

Elyse Eisenberg

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To: WeHo Heights NA, Elyse Eisenberg
Subject: Tower Presentation 2008 01 23 - Summary

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Wednesday, January 23rd, Sol Barket, Centrum Properties, invited the WeHo Heights neighborhood to an informal presentation of the revised plans for 8801 Sunset Blvd, the site of the former Tower Records. Horn Plaza offered its community room for the gathering.

It should be noted that these revised plans are still a work-in-progress. The purpose of the presentation was to offer some new ideas and get feedback from the area residents. This is still very early in the process.

Present

Centrum Properties – Sol Barket, Jackie Schwartz-Krashin (congratulations on your recent marriage, Jackie!).
 Gensler – Michael Darner, lead architect.
 Marathon Communications – Brian Lewis
 City of West Hollywood – Josh Kurpies, office of Mayor Pro Temp Jeffrey Prang
 Los Angeles Times – Bob Pool
 Community – about 30 WeHo Heights residents

Many people were unable to attend that evening because of the heavy downpour, but those who did venture out in the rainstorm were very much appreciated. We thank everyone who participated that evening.

Notable Changes

The changes from the previous proposal are listed here (Sol/Michael, please correct anything omitted or inaccurate):

1. One level parking has been moved from rooftop to underground.
2. Front façade on Sunset is now 35' (code), with setbacks beginning on third floor. Previously setbacks began on fourth floor.
3. Architectural projection on Sunset façade has been lowered from 85' to 75'.
4. Structure height before rooftop parking lowered from 68' to 58'.
5. Rear of building rises 25' from mid point of rear property line at top of hillside. Previously 35'.

6. Horn billboard (5,000 sf) has been eliminated.
7. Elimination of 50 public parking spaces. Eliminates 15' height bonus.
8. Approximately 50% of parking will be self parking. Previously was 100% valet parking.
9. Clump bamboo that grows to 50' and creates a green wall, similar to the bamboo wall at the base of the property above 8305 Sunset (next to Cabo Cantina), instead of palm trees on north and west (residential) sides of property. Awaiting name of genus.
10. A pocket park/dog run in the 12.5' of rear of the property, adjacent to Horn residential property. Approximately 6-10 inches of ground over parking garage below with cement planters for bamboo.

Comments

We acknowledge that a sincere attempt to address many previously expressed neighborhood concerns is evident in these revised plans. Many of these changes are at an obvious great expense to the developer, most especially moving a level of parking underground, and the elimination of a revenue-producing billboard. Certainly those who have attended earlier presentations were appreciative of these developments. We would like to formally thank Sol Barket and Michael Darner for these changes that were clearly made in good faith.

However, in the months since the November presentation, as awareness of the pending project has circulated in the neighborhood, new people have begun to participate in the process and are seeing the plans for the first time. While acknowledging the many changes made to the project, the project is still too large for this intersection, and the fear of the traffic that will be generated by a project of this size is overwhelming. It was of utmost concern by virtually all of the attendees.

Traffic Circulation/Vehicle Access

This was the area that generated the most concern, discussion, and agitation. The neighborhood is adamant that there be no access to this property from Horn. It was emphasized over and over what a small narrow street Horn is, and how it is already jammed with traffic during much of the day. People who don't know the area frequently use the street to make U-turns, using residential driveways, and looking for free side street parking. This would not be alleviated with this proposal, and is assumed by the neighborhood will make the situation worse.

There was great concern about emergency access as there have already been at least three major fires in the past ten years in Horn Plaza and Shoreham Towers, and the fire department has already noticed us that they have a difficult time getting up the street. In addition to fire vehicles, police and ambulances are routinely called to the area.

When it was mentioned that Tower had Horn access, it was pointed out that this was an exit driveway only, and at the very base of the street, almost on Sunset. However, confused drivers still tried to access the property from Horn, causing many traffic problems that continue to this day and were not stopped by the closure of Tower. Again, this would not be alleviated with the new plans.

Additional Traffic Lane on Horn

Although the city engineers state that the street legally only needs to be widened 2' to accommodate another lane, the residents of Horn know that this is not realistic under any circumstances, especially in an era of SUVs and Hummers, not to mention the delivery and garbage trucks that routinely block our ability to maneuver Horn. A single moving van or garbage truck on the street stops all traffic until it is ready to move. There is not enough area to go around them. Two feet more of the street is not going to make a difference.

