

September 30, 2014

Ms. Lorraine Weiss
Department of Community Development
City of San Mateo
330 West 20th Avenue
San Mateo, CA 94403-1388

RE: Station Park Green

Dear Lorraine:

I watched the video of the August 26th Planning Commission Study Session, and reviewed the revised drawings for the project. I have previously met four times with staff, the applicant and the applicant's architect. I also previously prepared a letter dated August 18 which outlined for staff my preliminary concerns related to the site plan and the architectural design of the project. My current comments follow.

NEIGHBORHOOD CONTEXT

The site is located adjacent to Highway 92 at the corner of South Delaware Street and Concar Drive. A single family residential neighborhood is directly across South Delaware Street from the site, a new two-building office complex has been approved across Concar Drive from the site, and the remainder of the nearby area is likely to be redeveloped with new uses in the future. The site is located close to the Caltrain Hayward Park Station.



There are few direct visual conditions nearby that would influence the design of this project. The two that are of importance are the existing single family residential neighborhood across South Delaware Street and the approved office development across Concar Drive. Images of those two influences are shown below.



South Delaware Street looking southeast: Single Family Neighborhood is to the left



South Delaware Street / Concar Drive Intersection - Approved Office Development

ISSUES AND CONCERNS

Architectural Form and Style

The proposed building forms and architectural styles of the structures are cubic and modern. Eight separate building styles are proposed with varied forms, some having a vertical emphasis and others having a strong horizontal emphasis (see concept diagram to the right and sketches on the following page organized by facade orientation).



South Delaware Street Frontage



MU-1



RE-4

Concar Drive Frontage



RE-2



MU-1

Caltrain Station Frontage



RE-3



RE-2

Park Frontage



RE-3



RE-4



MU-1



RE-2

The proposed buildings have a logic based on the design theme chosen by the applicant, but need to be reviewed in the context of the Specific Plan Design Guidelines dated June 30, 2014, and the direction previously established by the city. The example illustrations and diagrams in the design guidelines show a very different style and scale of architecture with a great deal more visual variety and facade depth than indicated on the proposed building designs. Photo examples and illustrations from the design guideline are shown below.

SPECIFIC PLAN DESIGN GUIDELINES EXAMPLES



Before conducting a full review of the proposed design, I would like feedback from staff and the Planning Commission regarding their comfort level with the proposed building designs. One potentially positive feature of the proposed design is that the variation of smaller scale vertical building forms with the large horizontal blocks could possibly break the four large buildings into what might appear to be several smaller buildings.



However, the proposed design appears in many regards quite different from that illustrated in the Specific Plan Design Guidelines adopted by the Commission. The illustrations contained in the Specific Plan Design Guidelines include many of the characteristics noted below on one example photo from the design guidelines.



In conducting their review, the Planning Commission may wish to examine the following issues:

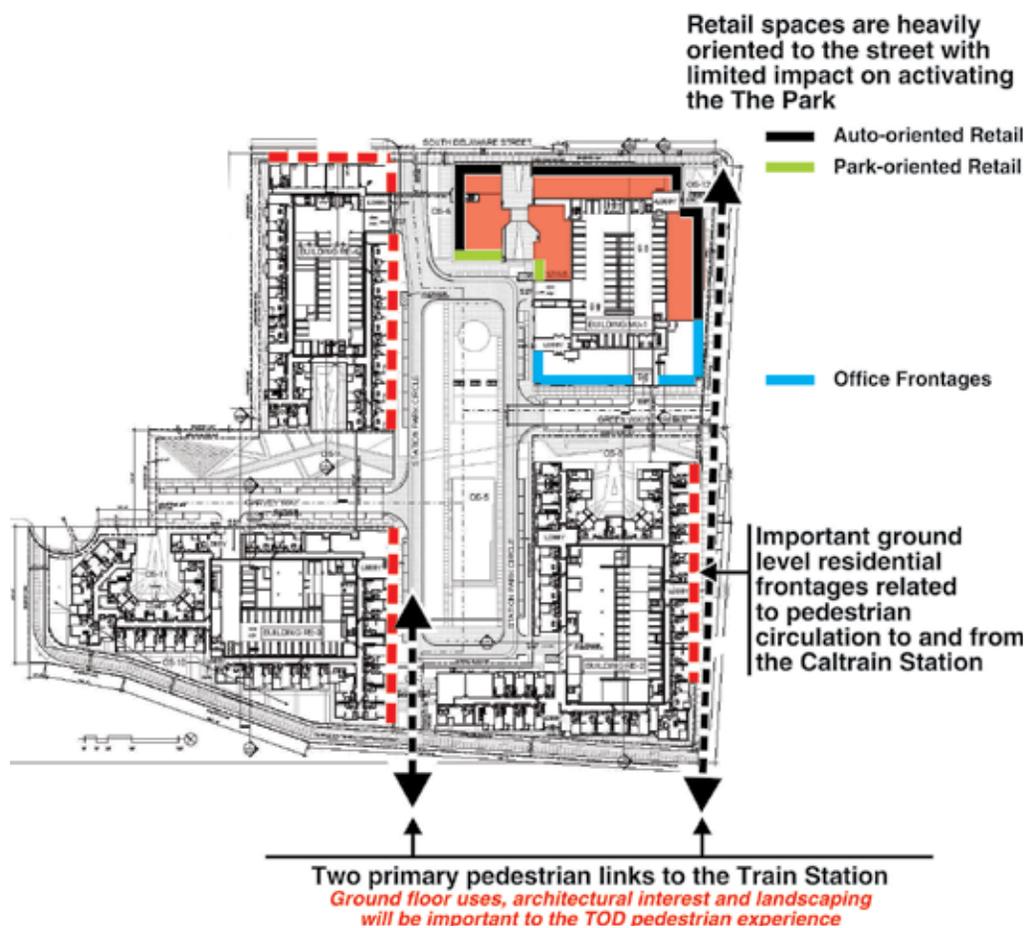
- The heavy surrounding frame for several of the buildings.
- The amount of visual interest within the bounding frame of the boxes.
- The extent of visual variety and architectural detail provided.
- The project's strong urban architectural form and character.

