



# REPORT TO PLANNING COMMISSION City of Sacramento

# 12

915 I Street, Sacramento, CA 95814-2671

STAFF REPORT  
**October 19, 2006**

Members of the Planning Commission

**Subject: Progress Report on Downtown Urban Design Plan Update. (M05-084)**

**Location/Council District:** CBD and Midtown Transitional Areas.

**Recommendation:** Review and provide comment on the scope of services and scheduled tasks to be undertaken as part of the Downtown Urban Design Plan Update.

**Contact:** William Crouch, Urban Design Manager (916) 808-8013; David Kwong, Current Planning Manager (916) 808-2691

**Summary:** On March 21, 2006 City Council authorized a professional services agreement with Wallace Roberts and Todd/ Solomon E.T.C. to update the City's Urban Design Plan, prepare a downtown development implementation strategy and review building height alternatives in the central city and transitional mid-town zones. The existing adopted Urban Design Plan for the Central Business District does not address the reality of high-rise residential projects, the need for sustainable development, the desirability of rapid transit systems in a pedestrian friendly cityscape, the priority of protecting and enhancing existing urban forest or strategies for providing activated urban spaces at street level. The need to update our existing guidelines is paramount if we are to respond effectively to emerging challenges in our changing urban landscape.

In discussions with the Steering Committee many pressing issues for the City's current and future needs have been identified to further define the scope of work for this program.

In particular the consultants currently have under their consideration the following broad list of design issues and challenges needing resolution:

## 1. **Lot coverage.**

For residential buildings, this defines the amount of a lot that can be occupied by the residential portion of a proposed building. This element is often combined with requirements to address holding the street-wall and helps define both the street frontage as well as allowing air and light into the interior of the lot. San Francisco, for example, permits 75% lot coverage for residential buildings, measured from the first residential floor. This allows 100% lot coverage for the ground floor where garage and retail might occur and 75% coverage for the residential floors above that level.

## **2. Residential Density limits/Floor Area Ratios.**

Many cities establish residential density limits per lot as a way of controlling the density in a particular district or neighborhood. This is generally done by stipulating the number of dwellings as 'one per so-many sq ft of site area'. For example: 1 unit per 400 sq ft of site area gives a density of 109 dwellings per net acre; 1 unit per 800 sq ft gives a density of 54 dwellings per net acre, etc.

Floor Area Ratios (FAR) are more typically used to measure and control the amount of commercial development permitted on a site. The ratio is the number of times the site area can be multiplied in the proposed development. FAR of 2:1 means that twice the site area can be built on the parcel.

## **3. Build-to-Lines and Setbacks.**

These require that a building hold the line of the street-wall, or a setback by a certain distance from the public right-of-way. The Build-to-Line can be required for 100% of the building frontage in certain Downtown locations, or a minimum percentage in other locations, where a public plaza, for example might be a desirable feature. (The US Bank Plaza overlooking Cesar Chavez Plaza has a small public entry court allowing the tower shaft to meet the ground and for the building entrance to be setback from the sidewalk.) Setbacks are more appropriate in residential districts where a landscaped zone between the building and the back edge of the sidewalk is desirable. Required setbacks can permit the tree canopy of the existing mature street trees to remain unobstructed. (See item on Protection of Mature Street Trees below.)

## **4. Street-wall height limit, or base condition for mid-rise and High-rise buildings**

The current Sacramento CBD design guidelines establish 60' as the street-wall height. This matches the predominant height of most existing low-rise downtown buildings. Above this height bulk controls and mandated setbacks apply. San Francisco has a base height of 1.25 x the street width, for example: Consideration might be given in the Sacramento CBD to raising this height to either 80', which is the same as the width of a typical Sacramento Street, or 85' the height above which Life-Safety High-rise building code controls apply.

## **5. Height Limits.**

Currently there are no height limits in the CBD except for some along L Street and 9th in relation to the Capitol mandated by the Capitol Area Plan. These are designed to protect the symbolic importance of the Capitol Building and establish a maximum height of 150' for the first half block rising to 300', 400' and 450' thereafter.

The establishment of Height Limits should be under consideration for both the CBD and mid-town particularly where they relate to the adjacent low-rise residential districts which currently have only a 35' limit.

