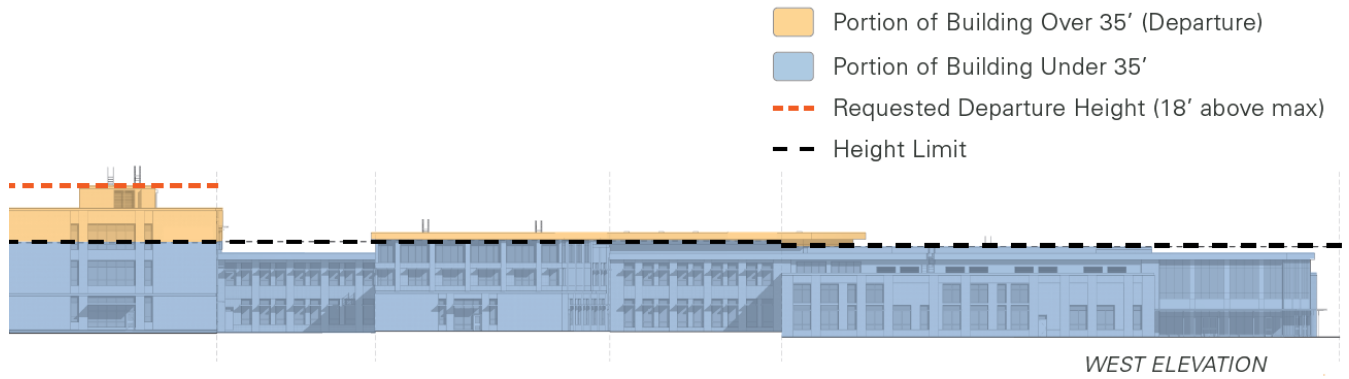
To accommodate the project needs and goals of this project, SPS requested the following departures from the development standards found in SMC 23.51B.002.

Departure #1 – Greater than Allowed Building Height

Existing Standard: SMC 23.51B.002.D.1.b: For new public-school construction on existing public-school sites, the maximum permitted height is 35 feet.

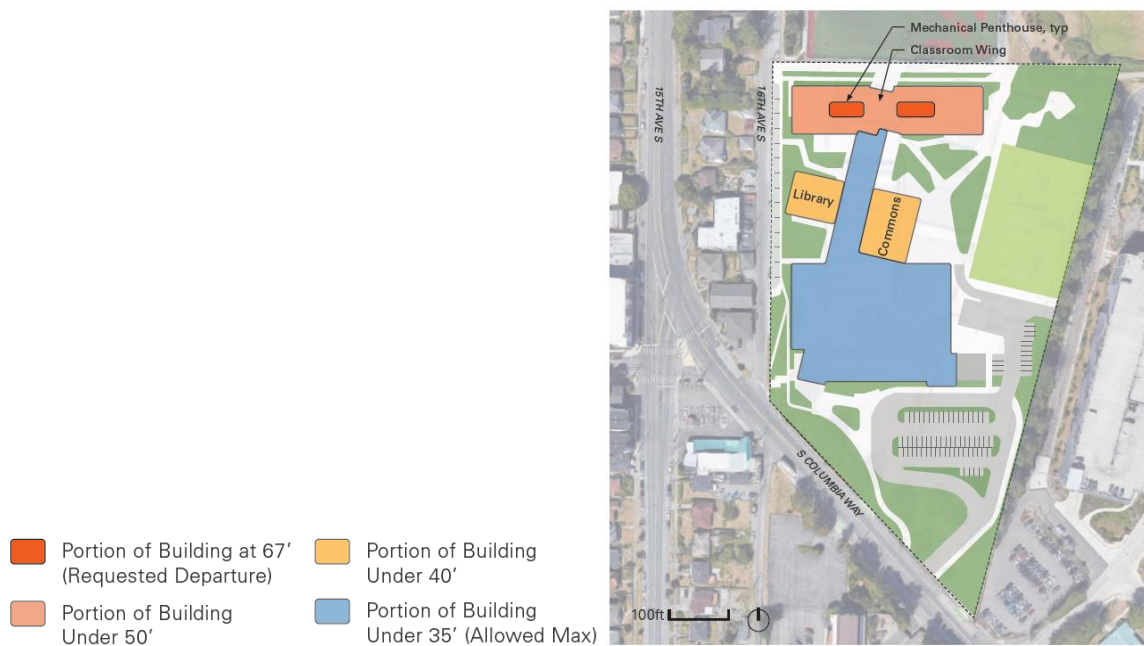
Allowed Building Height: 35 feet (23.51B.002.D1b)