However, if the Planning Commission is comfortable with the proposed design and variety shown in the current application drawings and feels that it meets community expectations, I can move forward in future design reviews working within that context.

Ground Floor Interface with the Public Realm

The Planning Commissions provided feedback to the applicant in the recent study session that focused on the length and scale of the structures as related to the pedestrian experience in walking to and from the Caltrain Station. This experience is relevant not only to tenants of this project, but also to all nearby neighborhood residents and commercial tenants.

The setbacks along the residential buildings facing South Delaware Street and Concar Drive are variable. This is discussed in more detail below. One generally accepted precept of transit-oriented design is that ground floor uses, building design and landscaping should enhance the pedestrian experience by making the walking experience between one's living unit or work location and a transit station as pleasant and enjoyable as possible. Also important in the ground floor interface is the quality of the living environment for residential units adjacent to major pedestrian walkways (e.g., privacy and usable outdoor living space). For this reason, ground floor residential units in buildings adjacent to major pedestrian walkways are often elevated above the adjacent sidewalk level. In this development, the ground floor level would be the same as the sidewalk which would align the natural eye view level of both pedestrians and tenants. The ground floor areas which are the most important in reinforcing the pedestrian experience for transit users are shown in the diagram below.



Factors that can play a role in achieving a pedestrian environment supportive of transit-oriented design on this site include the following.

- Uses at the ground level.
- Relative height elevation of sidewalks and adjacent living spaces.
- Landscaping between the public sidewalk and adjacent vehicular traffic.
- Setback size, design and landscaping between the public sidewalk and the adjacent structures.
- Depth of facade changes adjacent to the sidewalk - especially at the ground and second levels.
- Pedestrian paving.
- Pedestrian lighting adequacy and visual design.

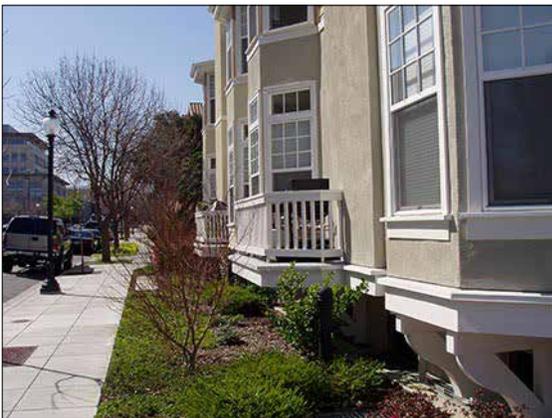
The images below are examples of a range of approaches to similar ground floor unit-to-public realm conditions.



Example of substantial building setback, unit entries and outdoor private space at sidewalk level, and with substantial landscaping and facade articulation (Station Park Green Design Guidelines)



Example of small ground floor unit private outdoor living space elevated above the sidewalk level (Station Park Green Design Guidelines)



Example of ground floor unit private outdoor living space elevated above the sidewalk level - no entry (Mountain View)

