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RE: General Plan Update: why City should retain General Plan designation of
“Residential” for existing residential areas within area of proposed “Central
Business District”

Dear Mr. McDonald,

Thank you for taking the time to talk with Jim last week.

We own a condominium at 500 N Street (Bridgeway Tower), which is part of the residential “superblock” bounded by 5th, 7th, N, and P Streets. This area was acquired by eminent domain, redeveloped and dedicated by City over 30 years ago for high-density residential use, consisting of Bridgeway Tower (condominiums), Pioneer Tower (senior housing), Capitol Tower (apartments) and Capital Villas (recently-upgraded 2-story apartments) totaling 739 residential units, and neighborhood retail. This unique and highly successful residential redevelopment area is known for its extensive tree canopy, and landscaped park-like interior which is open to the public. The ground floor retail in Capitol Tower and park-like grounds are used by numerous workers from nearby offices, particularly during the noon hour.

Continued residential use is protected by the current General Plan, which designates the area as “High-Density Residential” and The Central City Community Plan, which designates it as “Multi-Family Residential.”

However, the proposed General Plan Update proposes to abolish all existing General Plan Residential designations north of Q Street and west of 15th Street (except for a small area north of downtown), and instead cover all properties in that areas with a very general “Central Business District” designation. This is a radical change which would allow demolition of existing residences and replacement with office/commercial/retail development on any property in the “Central Business District” area, without a General Plan or Community Plan amendment. The Community Plan would be abolished. Long-established residential neighborhoods would be protected only by existing zoning, which can be readily changed.

Specifically, the proposed “Central Business District” designation would authorize either single or mixed use office, retail, or multi-family residential on any parcel. A developer in the CBD who wanted to demolish existing housing and build an office or hotel would need only obtain a change of zoning from City. Experience has shown that in most instances, the City is strongly inclined to approve zoning changes which are consistent with the General Plan.

The City’s abandonment of Residential general plan designations of residential neighborhoods in favor of the proposed “Central Business District” would communicate to commercial-use developers and the public that the City is now willing to replace residential neighborhoods with office and other non-residential development north of Q Street, marking a significant departure from long-established City policy. The General Plan Update says that City wants to increase downtown housing, but if the City were truly serious about downtown housing, the General Plan update would retain at minimum the existing Residential general designations for existing residential neighborhoods.

In addition to the Pioneer, Capitol, and Bridgeway Towers and Capital Villas “superblock”, there are a number of highly successful and long-established multi-family residential neighborhoods north of Q Street, such as Governors Square, that would be affected by the proposed removal of Residential designation. These neighborhoods have succeeded for decades because of quality of life features which would be threatened by rezoning portions of them to office, hotel and non-neighborhood commercial development which is incompatible with neighboring residential use. None of these neighborhoods would qualify as urban decay deserving of urban redevelopment.

Already the City is processing an application (“Capital Villas”) that would replace existing upgraded 2-story apartments with three 35-story office or hotel towers and parking structures between N, P, 7th, and former 6th Street.¹ The City used its power of eminent domain to develop the Capitol Tower/Bridgeway Tower/Pioneer Tower/Capitol Villas superblock specifically to provide housing in the downtown area, and has subsequently rejected more than one proposal for office towers in that area. To now allow the majority of that exclusively residential four block area to be redesignated, demolished, and rebuilt with office and commercial uses would be renegeing on the City’s commitment made to the public when this area was redeveloped. If that area were re-designated as “Central Business District” in the new General Plan, the developer would need only to obtain a change of zoning for a very drastic change of use.

New development in the proposed CBD is expanding exponentially with Richards Blvd Development, the Railyards and the Riverfront. It would be inconsistent with the focus on these new growth areas to permit piecemeal changes in the existing residential neighborhoods north of Q Street. It would allow uses that will compete with rather than complement the development

¹ The latest version of the Capitol Villas proposal calls for demolishing the 204-unit Capitol Villas apartments (2-story) and most of the trees and lawn within the 4-block superblock, subdividing into four parcels, erecting two 25-story apartment towers and three 35-story towers which can be office, hotel, or residential, as decided by the developer prior to construction, and erecting multi-story parking lots on most of the remainder. It is not unlikely that the developer would opt for three office towers, instead of residential, because of the potential for competition and overbuilding posed by the half-dozen or more other large multi-family downtown residential projects which have been approved but not yet built. Capitol, Pioneer and Bridgeway Towers would remain but most of the trees, lawn, and landscaping for which the area is noted would be eliminated.

planned for the new growth areas in the CBD while disrupting residential values and creating incompatible uses in the current successful residential neighborhoods.

The Capitol Villas proposal includes substantial new street-level retail. We are concerned about any new sizable retail development south of N Street (except for small neighborhood stores) that would compete with the healthy recovery of Downtown Plaza as the major shopping and entertainment center in our neighborhood. We have watched Downtown Plaza deteriorate as the City has approved new commercial uses in the downtown area, and we see the potential for further deterioration of Downtown Plaza in the redesignation of our residential neighborhoods for “multi-use” areas, even while there are existing storefronts south of N Street which are empty.

We also note that the Capitol Area Plan was developed to provide for mixed uses in part of this area while planning for growth in state office uses. It assumes that the residential uses designated in it, and those west of the Plan area, will remain residential in a tapestry of mixed use. The General Plan Update designation of this area as Central Business District on its face appears to contradict the Capitol Area Plan. How has the City included the Capitol Area Plan in its general plan update for the Central City?

If the City seriously wants to increase housing north of Q Street and west of 15th Street, it will retain Residential designations in its General Plan for residential uses in that area, and allow conversion to non-residential use only by case-by-case amendment of the General and Community Plans only if there is showing of very strong need, as is presently required. Replacement of Residential designation with the much more permissive CBD designation would only encourage replacement of residential with office/commercial development whenever the market is more favorable for downtown office/commercial development.

Please consider seriously the effect of this GP Update designation for this area on downtown residents and residential property owners. It is common sense that if City wants to substantially increase housing in the affected area, it at minimum must retain Residential designation for residential areas in its General and Community Plans. We urge you to retain the Residential designations for this area as you have in other areas of the Central City.

Very Truly Yours,

James P. Pacht

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