

Grand St Commons/Mt. Baker Housing Vacation

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Commissioners Present

Brianna Holan, Chair
Justin Clark, Vice Chair
Kim Baker
Elizabeth Conner
Azzurra Cox
Mark Johnson
Rick Krochalis
Amalia Leighton
Vinita Sidhu
Elaine Wine

Commissioners Excused

Project Description

Mt. Baker Housing Association, an affordable housing developer based in Seattle's Rainier Valley neighborhood, is proposing to vacate an alley between S Grand St. and S Holgate St. in the North Rainier HUB Urban Village. If the vacation is approved, the applicant will develop over 200 units of affordable housing at the 60 percent area median income (AMI). The development will include a variety of unit sizes from studios to three bedrooms. The building will be a part of a larger 3-block development developed in conjunction with Lake Union Partners. The developments are located along Rainier Ave S between S State St and S Holgate St, which will include ground level commercial and office space as well as market rate and affordable housing.

Meeting Summary

This was the Seattle Design Commission's (SDC) second review of the Grand Street Commons Alley Vacation project. The purpose of this meeting was to complete the Public Trust review of the project, as required by the City Council Street Vacation policies (Resolution 31809). The SDC voted, 10-0, to approve the public trust analysis for the project. The SDC also provided feedback on an early, cursory presentation of the proposed Public Benefit.

Recusals and Disclosures

None

November 5, 2020

2:00 - 4:00 pm

Project Type

Alley Vacation

Phase

Public Trust

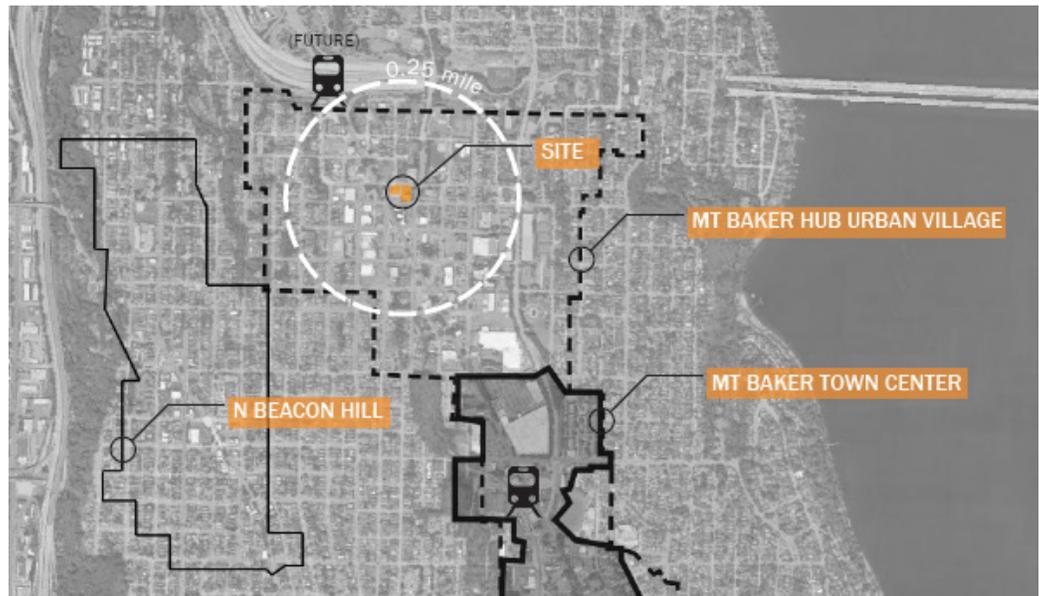
Previous Reviews[11/21/19](#)**Presenters**Conner Hansen
Mt. Baker HousingKris Snider
HewittMelissa Wechsler
Runberg Architecture Group**Attendees**Barry Baker
Mt. Baker HousingBeverly Barnett
SDOTReese Cowan Stewart
HewittStefanie Dirks
Runberg Architecture GroupThaddeus Egging
KPFJoe Ferguson
Lake Union PartnersPatrick Foley
Lake Union PartnersMoir Gray
SDOTJoy Jacobson
FASBrendan Lawrence
Lake Union PartnersRandall Olsen
Cairncross & HempelmannMatthew Porteous
HewittDavid Sachs
SDCIJonathan Williams
SDOT