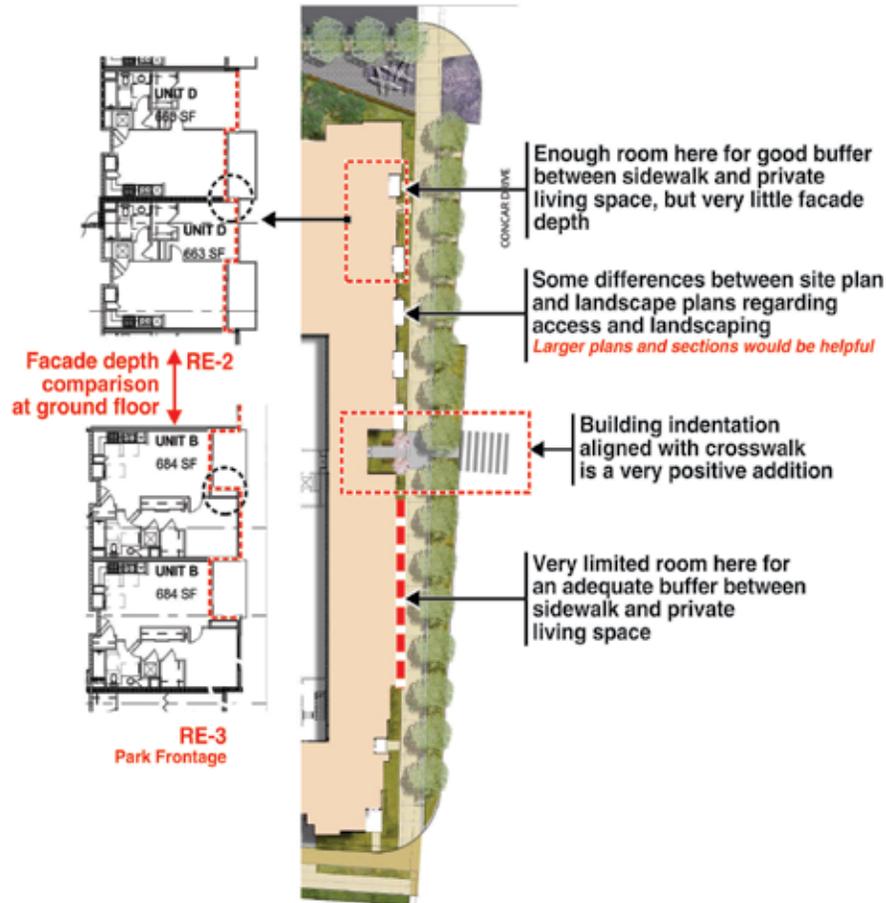


Example of ground floor unit private outdoor living space elevated above the sidewalk level and substantial ground floor facade articulation (San Mateo)



Example of ground floor unit private outdoor living space elevated above the sidewalk level and substantial ground floor facade articulation (San Jose)

The ground floor conditions are variable for the proposed design. The area that seems most problematic is the Concar Drive ground floor setbacks and facade articulation in the area shown in the diagram below. The indented building entry facade section on RE-2 added to address the Planning Commissioners' concern about long building masses will help, but the limited setbacks and facade depth could only be addressed by some combination of increasing the setbacks, reducing the landscape buffer between the street and the sidewalk, and/or modifying the unit plans to increase the facade depth and visual interest.



Retail Storefronts

The applicant has responded to earlier comments on the retail storefronts with some changes. They are better, but seem to me to still be rather uniform and urban in appearance, as shown in the two sketches below.



Concar Drive Retail Frontage



South Delaware Street Retail Frontage

At this stage of the design development, they do not seem visually interesting enough to be very contributory to the transit-oriented pedestrian experience. The idea of individualized blade signage, as shown on the Concar Drive frontage, would be helpful, but some of the large signage applied to the face of projecting canopies would probably not be supportable. There is, it seems to me, the potential for a small and distinctive neighborhood shopping district serving the residents of Station Park Green and nearby neighborhoods as well as the tenants of the Hines office development across Concar Drive. Some examples of approaches to retail shops integrated into mixed use buildings are shown on the following page.

I understand that detailed designs are not possible at this early stage when individual tenants are unknown, but it would be desirable to have a framework and design guidelines in place to assist in creating a unique retail environment, as was done for the Bay Meadows II retail frontages. This is an area where more discussion is warranted by the Planning Commission to better define community expectations for this project.

MIXED USE STOREFRONT EXAMPLES



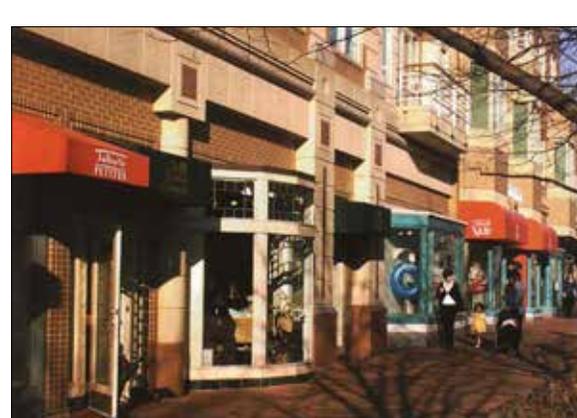
Semi-urban with simple storefronts, recessed glass and a tall first floor (San Rafael)



Suburban with simple storefronts, recessed glass and distinctive materials (Valencia)



Urban with strongly individualized storefronts (Santana Row | San Jose)



Urban with individualized storefronts (Emeryville)

Urban with individualized storefronts within an organized pattern (Reston, VA)

Large Signage

Three large, vertical blade signs are proposed as integral parts of the architectural designs for blocks MU-1 and RE-2. At this point, they appear as project identification signs (see illustrations below). I do not recall other residential projects, including Bay Meadow II, having this type of signage. Since they are such a significant feature of the buildings, some guidance would be desirable.



Concar Drive at South Delaware Street



MU-1 at Leasing Office



Pedestrian entry nar Caltrain Statione

Lorraine, please let me know if you have any questions, or if there are any other important issues that I did not address.

Sincerely,
CANNON DESIGN GROUP

Larry Cannon