A maximum height limit might be established of 300' in the CBD, for example, above which additional height bonuses could be granted as a Variance. This could be granted in exchange for certain benefits or in-lieu fees given to the city, such as the provision of

open space, preservation of historic structures, affordable housing etc. San Francisco allows a 10% increase above the height limit in exchange for certain 'give-backs' to the City.

Height limits should be related to base conditions in order to maintain a proportional relationship between them and protect the predominant scale of the surrounding context. For example a 300' height limit might be paired with a 60' base while a 500' height limit might be paired with an 80' base. They could thus be labeled 300'/60' and 500'/80'.

The transition between different height zones should be carefully located in order not to create lopsided street conditions or abrupt juxtapositions between different areas. Generally it is preferred to have a division between zones occur mid-block rather than down the center-line of a street in order to maintain symmetry along the street. Mid-block alleys can lend themselves well to this situation in east/west locations.

## **6. Setbacks and Bulk Limits.**

Sacramento currently requires a 15' setback from the street-wall above 60' up to 150' and a further 5' above that height. This is acceptable for commercial office buildings but less practical for residential buildings. (Residential buildings typically prefer a standard dimension from the core to the perimeter in order to stack like above like units.) It might be appropriate to consider zero setbacks for residential towers, as exists with the historic 926 J Street building and acknowledge the street-wall/base condition with a horizontal string course marking the division between base and shaft of a tall building.

One of the unfortunate features of the current design guidelines is that they permit the above-grade parking levels to occupy the levels up to the base height limit and expose the parking levels to the street-wall. This creates the undesirable condition where there are no windows or occupied spaces from ground level to where the occupied floors start, resulting in a dead street-wall as seen from the sidewalk. This issue is addressed in a subsequent proposed guideline.

Bulk limits currently permit large floor-plates with a 220' maximum diagonal for the building above 60' height and a 200' maximum diagonal above a 150' height. This results in large 24,000 sq ft and 20,000 sq ft floor-plates respectively. These are acceptable for office buildings, but are very large for residential towers. Several West Coast cities have strict bulk limits for residential towers in order to create tall slender buildings. Vancouver's towers typically have very small floor-plates varying from 3,500 - 6,500 sq ft maximum. San Francisco's new Rincon Hill towers permit an array of floor plates related to height ranging from 7,500 sq ft for a 300' high tower to 10,000 sq ft for a 500' high tower. The current generation of Sacramento's downtown residential towers has a range of much larger floor-plates such as 15,000 sq ft for The Towers on Capitol Mall project and 12,500 sq ft for the high-rise portion of the proposed Metropolitan tower overlooking Cesar Chavez Plaza.

In order to create tall slender towers new residential bulk limits should establish maximum plan and diagonal dimensions as well as maximum floor-plate areas.

There is a well established architectural tradition of high-rise buildings having a distinctive top terminating the shaft of the tower when seen in silhouette against the sky. To achieve this aim some refinements to the current bulk controls would be required. For example, San Francisco's new Rincon Hill massing controls require a 10% bulk reduction for the top 20% of the building height. This helps define a penthouse zone at the top of the building and reduces the apparent bulk of the tower as seen against the sky.

Mechanical penthouses should be screened and integrated into the form of the building. Sacramento, unlike many cities requires a helicopter landing platform on the roof for emergency evacuation purposes. This tends to create flat topped profiles. Consideration should be given to various ways of handling this design element without compromising safety or creating a monotonous skyline.

#### **7. Avoiding exposed parking levels above street level.**

Since Sacramento has a high water-table level, basements beyond one level are inadvisable. The high parking ratio typically produces the need for multiple parking levels above grade. When wrapped with residential or other uses, such as in the new J Street Lofts building, this is both an attractive and a practical solution. It is significantly less desirable when parking levels are exposed to the street, such as occurs on multiple office buildings in downtown.

If the site conditions are so restricted that exposed parking is unavoidable, it is preferable to have parking levels exposed on the east or west elevations of the 'numbered streets', as is the current pattern with several large commercial buildings, and to avoid this condition on the north or south facades of the 'lettered streets'.