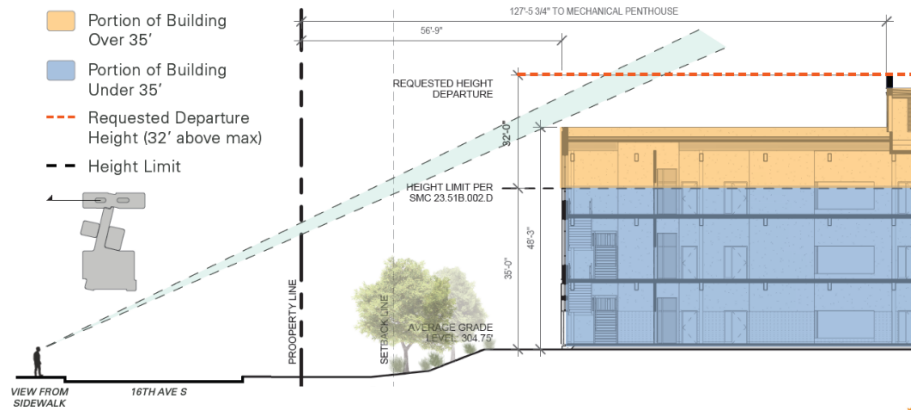
The proposed maximum building height is 67' above average grade. The over height areas are 1) mechanical penthouses stepped in from the faces of the 3-story building wing, and 2) the tallest parapets. These areas are 32' and 12', respectively, above allowable height.



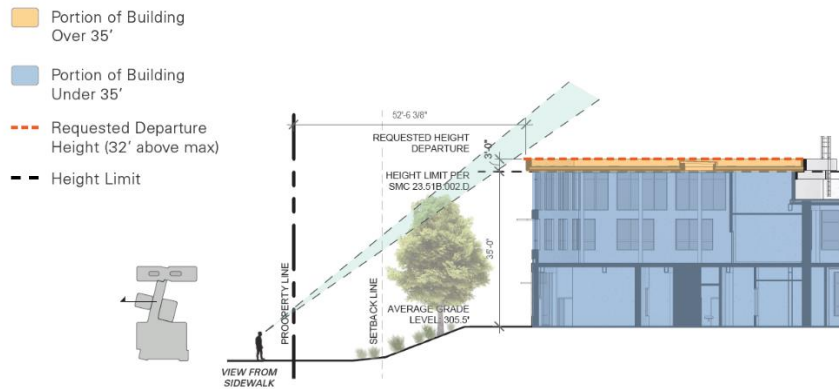
Only a limited portion of the building would reach the requested 67 feet:

- The commons and library roofs exceed the allowable height by less than 5 feet.
- Third floor roof exceeds the allowable height by less than 15 feet.
- Only the Mechanical Platforms reach the requested 67 feet.
- The tallest over height areas would not be visible from the West sidewalk of 16th Ave S.

