



ADMINISTRATIVE REPORT

TO: PARK AND RECREATION COMMISSION

FROM: PARKS AND RECREATION DEPARTMENT

PREPARED BY: DENNIS FRANK, LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT

MEETING DATE: FEBRUARY 5, 2014

SUBJECT: PA13-066 THE ESSEX AT CENTRAL PARK PRE APPLICATION REVIEW

RECOMMENDATION

Review the selected drawings from PA 13-066 - The Essex at Central Park Pre-Application submittal, receive public comments and provide comments relative to project impacts on Central Park.

BACKGROUND

It is the purview of the Park and Recreation Commission to review and provide input on planning application projects that are located adjacent to or across from a park in terms of potential impacts that the project may have on the park. Section 2.27.030 of the San Mateo Municipal Code states, "The Commission may, through the City Council, make recommendations to other boards and commission of the city with respect to any action the commission believes should be taken, or upon which it has been requested to advise." A Pre-Application proposal has been submitted for the construction of a new multi-use 8-story development project on the north side of E. Fifth Avenue between S. San Mateo Drive and the Sleep Train Mattress store and across the street from a portion of Central Park. The project consists of 117 rental housing units, ground floor retail, and 260 parking spaces located in one-level of underground, ground level and above ground parking. The project also includes a new ramp to maintain access to the roof top parking lot above the adjacent commercial building. Julia Klein, Associate Planner from the Planning Division, will be present at the meeting to answer questions relative to the planning application process.

Staff typically brings planning applications before the Commission when they become a formal application, however due to the size and significance of this project staff felt that it would be a good idea to bring it to the Commission as soon as possible in the review process which is the Pre- Application phase. Comments and recommendations from the Park and Recreation

Commission will be forwarded to the Planning Commission for their February 25, 2014 study session. Direction from the Park and Recreation Commission and the Planning Commission will help guide the applicant's preparation for the formal planning application submittal. The formal application is expected to include more detailed information and will be brought back to the Park and Recreation Commission again. The applicant's design team will be at the Park and Recreation Commission meeting to present the drawings to the Commission and to answer questions.

Park and Recreation staff has reviewed the drawings and has the following comments:

Visual Appearance: The change in the project site from a parking lot with several mature Heritage Oak trees to an eight story, 75 foot tall building will change the visual appearance and character of the areas surrounding it. Much of what is now viewable from the park, as sky will now be replaced with a building façade. It should be noted however that the City's General Plan Building Height Map designates a maximum building height range of 55 feet to 75 feet provided that an appropriate public benefit is included and accepted by the City Council (see below for discussion on public benefit). For the first four floors the building wall is set back from E. Fifth Avenue and S. San Mateo Drive by at least 6 feet and is setback a greater distance from the fifth floor and above. The fifth floor setback is large enough to accommodate an outdoor roof top terrace. (See Attachment 1 – Sheet A.300)

The existing surface parking lot is not a particularly attractive visual space even with the Oak trees and gives the impression of being the back side of downtown. It is anticipated that the proposed building will establish a more prominent edge to the downtown and will serve as a transition to Central Park. It could, if tastefully designed, enhance the vitality to this part of E. Fifth Avenue and therefore improve the connectivity between the park and downtown. Staff feels that trees and landscaping will need to play a significant part in the design of the building both on E. Fifth Avenue and along S. San Mateo Drive to promote this connectivity in a manner complimentary with the Central Park.

Staff believes that the South Elevation (along E. Fifth Avenue) and the East Elevation (along S. San Mateo Drive) drawings of the building (Attachment 1 – Sheet A.400) illustrates the landscaping that is needed to make the project complimentary with Central Park. The landscape depiction from the artist appears to include street trees, shrub plantings on the ground floor between the sidewalk and the building, vines on the building columns, plantings below the windows and openings above the retail space at the corner of Fifth and San Mateo Drive and the landscaping on the fifth floor terrace which consists of additional trees, vine plantings on trellis structures, and shrub and vine plantings along the edge of the terrace that appear to cascade down over the edge of the terrace. Staff also recommends additional plantings wherever possible on the ground floor in larger planters adjacent to the building and in areas within the sidewalk areas where there is room such as adjacent to the mid-block pedestrian crossing on Fifth Avenue and around the street trees. In addition staff recommends that more street furniture such as benches, and additional landscaping be added along Fifth Avenue and San Mateo Drive between the street curb and the through pedestrian sidewalk

zone per the Pedestrian Master Plan and to be consistent with the policies in the Downtown Area Plan which call for supporting the development of streetscape improvement plans along Fifth and San Mateo Drive and to enhance the view and pedestrian connection between Central Park and the Downtown core.