Figure 1: Project location

Summary of Presentation

Conor Hansen of Mt. Baker Housing, Melissa Wechsler of Runberg Architecture Group, and Kris Snider of Hewitt, presented the Public Trust phase of the Mt. Baker Housing Alley Vacation project (see figure 1). The project team provided background and neighborhood context for the project. The proposed project includes the development of over 200 units of affordable housing for families at the 60 percent AMI on a site bounded by Rainier Ave S, S Grand St, 23rd Ave S, and S Holgate St. The building is a part of a larger 3-block mixed-use development, which is referred to as Grand Street Commons. The larger project is being developed in conjunction with Lake Union Partners, that will include commercial, office and residential space. Lake Union Partners will be providing additional affordable housing units within their two buildings. The project site for the Mt. Baker Housing development currently consists of two parcels bisected by an Alley between S Grand St and S Holgate St. The project team is requesting the vacation of the alley between S Grand St and S Holgate St, to construct one building rather than two.

The project team presented vacation alternative and no-vacation alternatives. The vacation alternative includes the development of one large multi-story building on the project site bound by S Grand St, 23rd Ave S, and S Holgate St. The alternative would also include a realignment and narrowing of S Grand St to 18 feet as well as the elimination of the 22nd Ave S spur between S Grand St and Rainier Ave S. There would be one curb cut for vehicular access to the building from S Holgate St.

The team then explained how the vacation alternative proposal would contribute to the urban form, impact light air and views, and provide for public assembly. The team also explained that the vacation alternative provided a reduction in the number of pedestrian and vehicular crossing points, which would reduce locations for collisions. Removing the alley would also eliminate a vehicular access point on Grand St and consolidate site access on Holgate. The team explained that with the realignment of Grand and elimination of the 22nd Ave S spur, vehicular movements from Rainier Ave S would be slowed (see figure 2).

The no-vacation alternative included the development of two buildings along S Grand St with vehicular access along the platted alley. The no-vacation