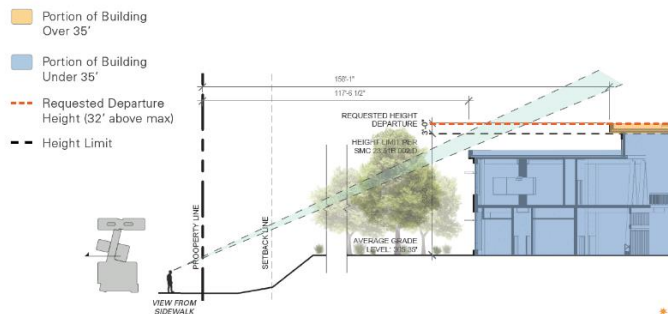




Building Height at Classroom Wing



Building Height at Library



Building Height at Commons

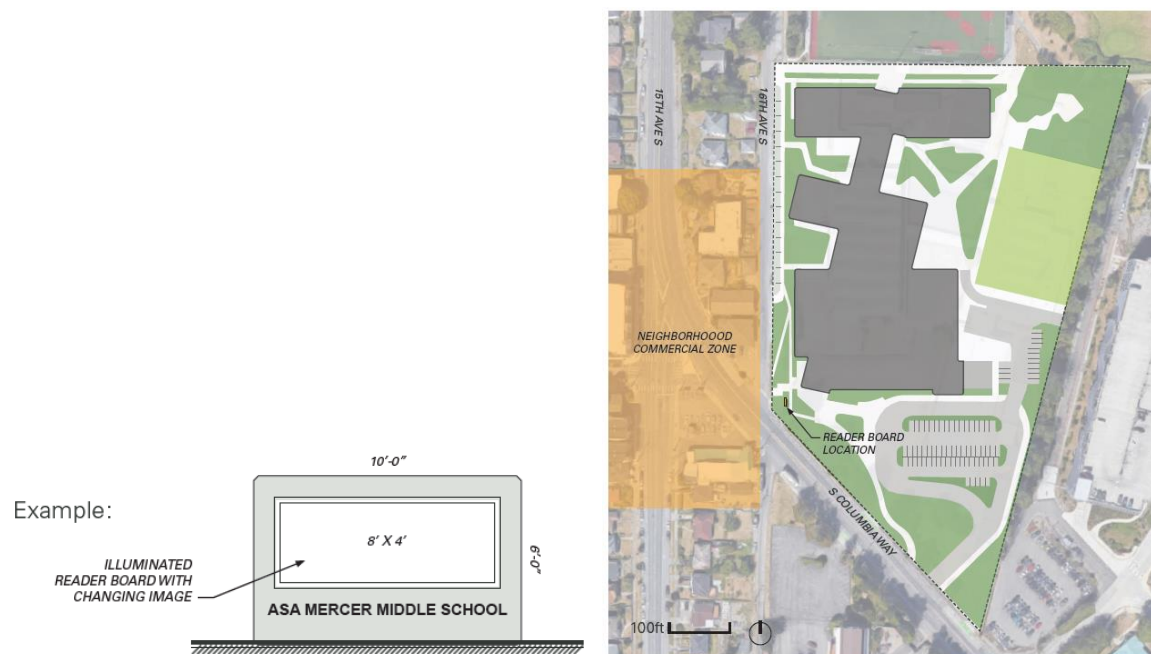
Proposed Departure Requested: The Code allows a maximum height of 35' for secondary schools. The project proposes a 67' height limit for a 32' departure.

Departure #2 – Signage/Illuminated Reader Board

Existing Standard: SMC 23.55.020.B: Reader Board Standards:

- No flashing, changing image, or message board signs.
- For elementary or secondary schools, one electric or nonilluminated double-faced identifying sign, not to exceed 30 feet of area per sign face on each street frontage.

The project is requesting a departure to allow one single-sided illuminated reader board with changing image. The reader board will only face the neighborhood commercial zone, and not a neighborhood residential zone. The reader will be on from 8am-9pm every day and automatically shut down accordingly. Proposed size: 10' L x 6' H x 2' W (60 square feet) with 8' x 4' illuminated changing image portion.