#### **8. Separation between towers.**

Currently there is nothing in the CBD zoning to prevent two residential towers on adjacent interior lots from having their side elevations 10' apart (i.e. each with a 5' setback from the dividing property line). Since one of the benefits of towers is to have unobstructed views for the upper floors it makes sense to control how closely towers can be located. This is particularly important in narrow lots in a multi-parceled block. Cities such as San Francisco have controls to establish minimum distances between towers, generally the same dimension as a typical street.

Since Sacramento's streets are all 80' wide, it makes sense to establish this as the minimum dimension between towers. After a first tower is built on a narrow parcel in a multi-parcel block, subsequent towers on the same block would have to adhere to this rule.

Consideration might be given to limiting the number of towers permitted per block. Vancouver, for example, limits two towers per block, and requires them to be separated diagonally by at least 80'.

### **9. Active street uses at sidewalk level.**

In order to have a lively mixed-use downtown it is desirable to avoid blank street-walls and to encourage retail and other uses at sidewalk level. Since there is a limited amount of retail that can be supported in downtown, provision for ground floor commercial or live/work loft space might be a possible alternative.

### **10. Street encroachments**

Permitted encroachments include: over the street-wall build-to-line, or required setback for porches, stoops, bay windows, balconies and other architectural features etc.

Bay windows are a desirable feature of residential buildings and are part of California's architectural vocabulary. They encroach into the public right-of-way. Specific dimensions to maintain an appropriate set of proportions, ratio of width to depth etc can be established. San Francisco permits a 3' encroachment with a maximum 9' length, horizontally and either angled or squared-off returns. Elements such as porches and stoops should be permitted to encroach within a required setback from the public right-of-way/property line. These will help animate the façade and reinforce the residential character of the building.

### **11. Façade articulation.**

Sacramento's urban block and lot size is typically divided into 40'wide lot increments. The blocks in the CBD are typically 320' long in their east/west direction, subdivided into multiples of 40' wide lots. This gives the urban blocks their predominant rhythm and variety and creates a fine-grained pattern to the urban fabric. In order to avoid block-long, unbroken facades, it is desirable to require a limit to an unarticulated façade plane. This can be achieved in a number of ways, such as requiring, for example, a 2'deep notched setback for every portion of the facade. A maximum unbroken façade should be limited to 120'.

### **12. Open space requirements.**

This covers the amount of public, common and/or private open space required per unit. Public open space must be open to the street or public right-of-way and accessible to the average citizen. This element could be provided either as a dedicated courtyard or plaza, or as an in-lieu fee for the City to purchase land for a new public park nearby. Public open space should include hard and soft landscaping, areas for sun and shade, benches and water features, where appropriate. It must be accessible and meet ADA requirements.

Common and private open space belongs to the residents and is either in the form of a secure garden or roof-deck above the base of the building, or in the form of private balconies attached to each unit. Minimum dimensions apply in order to create useable space.

### **13. Parking ratios.**

This refers to the number of parking spaces associated with each unit. These can be either on-site or, more rarely, in a remote location. Parking arrangements are either self-

parked or tandem and can include parking lifts and parking elevators for multi-floor garages where ramps are inappropriate.

In order to encourage a compact, dense downtown, which already has good public transit, it is desirable to reduce the amount of off-street parking and pursue a Transit First policy as other cities such as San Francisco, Portland and Seattle have done. Car-share facilities should be encouraged as well as provision for secured bicycle storage.

**14. Transfer Development Rights.**

TDRs are a way of achieving a number of civic goals. They allow the unused development potential on a particular site to be transferred to another site to permit a larger or taller building than would otherwise be permitted. TDRs can be used to protect historic buildings from demolition by preserving them in perpetuity in exchange for the sale and transfer of the unused development potential. Both New York City and San Francisco have adopted successful TDR policies.

**15. Protection of Street Tree canopy.**

One of the most distinctive features of Sacramento is the fine canopy of mature street trees. Practically all of the streets within the historic core of the city, bounded by the freeways, have large regularly spaced street trees whose foliage provides shade to the road, sidewalks and overhangs the property lines on either side of the public right-of-way.

Outside of the CBD most buildings have setbacks from the right-of-way so that they do not interfere with the foliage. New buildings built right up to the right-of-way can damage the symmetry of the tree canopy. It is desirable to require notched setbacks to protect the tree canopy where existing trees occur and to encourage new tree planting to maintain the tree canopy.