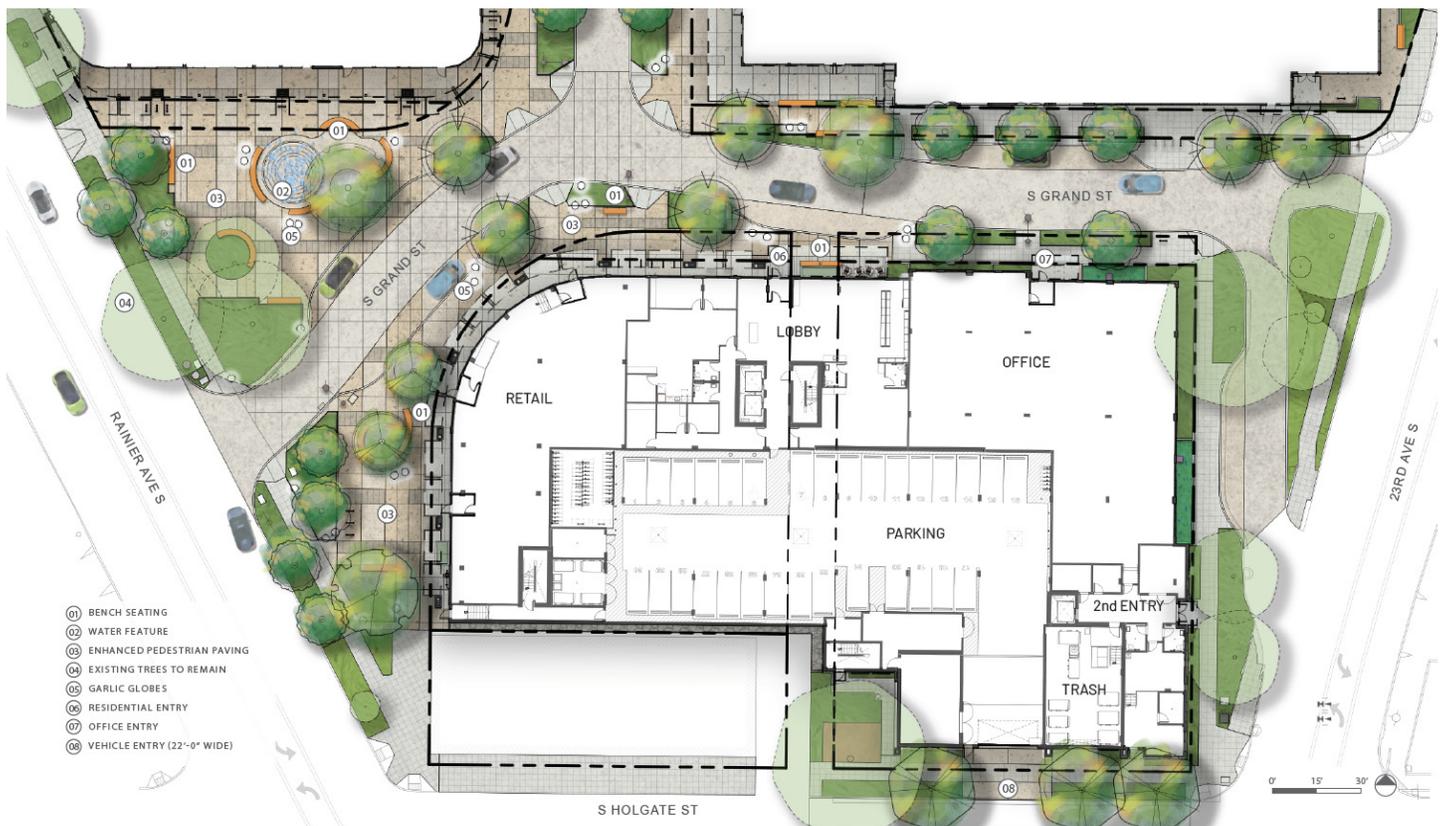


Figure 2: Preferred design proposal with alley vacation

scenario would not provide for a realignment of S Grand St and would not eliminate a curb cut onto S Grand St.

The project team explained that the vacation alternative would allow for 45 more affordable housing units to be built, due to the efficiencies of developing a contiguous site, which would lower the per unit cost of the affordable units resulting in \$4.5M less Office of Housing tax dollars needed to complete the project.

The team then provided a summary of the proposed public benefit package.

Agency Comments

Beverly Barnett, SDOT commended the project team for a thoughtful design. She pointed out that with the vacation more affordable units can be built. She explained that in the public trust analysis, the City was looking to see that projects were not being turned inside out, with such services as trash storage and pick up shifting from the alley to the perimeter of the block in a way that impacts the public realm. With elimination of the alley there was also a danger that projects would balloon in size and impact the urban fabric. With elimination of the alley and realignment of the street the City has an obligation to consider circulation of both vehicles and pedestrians, as well as the public spaces that are being shaped.

A combination of regulatory, policy, and vacation documents guide the design of streets.

Public Comments

None

Summary of Discussion

The Commission organized its discussion around the following issues:

- Overall comments
- Public trust – Circulation
- Public trust – Urban Form
- Public Benefit proposal

Overall Comments

The Commission was glad to see the increase in number of affordable units that could be built as a result of eliminating the alley, and the decrease in per unit cost from development efficiencies of a consolidated parcel. They agreed that focusing vehicular access on Holgate provided a more pedestrian friendly realm on Grand, at the center of the development.