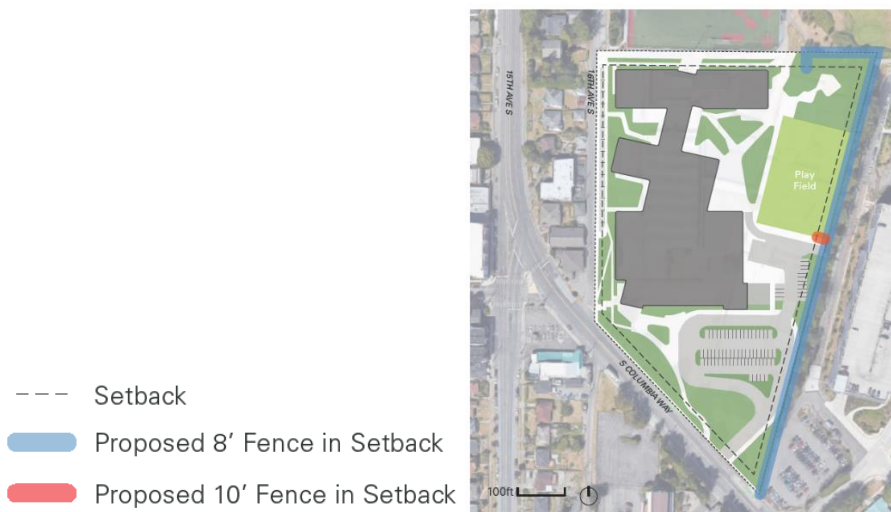


Proposed Departure Requested: The Code allows a reader board with no flashing, changing image, or message board sign; not to exceed 30 sq. ft. The project proposes a single-sided 60 sq. ft. illuminated reader board with changing image facing the neighborhood commercial zone

Departure #3 – Increase fence height within setbacks

Existing Standard: SMC 23.44.014.C.10: Freestanding structures (such as fences) are allowed to be 6 feet or less in height within a setback.

The project is proposing replacing the existing fence along the East edge of the property with an 8-foot fence for security purposes; and a 10-foot fence along the South edge of the soccer field to prevent balls from going past the field.



Proposed Departure Requested: The Code allows freestanding structures (such as fences) to be 6' or less in height within a setback. The project is proposing an 8' fence along the East property edge and a 10' fence along the South edge of the soccer field.

Departure #4 – Reduced Parking Quantify

The project proposes the use of bus drop-off areas as additional parking for after-school hours public events. It prioritizes essential outdoor program spaces by minimizing on-site vehicles and encouraging off-site parking, as recommended by the City of Seattle School Traffic Safety Committee.

Parking quantity requirements are based on the size of public assembly spaces (such as commons and gymnasiums) for public events, which are typically scheduled for after-school hours.

PARKING CALCULATIONS (SMC 23.54.015 Table C-N)

REQUIRED		
Area at Commons:	7295SF / 80SF	= 91
Bleachers at Gym:	600 Seats / 8	= 75
Total Spaces Required:	91 + 75	= 167
PROPOSED		
Total Spaces Proposed:		= 84
DEPARTURE		
Requested Departure:	167 - 84	= 83

If all code-required parking was provided, it would occupy most of the open space. The additional parking would reduce the available area for needed outdoor programmatic activities such as the playground areas, play field, outdoor classroom, and vegetable garden. This layout would also affect the natural views throughout the building, and it would negatively affect the atmosphere of the remaining outdoor areas.



LAYOUT DEPICTING
PROPOSED PARKING QUANTITIES

Proposed Departure Requested: The Code requires 167 parking spaces. The project is proposing 84 parking spaces to accommodate needed programmatic outdoor activities.

2.2 DON Review

2.2.1 Public Comment

The public comment period began via a DON press release issued on June 10, 2022. The press release was translated into Vietnamese and Spanish to provide an opportunity for nearby neighbors who do not speak or read English as their primary language learn about the project and submit comments. DON sent the press release directly to media outlets and mailed postcards about the public comment period to addresses within approximately 600 feet of the school property.

DON also created a webpage where the public could submit their comments. In addition, DON instructed SPS to post signs at the perimeter of the school property. A notice of public comment opportunity was also published in the City's Land Use Information Bulletin (LUIB).