**16. Landscaping and trees on Private property.**

In order to encourage more greenery and to avoid large areas of concrete, asphalt and heat absorbing surfaces, it is desirable to require that all non-building areas on the site be landscaped with trees and landscaped ground cover to reduce CO2 emissions.

**17. Green roofs and solar collectors, PV panels etc.**

To reduce CO2 emissions and the imminent dangers of global warming all new buildings should be required to have green roofs and/or install roof-top solar panels and photo-voltaic panels.

**18. Maximum and minimum lot sizes.**

While minimum lot sizes are a standard feature of many cities, including the residential districts of Sacramento, consideration might be given to establishing a maximum lot size as well. It is desirable to encourage a rich mix of both land uses and architectural variety within the densest parts of downtown. This is what gives them their character.

Policies should be established to avoid this mix of uses being destroyed by each block only having a single use or architect. A way of achieving this would be to limit the maximum size of a parcel to either a half block, or three-quarters of a block. A variant would be to require a single block development to hire two or more separate architects to design the various buildings. This latter situation has been achieved in some of the Little Italy blocks in San Diego and the proposed four city block development of Laguna Hill on the site of the former UC Berkeley extension in San Francisco.

**19. Protection of the mid-block alleys.**

Sacramento's alleys are primarily used as service ways in the CBD because of their narrow 20' width. There are, however, locations where small scale residential buildings and courts open onto the alleys, creating a contrast with the width and scale of the regular 80' wide streets and providing a respite from the repetitive urban framework of identically sized blocks.

The 20' alley right-of-way width is just wide enough for one-way vehicular traffic without either sidewalks or curbs. This width is insufficient for head-in turning into a garage. For new residential buildings fronting the alley a minimum 5'-setback is recommended, making a 25' building-to-building width for new development on one side of the alley, and 30' building-to-building if both sides are developed. New residential buildings facing the alley should be scaled appropriately. A maximum height of 35' will permit light and air relative to the width of the alley itself.

Respectfully Submitted by: \_\_\_\_\_  
William R. Crouch, Urban Design Manager

Approved by: \_\_\_\_\_  
David Kwong, Planning Manager

<b>Table of Contents:</b>	Pg	1	Report
<b>Attachment 1</b>	Pg	8	WRT Works Schedule

## **SCHEDULE**

**WRT/Solomon E.T.C. - August 10, 2006**

<b>Tasks</b>	<b>Schedule (Task Initiation)</b>
<b>Task 1 Review Background Documents</b> 1.1 Review Existing CBD Urban Design Plan 1.2 Review Pertinent Midtown Documents 1.3 Prepare Base Maps	<b>July 2006</b>
<b>Task 2 Kick-off Meeting with Staff</b>	<b>June 23, 2006</b>
<b>Task 3 Study Area Reconnaissance</b>	<b>August 11, 2006</b>
<b>Task 4 Developing a Downtown Residential Strategy</b> 4.1 Determining Residential Development Potential 4.2 Urban Design Framework 4.3 Defining Preferred Built Form Scenarios 4.4 Preliminary Design Recommendations for Downtown Development	<b>August - September</b>
<b>Task 5 Steering Committee Meeting</b>	<b>September 26, 2006</b>
<b>Task 6 Understanding Midtown Development Issues &amp; Potential</b> 6.1 Meeting with City Staff 6.2 Research Street Tree Health & Compatibility	<b>September 2006</b>
<b>Task 7 Understanding Implications of Midtown Devel. Standards</b> 7.1 Assess Implications on Development Capacity 7.2 Evaluate Development Scenarios & Prelim. Recommendations	<b>October 2006</b>
<b>Task 8 Steering Committee Meeting</b>	<b>October 26, 2006</b>
<b>Task 9 CBD/Midtown UDP &amp; Residential Strategy</b> 9.1 Administrative Draft Urban Design Plan 9.2 Implementation Strategy	
<b>Task 10 Steering Committee Meeting</b>	<b>November 21, 2006</b>

<b>Task 11 Community Workshop</b>	<b>December 7, 2006</b>
<b>Task 12 City Leadership Workshop</b>	<b>December 12, 2007</b>
<b>Task 13 Draft Urban Design Plan</b>	<b>January 15, 2007</b>
<b>Task 14 Presentations to City</b>	<b>January - February 2007</b>