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May 21, 2012

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Re: Proposed Development at Parcel P in Hayes Valley

Immediate Past Chair
Lee Blitch

Dear Mr. Vasquez and Ms. Spriggs:

Advisory Council
Co-Chairs
Michael Alexander
Paul Sedway

On behalf of the members of the SPUR Project Review Committee, we would like to thank your team for bringing the proposed development at Parcel P in Hayes Valley to our group for consideration and review at our May 2012 meeting.

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The mission of the SPUR Project Review Committee is to consider projects that are of citywide importance and to evaluate them according to criteria related to land use, public realm interface, building design and environmental effects. In all cases, we are seeking a combination of excellent planning and design solutions that will ensure the positive contribution of each project to a safe, visually appealing, and vibrant urban setting for the people who live and work in San Francisco.

As a result of our review and discussion of the Parcel P project, we provide the following comments for your information and action:

Land Use

The project proposes mixed-use development on Parcel P in Hayes Valley, a city-owned parcel left vacant by the closure of the Central Freeway. Bounded by Octavia Street on the east, Laguna on the west, Oak Street on the South and Hickory Alley -- a proposed new alley -- on the north, the approximately 1-acre sloped site presents a challenge for the developer to meet both the requirements of the neighborhood site and the expectations of the public for this key parcel within the Market-Octavia Plan Area.

As required by the City, three separate architects are involved in the project, thereby ensuring design variation on the Laguna, Octavia and Oak street frontages. The proposed development provides 182 residential rental units (40% 2-bedroom, 60% studio and 1-bedroom); approximately 3500 square feet of neighborhood-serving retail; three courtyards, including a mid-block passage; and the development of Hickory Alley as a "living alley." Parking is proposed at 0.5 spaces per unit below grade, and approximately 85 bicycle parking spaces will be included.

The committee is supportive of a dense rental, mixed-used development at this location. The site is well served by public transport, near the Market Street streetcar and bus lines and the Van Ness transit corridor. We especially like the proposed design of Hickory Alley with its minimal traffic and pedestrian-friendly landscaping and furniture. We believe the proposed townhomes on the alley will contribute to the vibrancy of the alley.

The project sponsor is proposing to pay a 20% fee in lieu of on-site, inclusionary housing. The committee would like to see this funding dedicated to the development of Parcel O as affordable housing. We hope that the City will be amenable to dedicating the use of these funds to the adjacent site.

Public Realm Interface and the Promotion of a Pedestrian-Oriented Environment

The project sponsor has responded admirably to the challenge of developing a coherent plan involving three architects on a one-acre site. The committee likes the ground-floor treatment of the entry way on Octavia and we believe that, with the right commercial tenant, the space will be active and welcoming. We are very happy with the proposed Hickory Alley and with the sponsor's willingness to extend the development of the alley to the opposite curb. And we agree that the more fine-grained visual differentiation of the buildings provided by the employment of three good architects is a most desirable effect in the urban context.

However, the committee is in agreement that the project does not live up to the potential of the site. Though we like the gesture towards a visual opening in the mid-block passage on Oak and Hickory and the entry on Octavia Street, we are disappointed that these open spaces will be fenced off from public access. Even for residents, the open space is somewhat tight and will likely be fairly dark. In general we would like to see a more effective use of open space throughout the project.

A second, and perhaps more important, instance is the location and treatment of the project fitness center. The corner of Laguna and Oak is a very prominent corner and we would like to see a much more active and inviting use than a private gym. The committee feels strongly that a more appropriate use of this corner location would be a café or other community-building commercial use with a stronger, more welcoming design than what is currently shown.

And finally, we caution the sponsors to carefully consider the design of the residential entrances along Oak Street. The current design show recessed entries with some at grade and others just a few steps up. Because Oak is such a busy traffic corridor, the committee questions the likelihood of these stoops being used by residents. Careful attention to detail will be required to activate the stoops and the street in any meaningful way. Re-thinking the Laguna-Oak corner may encourage a pedestrian presence for the whole of the block on both Laguna and Oak Street. We suggest the sponsor revisit and strengthen this stretch of the project.

Building & Landscape Design

The buildings are appropriately scaled for this location and we applaud the sponsor's efforts to embrace several distinct design directions within the single project plan. We are especially pleased with the Octavia Street design and its response to the surrounding context. We believe that the design overall responds contextually to the neighborhood.

The committee is quite pleased with the direction of the landscape design on Hickory Alley and encourages the project sponsor to continue this strong direction throughout the project courtyards and roof gardens. We understand that the Hayes Valley Farm currently located on Parcel O is soon to be moved and we urge the project sponsors to work with the City to prolong the Farm's tenancy until such time as Parcel O can be developed.

Environmental Effects

SPUR believes it is essential for projects to build environmental sustainability into their design and function, and we appreciate the specifics with which the project sponsor has made this an ongoing priority from the outset. We applaud the project sponsor's goals to achieve a minimum of LEED Silver status and encourage exploring all avenues for the highest certification possible.

The committee especially appreciates the project sponsor's efforts to provide rain gardens for storm water waste recycling, and the use of permeable pavement throughout the site, including Hickory Alley and along Octavia. We look forward to seeing additional sustainable features as the project evolves. In all instances, the committee encourages project sponsors to incorporate sustainability early in the design process.

Conclusion

The SPUR Project Review Committee finds the proposed project at Parcel P to be an appropriate use of the site. The dense residential development will enliven and enhance this transit-rich neighborhood.

We thank you for committing your time and resources to the presentation at SPUR. We will follow further refinements of this project with great interest and invite you to keep us informed on its progress.

Consideration for Endorsement

Should you intend to request SPUR to consider this project for endorsement, you should contact the Committee co-chairs at the appropriate time. Endorsement by SPUR is reserved for projects of the highest quality and significance to the city. Consideration for endorsement begins with a formal response by projects sponsors to this review letter, including an update on any significant changes to the project program or design since the project was initially presented at SPUR. The project is then taken up for discussion by an endorsement subcommittee of SPUR board members who serve on committees in the areas of project review, urban policy, housing, sustainability, and transportation. We normally require a month's lead-time to schedule a meeting of the endorsement subcommittee.

Please do not hesitate to contact us for questions/clarifications.

Sincerely,

Charmain Curtis Mary Beth Sanders Reuben Schwartz
SPUR Project Review Committee Co-Chairs

cc: SPUR Board of Directors