2.2.2 Review Criteria

In lieu of an Advisory Committee process, Section 23.79 of the Code currently allows the DON Director to evaluate requested school departures for consistency with the general objectives and intent of the Code, and to balance the interrelationships among the following factors:

a. Relationship to Surrounding Areas:

- (1) Appropriateness in relation to the character and scale of the surrounding area.
- (2) Presence of edges (significant setbacks, major arterials, topographic breaks, and similar features) which provide a transition in scale.
- (3) Location and design of structures to reduce the appearance of bulk.
- (4) Impacts on traffic, noise, circulation, and parking in the area; and
- (5) Impacts on housing and open space.

b. Need for Departure: The physical requirements of the specific proposal and the project's relationship to educational needs shall be balanced with the level of impacts on the surrounding area. Greater departure may be allowed for special facilities, such as a gymnasium, which are unique and/or an integral and necessary part of the educational process; whereas a lesser or no departure may be granted for a facility which can be accommodated within the established development standards.

2.2.3 Application of Review Criteria to Requested Departures

Code departures may be granted to accommodate the educational needs of public-school programs located in neighborhood residential zoned neighborhoods. For Mercer Middle School, SPS has demonstrated it cannot accommodate the necessary educational programs without development departures for: 1) greater than allowed building height, 2) signage/illuminated reader board, 3) an increase fence height within setbacks, and 4) reduced parking quantity.

Need for Departures

DON received a total of eight public comments. Three comments were submitted via email and five comments were submitted via pre-printed postcards. Some of the comments supported the departure request and some raised concerns over transportation and parking, traffic circulation, carbon footprint impact, air quality and noise, and the exterior building aesthetics.

These comments were shared by DON with SPS, and SPS provided their responses in addressing the concerns of the neighborhood. Upon further review and consideration of all the public comments and the response received, the Department of Neighborhoods recommends the following to help mitigate the impacts on the surrounding neighborhood.

3. DON Recommendations

Departure #1 – Greater than allowed building height

- 1) **Appropriateness in relation to the character and scale of the surrounding area** was considered and DON did not have concerns about the school's increased height having an impact on its relationship to the surrounding neighborhood.
- 2) **Presence of edges (significant setbacks, major arterials, topographic breaks, and similar features) which provide a transition in scale** was considered and DON did not have concerns about the school's increased height having an impact on the presence of edges or transition in scale.
- 3) **Location and design of structures to reduce the appearance of bulk** was considered and DON did not have concerns about the school's increased height having an impact on the appearance of bulk.
- 4) **Impacts on traffic, noise, circulation, and parking in the area** was considered, and DON did not have concerns about the school's increased height having an impact on traffic, circulation, and parking in the neighborhood.
- 5) **Impacts on housing and open space** was considered and DON did not have concerns about housing and open space.

DON received one comment on this departure. The comment was critical of the zoning height maximum of 35' and advocated for a city-wide policy change that would adopt a minimum zoning height, not a maximum.

After consideration of the above, the Department of Neighborhoods recommends:

Recommendation 1 – That the departure to allow greater than allowed building height to be GRANTED as requested by SPS.

Departure #2 – Signage/Illuminated Reader Board

- 1) **Appropriateness in relation to the character and scale of the surrounding area** was considered and DON did not have concerns about the reader board impacting the appropriateness in relation to the character and scale of the surrounding area.
- 2) **Presence of edges (significant setbacks, major arterials, topographic breaks, and similar features) which provide a transition in scale** was considered and DON did not have concerns about the reader board affecting the presence of edges or transition in scale.
- 3) **Location and design of structures to reduce the appearance of bulk** was considered and DON did not have concerns about the reader board affecting the location and design to reduce the appearance of bulk.
- 4) **Impacts on traffic, noise, circulation, and parking in the area** was considered and DON did not have concerns about the reader board impacting on traffic, noise, circulation, and parking in the area.
- 5) **Impacts on housing and open space** was considered and DON did not have concerns about the reader board impacts on housing and open space.

DON received no comments regarding signage/illuminated reader board.