Underground Parking

When asked about the possibility of moving all the parking levels underground, Sol explained that every level deeper that you go, the cost is exponentially greater and therefore, not economically feasible.

Public Parking

There were no public comments about the loss of the public parking spaces. Clearly the greater concern is the height and mass of the building. Neighborhood parking discounts, available parking for Spago's, hours of operation, etc., have been raised previously. Those issues will be more specifically addressed during later stages of the planning process.

Building Use

Retail, gym/spa, and office space are still proposed. No word yet on a likely retailer, although discussions are

being held with international brands.

Again, there is great concern about a gym/spa coming onto the property because of the traffic it would generate. The developer mentioned that he has been approached by many entities to put a restaurant in there, but the preference would be for the David Barton gym because of his close friendship with the owner.

The neighborhood suggested that the building house solely a gym, and eliminate the retail and office uses. That was rejected as not being economically viable. The neighborhood then proposed that the office space be eliminated since there has been no shortage of available office space for lease along Sunset Blvd for many years, even before the oncoming recession.

There was no immediate response to that suggestion, but the neighborhood urges its serious consideration. It would help mitigate much of potential rush hour traffic problems that this building will be adding to under any circumstances, and make strides towards further minimizing the size of the structure. Less parking would be required, possibly eliminating yet another level of the building and thereby reducing the height further, which is desirable.

Landscaping

There was a lot of discussion about the bamboo screen in the rear and side of the property as many believe it to be an invasive plant that would cause root damage to the parking structure which will be immediately below this area. There is still no distinguished landscaping plan. The city project planner has requested that the design provide landscaped planters in the front of the storefront windows along Sunset Blvd, enhancing the architecture. That has not yet been incorporated into this design.

Pocket Park/Hillside

The residents responded extremely well to the concept of a pocket park – something that is very desired by many of the dog owners in the neighborhood, as well as others. There is no green area for more than a quarter to a half mile radius from this intersection. However, it should be noted that the proposed pocket park is on open space that the structure was required to have - the minimum legal setback from residential area. The 35' hillside with deciduous vegetation and hundreds of canopy trees is still eliminated in this plan. It would be preferable to utilize the existing hillside for the pocket park. It is also preferable to have greater setbacks from the residential areas.

Building Height/Mass

While acknowledging that the building height has been reduced by 10' from the original plans, we would like to remind that most of this was required by the city planning department to stay within code, and 35' remains the height for this property, per the Sunset Specific Plan (SSP).

The property has long had an existing grade - the parking lot. Although it is legal to height average from a hillside slope, the neighborhood emphasizes that there is a great desire to save the Sunset Strip's last remaining green hillside with its native vegetation and hundreds of trees.

Additionally, the Larrabee homes adjacent to the property would still be dwarfed by the 25' height, which would not be as desirable as the existing canopy trees.

The floor space for the retail/gym/office use has not changed. These spaces are still too large for the property and will generate too much traffic.

There is still no significant articulation in the design, which is still reminiscent of the Beverly Center, and the setbacks are still the legally required minimum from the street: 12' on Sunset and 10' on Horn. Furthermore, there are no setbacks on Horn at all. This is still not a pedestrian-friendly structure.

Architectural Compatibility

Again the concern was raised that the architectural style of this building is incompatible with the neighborhood, being more suitable for Century City or Hollywood and Highland. It was suggested that it would be better to tie it into - and extend the look of - the Sunset Plaza shopping area – a concept that is also mentioned in the SSP as being desirable.

Although the building is adjacent to the high tech Gehry/IAC building, that style is unique to - and possibly incompatible with - this area, a façade over a mediocre mid-Century high rise, grandfathered into the city plan, and should not necessarily be used as a guideline for what is compatible for the Strip. The Carolco building too was grandfathered into the area and not intended to justify heightening the Strip. In fact, it should be noted that

West Hollywood was incorporated specifically to prevent a creeping density of the community. These buildings are not – and should not be – standards for the city or the Strip.

Certainly this is the most subjective aspect of the proposal, and there will be many varying opinions. However, with the Sunset Plaza shopping center, the Argyle Hotel and the Plaza del Sol all protected structures, and this stretch of Sunset Blvd still having many other existing buildings from the 1920's and 1930's, this is perhaps the last remaining stretch of old architecture in all of West Hollywood – from next door Spago's, the entire block across the street housing Book Soup and other small stores, the Holloway Triangle buildings, the Whiskey a block away, and the many small buildings on both sides of the street between Hilldale and Doheny. Wouldn't it be more desirable for an architectural style that enhances and celebrates this period, as does the Tramonto Shopping Plaza across from the Whiskey? In that building's promotional literature it specifically states that the architecture pays tribute to the heyday of the Strip. Would that 8801 did that too.