In looking closely at the Level 1 – Ground Plan and the Level 5 – Podium Units and Amenity Plan (Attachment 1 - Sheets A.201 and A.203) where the plantings are graphically shown and not labeled, there are inconsistencies between the plans and the elevation drawings such as:

1. On Level 1, the shrub plantings are not shown between the sidewalk and the residential patios on right side of the Fifth Avenue frontage but only on the left half of the frontage in front of the parking garage where as on the elevation drawing such plantings are shown to run along almost the entire frontage.
2. It is not clear graphically on the Level 1 plan if there are plantings proposed along the front and side of the retail building at the corner of Fifth and San Mateo Drive as clearly shown on the elevation drawing.
3. On the fifth story terrace, the Fifth Ave elevation drawing shows three more (14 vs. 11) trees than shown on the plans and there is no indication or where the trellis structures are located on the plans.

Since the project is in the pre-application stage, the drawings are more conceptual in nature. Specific landscape details will be provided when a formal planning application is submitted. It is anticipated that the formal planning application drawings will eliminate all inconsistencies between the plans and elevation drawings and that a planting plan be prepared by a Landscape Architect to clearly show what is being proposed and to comply with staff's recommendations. A letter from the landscape architect should also be included indicating how the project addresses the issues raised in this report and comments from the Commission.

Landscape Challenges: In providing the landscape features there will be some challenges that would need to be addressed as follows:

1. There is an existing utility line that runs under where the street trees are proposed and this utility line may need to be relocated.
2. The parking garage is beneath the proposed ground level planter adjacent to the parking garage. It will therefore need to be structurally designed, as will the planters on the terrace and below the windows and openings above the retail space. Drainage will need to be built into these planters.
3. Access to the planters shown below the window openings above the retail space will need to be provided for routine maintenance purposes.

It is expected that the formal planning application will include more details and will address the above identified challenges.

Public Passageway: Currently, pedestrians may travel from E. Fourth Avenue to Central Park through the 10-foot wide covered public access easement located on the Central Park Plaza site (walkway adjacent Starbucks), thenceforth connect to the 10-foot wide uncovered public access

easement located on the surface parking lot, and then to the mid-block crossing on E. Fifth Avenue . This path of travel is a very important link between the park and the downtown retail core. The proposed preliminary plans of the project show that this pathway of travel is proposed to be maintained with the provision of a public passageway through the new building. In looking at the ground level plan (Attachment 1 – sheet A.201), although it was not labeled, graphically it appears that the public passageway corridor will be provided with tables, chairs, and planters against the interior walls to enhance the visual quality of the space. Having a public passageway through the building provides the added benefit of protection from the rain. Staff recommends that the doors to the public passageway be maintained open to the public during daytime and evening hours in a manner consistent with the hours that public access easement in Central Park Plaza (the adjacent building to the north) is maintained.

Wind, Shadows and Reflection: The potential impact of shadows and wind has consistently been concerns that are raised in the review of other buildings/projects located around Central Park. Staff recommends that a wind study be conducted to examine how much if any discomfort will be caused to park users from changing wind patterns and speeds that will be created from the building. Additionally, since the building faces south, shadow impacts may not be significant; however, it is recommended that this be verified through a shadow study with particular emphasis on shadow impacts in the afternoon hours during the longest months of the year. Also, the building's south exposure may cause some discomfort to people in the park from reflection or glare and it would be less appealing than viewing the sky. With this in mind, staff recommends that a study be conducted that evaluates the materials (including durability) used on the building and to recommend the most efficient way to mitigate against potential reflection and glare that could cause discomfort and that could promote a visually pleasing view of the building from the park. The above studies should be performed independently from the applicant by professionals that specialize in the particular area of expertise who would be contracted by the City and whose services would be paid for by the applicant.