The Department of Neighborhoods recommends:

Recommendation 2 – That the departure to allow a signage/illuminated reader board to be GRANTED as requested by SPS with the following conditions:

- 1) **The reader board will only face the neighborhood commercial zone.**
- 2) **The reader board will only be on from 8am-9pm.**
- 3) **No flashing, scrolling, or moving images, but messages can change to show content.**
- 4) **The sign should be lit only when school is in session, and not used on holidays.**
- 5) **Sign illumination should be limited to two colors to allow the messaging to be more legible and with a dark background.**

Departure #3 – Increase fence height within setbacks

- 1) **Appropriateness in relation to the character and scale of the surrounding area** was considered and DON did not have concerns about the increase fence height within setbacks having an impact on the character and scale of the surrounding area.
- 2) **Presence of edges (significant setbacks, major arterials, topographic breaks, and similar features) which provide a transition in scale** was considered and DON did not have concerns about the increase fence height within setbacks having an impact on the presence of edges or transition in scale.
- 3) **Location and design of structures to reduce the appearance of bulk** was considered and DON did not have concerns about the increase fence height within setbacks having an impact on the location and design of structures to reduce the appearance of bulk.

- 4) **Impacts on traffic, noise, circulation, and parking in the area** was considered and DON did not have concerns about the increase fence height within setbacks having an impact on traffic, noise, circulation, and parking in the area.
- 5) **Impacts on housing and open space** was considered and DON did not have concerns about the increase fence height within setbacks having an impact on housing and open space.

DON received no comments critical of this departure.

The Department of Neighborhoods recommends:

Recommendation 3 – That the departure to replace the existing fence along the East edge of the property with an 8-foot fence for security purposes, and a 10-foot fence along the South edge of the soccer field to prevent balls from going past the field be GRANTED as requested by SPS.

Departure #4 – Reduced Parking Quantity

- 1) **Appropriateness in relation to the character and scale of the surrounding area** was considered and DON did not have concerns about reduced parking quantity having an impact on the character and scale of the surrounding area.
- 2) **Presence of edges (significant setbacks, major arterials, topographic breaks, and similar features) which provide a transition in scale** was considered and DON did not have concerns about reduced parking quantity having an impact on the presence of edges.
- 3) **Location and design of structures to reduce the appearance of bulk** was considered and DON did not have concerns about reduced parking quantity having an impact on the appearance of bulk.
- 4) **Impacts on traffic, noise, circulation, and parking in the area** was considered and DON did have concerns about reduced parking quantity having an impact on traffic, noise, circulation, and parking in the area.
- 5) **Impacts on housing and open space** was considered and DON did not have concerns about reduced parking quantity having an impact on housing and open space.

DON received comments expressing concerns about transportation, traffic circulation, and parking around the school site, especially where 16th Ave S. will be changed to be a one-way, northbound street. SPS responded that 16th Ave S will remain a two-way street upon further review by SDOT.

After consideration of the above, the Department of Neighborhoods recommends:

Recommendation 4 – That the departure to allow 84 parking spaces to accommodate the needed programmatic outdoor activities be GRANTED as requested SPS with the following conditions:

- 1) **Transportation Management Plan (TMP):** Prior to the school reopening, SPS and school administration should establish a TMP to educate families about access load/unload procedures for the site. SPS should also require the school to distribute information to families about onsite pick-up/drop-off on 16th Ave S. as well as travel routes for approaching and leaving the school. Staff and parents should also be instructed not to block or partially block any residential driveways with parked or stopped vehicles.
- 2) **Engage Seattle School Safety Committee:** SPS should continue partnering with SDOT's Seattle School Safety Committee and the Risk Management Office to review any adjustments made to traffic control and crossing paths with school buses with the goal of maintaining safe pedestrian and non-motorized flows at designated crosswalk locations.
- 3) **Neighborhood Communication Plan for School Events:** SPS and school administration should develop a neighborhood communication plan to inform nearby neighbors of large events each year. The plan should be updated annually (or as events are scheduled) and provide information about the dates, times, and magnitude of large-attendance events. The communication would be intended to allow neighbors to plan for occasional increases in on-street parking demand that could accompany large events.

Nelson Pesigan,
Department of Neighborhoods