View Corridors

This was brought to our attention after the meeting as an issue that has not been raised before but affects any decision on the design of the building. View corridors through to the hills above Sunset are specifically mentioned in the SSP as being a desirable design element of any new architecture. This building, if allowed to proceed as is, would eliminate one of the largest swathes of uninterrupted views from Sunset to the hills above that remain on the Strip.

Historic Preservation of original Tower Records building

Not brought up at the meeting, but the neighborhood should be informed that a private party, author Dominic Priore (RIOT ON THE SUNSET STRIP, among others), has filed an application for cultural resource preservation of the Tower Records building. We do not have many details on this filing. Our understanding is that the application was deemed complete after the developer's application and may have to wait for the development process before being considered, due to West Hollywood law about these matters. Note today's article in the LA Times - <http://www.latimes.com/news/local/la-me-tower30jan30,1,4615087.story?ctrack=5&cset=true>

Summary of changes from original presentation

The neighborhood concerns from the previous two presentations are as follows:

1. Public and commercial vehicular entrances should be on Sunset, not Horn (PARTIALLY ADDRESSED)
2. Increased traffic to neighborhood and Sunset
3. Open garage facing residential areas needs to be enclosed. (ADDRESSED)
4. Building too massive and too high (HEIGHT PARTIALLY ADDRESSED BUT STILL TOO HIGH AND TOO MASSIVE)
5. Rooftop parking noise pollution issues (TOP LEVEL ROOF PARKING HAS CANOPY)
6. Inadequate building setbacks
7. Green zone separating residential properties from commercial areas (INSUFFICIENTLY ADDRESSED)
8. Green roof desirable
9. Distinctive landscaping design desired
10. Undesirable oversized billboard facing Horn (ADDRESSED)
11. Valet parking for all parking? (ADDRESSED)
12. Public and neighborhood parking discounts (WILL BE ADDRESSED)
13. Tenant hours limited (WILL BE ADDRESSED)
14. Multi-use preference - i.e. residential/office vs. office/gym/retail
15. Building design doesn't conform to Sunset Strip
16. Developers commitment to community (DEVELOPER HAS REPEATEDLY AFFIRMED HIS COMMITMENT TO THE COMMUNITY AND PUBLICLY STATED THAT HE DOES NOT INTEND TO SELL THE BUILDING SHORTLY AFTER COMPLETION)

EIR and Time Line

The developer and architect need to resubmit the above changes to the application. There may be more changes after the recent meeting, but we do not have this information.

The next step in the process is the EIR. A traffic study is to begin this month, or may have already begun, and the completion of the EIR is expected to take approximately six to nine months.

A transportation consultant will be hired by the city, evaluating the number of trips, the amount of parking, the impact on traffic, the impact on environmental air quality, geology, hydrology, soil, and other determinations – including historic preservation, and whether any of the impacts are mitigable.

Any questions or concerns about the EIR process can be addressed to the WeHo Transportation Manager, Terry Slimmer, or to the Project Planner, Adrian Gallo.

After the EIR, the Fire Department, Safety, and Building and Transportation Departments will evaluate the project.

When complete, the City Council can adopt the EIR. There is then a 45 day public comment period on the study.

After the EIR is adopted, the project goes to the Design Review Sub Committee of the Planning Commission for review and approval. The public has an opportunity to attend the hearing and comment.

If approved, the project then goes to the Planning Commission for review and approval. The public has an opportunity to attend the hearing and comment.

If approved, the project then goes to the City Council for review and approval. The public has an opportunity to attend the hearing and comment.

Each of these steps can take anywhere from four to six weeks or longer if changes are requested.

If you have an opinion on the project, it is important for you to participate in these public discussions.

Conclusion

We thank you for your participation in the development of 8801 Sunset. It is in everyone's interest to weigh in early so that concerns are appropriately heard. The further along in the process the project gets, the less ability there is to have any meaningful input.

Thank you.

West Hollywood Heights NA

Representing WeHo above Sunset Blvd — Clark, Horn, Larrabee, Sherbourne & Shoreham
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