



May 17, 2016

(By electronic transmission)
Mayor and City Councilmembers
City of Alameda
2263 Santa Clara Avenue
Alameda, CA 94501

Subject: Proposed changes to Call for Review process (Item 9-D on the City Council's 5-17-16 agenda)

Dear Mayor Spencer and Members of the City Council,

In the May 2, 2016 letter to Mayor Spencer from the Alameda Chamber of Commerce and its Board of Directors concern was expressed over the use of the "call for review" process. The Chamber states the use of this process introduces "uncertainty and unpredictability" into the design review process, delays initiation of projects and this delay "calls the future of the City into question." The Chamber's letter appears to have been prompted at least in part by the new building proposed at 1435 Webster Street that was recently called for review by the City Council.

In looking back at the process of public review of the design for this project, the first design presented by the developer in early 2015 was for a single new building with a contemporary/"modern" idiom using modern materials and minimal articulation of the exterior façade. This proposal ignored the existing Webster Street Design Review Manual that promotes more traditional design vocabularies for new buildings. At the first review of this project, a complete new design of the exterior was requested that adhered to the Manual. The placement of the building on the lot and its size were not called into question.

The City and the West Alameda Business Association (WABA) developed the Manual in 2001 and revised it in 2005 and 2011. It provides specific criteria that can be easily understood and incorporated into the designs of new buildings within the Webster Street Business District. Use of the Manual is intended to facilitate and expedite the design review and building permit application process.

Subsequent revisions in 2015 brought the project into closer conformity with the Design Review Manual, but also left several of the Manual components unaddressed. The AAPS 10-21-15 review of this proposal asked that attention be given to the Manual requirements for many of the buildings details. Once again the overall size, scope and placement of the buildings on the parcel were not objected to. Although not part of the AAPS Design Review there was a question about the adequacy of parking when a restaurant was planned for a substantial portion of the first floor. Additionally, it was understood that the number of parking spaces required on site was reduced through the use of bus passes.

Although the next submittal provided further conformity with the Design Manual, previously requested clarification of many design treatments, such as for windows, surface materials and architectural details, still had not been provided. The 11-24-15 AAPS comments asked for these clarifications and for some minor changes to some of the exterior articulating elements. The allocation of space to a first floor restaurant had been dropped from the proposal. Following this review, City Planning staff determined that the next public review would be made by the Planning Board and requested design input from an outside consultant.

The Planning Board review of the project was similar to the last AAPS review. The project was given tentative approval but there were still some unanswered questions about how the parking requirements were going to be met and there were some architectural element alterations that were to be included in the design. Approval of the project was given at a subsequent Planning Board meeting with the condition that the City Planning Department would check and verify inclusion of the design changes asked for and for conformance with City parking regulations.

Although we are aware of the importance of expeditious design review by the City, the developer also shares in this responsibility. Much of the delay in processing the project was due to the developer's nonresponsiveness to Webster Street Design Manual provisions and to comments based on the Manual provided by staff, WABA and AAPS. If expeditious review by the City is a project goal it is recommended that developers use a local architect familiar with Alameda's design review manuals, parking requirements, application procedures and review processes and timing.

If this project had presented an initial design that conformed to the Webster Street Design Manual and was more responsive to comments provided, the design review process could have been completed much earlier. Additionally, the developer could have been informed of the potential for a question of interpretation of parking regulations and allowed to make a decision on how to proceed before the Planning Board review.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment. Please contact Steve Aced at 510-239-4455 or steveaced@aol.com if you would like to discuss these comments.

Sincerely,

Christopher Buckley, President
Alameda Architectural Preservation Society

cc: Jill Keimach, Andrew Thomas and Debbie Potter (by electronic transmission)
AAPS Board and Preservation Action Committee (by electronic transmission)