Traffic and Parking: The 117-unit residential development is anticipated to bring increased vehicle trips to and from the project site. They will provide 165 on-site parking stalls. The project will also provide additional public parking to compensate for the loss of the 95 stalls within the existing parking lot that will be demolished. A Traffic and Parking study will be conducted to examine the level of congestion this project will create on Fifth Avenue as part of the Planning Application process.

Public Benefit: The City's General Plan and Measure P includes provisions for the consideration of development proposals that exceed the 55-foot height limit which do not exceed 75-feet and includes the provision of a public benefit. Measure P states:

“Densities up to 75 units per acre, heights up to 75’ and appropriate FAR’s may be allowed in the following areas of the Downtown, for projects which provide public benefits or amenities substantially greater than code requirements:

1. *the area designated on the Land Use Plan (LU-3) as Downtown which is bounded by El Camino Real (SR82), East Fourth and East Fifth avenues and the SPRR railroad tracks;”*

While Measure P provides some general guidance, it does not specifically define or identify “public benefits or amenities,” nor does it outline how the City should go about deciding how much public benefit would be required in exchange for the additional height and density, or how much additional height and density would be allowed in exchange for a specific amount of public benefit, or the specific nature of the public benefits. For this reason, the methodology for determining public benefit will be discussed by the City Council at a future study session prior to or concurrent with the processing of the formal planning application for this project. Examples of past public benefits will also be shared with the City Council as part of an overall discussion on the variety and possible range of public benefits. The three public benefits that were previously accepted by the City Council are:

- Bridgepoint Offices project - \$669,000 contribution to be used for Mariner’s Island Park and Shoreline Park improvements.
- Marriott Hotel - \$200,000 contribution to fund public improvements to Concar Park.
- Concar Offices – Approximately \$800,000 of improvements and plantings in the right of way area adjacent to the 19th Avenue neighborhood.

Neighborhood Meeting: The applicant hosted a neighborhood meeting on Thursday, January 23, 2014 at 7:00 pm at Central Park Recreation Center. Approximately 40 members of the public attended the meeting and voiced concerns about the project’s potential impact on traffic/circulation, parking (loss of parking as well as the overall lack of parking in downtown, loading and unloading functions), and the project’s water demand. The applicant’s meeting summary is included as Attachment 2 – Community Meeting Notes.

BUDGET IMPACT

This project will be required to pay fees in-lieu of dedicating land for park and recreation purposes. The exact amount of the fee will be based on the fee per unit in effect at the time the first building permit is issued. Additionally, as the project exceeds the building height of 55 feet, the City’s General Plan and Measure P require the provision of public benefit. The methodology for determining public benefit will be discussed by the City Council at a future study session.

ENVIRONMENTAL DETERMINATION

In accordance with CEQA Guidelines section 15061(b) (3), this review and comment is not a project subject to CEQA in that it won’t impact the environment, because the Parks and Recreation Commission is providing comments only. An environmental document for the project consistent with the California Environmental Quality Act will be prepared after submittal of the formal planning application

NOTICE PROVIDED:

Notices were published in the Examiner newspaper 10 days before this Study Session and were sent to the following parties:

- Property owners, residential tenants and business tenants within 1,000 feet of the project site;
- The City's "900 List" which contains nearly 100 Homeowner Associations, Neighborhood Associations, local utilities, media, and other organizations interested in citywide planning projects.
- The interested parties list which includes interested individuals who contacted the City and requested to be added to the project notification list.
- The Central Park Master Plan stakeholders.

Three written public comments were received prior to printing of this staff report and have been included as Attachment 3. Comments received following printing will be provided to the Commission on the evening of the study session at their desk.

ATTACHMENTS

Attachment 1: Drawings (6 sheets)

Attachment 2: Applicant's Community Meeting Notes

Attachment 3: Public Comments

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