Public Trust - Circulation

The Commission expressed concerns about vehicular circulation and connections to Rainier Ave S and 23rd Ave S. The project would generate more pedestrian traffic across both Rainier Ave S and 23rd Ave S, which do not include many crossings within the vicinity of the project. Particular attention is needed where Grand St intersects with Rainier Ave S. Commissioners were also concerned that the loss of bus rapid transit (BRT) limit pedestrian access to transit, notwithstanding the existing Route 7 bus line on Rainier and future Link light rail station to the north. Commissioners discussed the possibility of allowing only one way traffic on the segment of Grand St between Rainier Ave S and 22nd Ave S. The Commission also expressed concern with loading.

Public Trust - Urban Form

The Commission discussed the building massing. Although elimination of the alley would be mitigated in the building articulation, Commissioners noted the design of the building façade included limited visual breaks, appearing to be a long massive block, and the architectural expression was impacting the public realm negatively at the west end. The selected materials and higher datum in the portico segment gave a heavy appearance to the building. Commissioners also found the curved façade to lend a commercial, campus appearance and less of an urban neighborhood sense. The eastern part of the building was noted to provide more transparency and lightness, which created a more comfortable, open experience of the public realm. Commissioners suggested that the western part of the building be refined to more closely relate to the residential character of the east part of the building, using cement board in a more authentic way.

Public Benefit proposal

The Commission discussed the public benefit proposal, which includes the development of a public plaza between S. Grand St and Rainier Ave S. The Commission was concern about how people approaching from residential areas on the west side of Rainier Ave S and east of 23rd Ave S would reach the plaza safely. At the next presentation the Commission would like to see pedestrian and bike circulation in a five block radius. They would like to understand which improvements the development is providing and the status of what SDOT is planning and implementing to increase safety in this area that will greatly increase east west non-motorized movements. If the public plaza is to be usable by the broader public there will need to be safe opportunities to cross.

The SDC also discussed safety and the pedestrian experience along the streets of the Grand Street Commons development. The new geometry of Grand Street was seen as both a positive because it slows traffic, as well as an impediment because it bisected the public open space. The Commissioners asked the team to consult with SDOT on measures to make Grand St less impactful to pedestrian movements and the open space.

The Commission continued discussing the public plaza. There was concern about its proximity to Rainier Ave S, which produces a lot of noise due to vehicular traffic. Commissioners were also concerned that the plaza would be perceived as an extension of the retail in the market rate part of the development along the north of the space. While commissioners acknowledged that retail is a use that can be activating, they agreed that a more community-oriented use would contribute to this being a place the community embraces and uses. Commissioners suggested that the space be clearly programmed in response to the voices of underserved communities in the vicinity. They emphasized that in order to be a public benefit, in this location in particular, the team must think beyond what a new development in a gentrifying neighborhood would provide. Commissioners stressed the importance of acknowledging existing communities within the Rainier Valley and Central District as well as providing a land acknowledgment.

After discussing the plaza, the Commission suggested that the team consider other public benefits, including exploring benefits in alignment with the SDC Handbook's goal to support race and social equity for this project site that is in a neighborhood cited for high displacement risk by the Department of Housing and Puget Sound Regional Council. They suggested exploring providing retail or indoor community space for BIPOC businesses, job programs, education and childcare across the whole development. The idea of providing indoor

community space was suggested and the possible relationship to other community spaces in the area. Public art was another idea that was discussed, and the possibility of opportunities for BIPOC artists.

Action

The SDC voted, 10-0, to approve the public trust analysis phase of the Grand Street Commons Vacation project with the following recommendations:

1. Work proactively with SDOT to explore crossing improvements across Rainier Ave S and 23rd Ave S in the vicinity of the development. The Commission has strong concerns about approving any changes to the street grid at a location with known long-standing inequities in pedestrian safety investment. Turning movements at Rainier Ave S and Grand St, and 23rd Ave S and Grand St are concerning, in particular because of the transit stop and the increased number of pedestrians the project will add to the circulation.
2. Consider how the proposed changes to the vehicular circulation pattern bisect the open space at Grand St and S 22nd St. The Commission is concerned that this creates a stronger relationship of the open space to the northern development instead of the southern, affordable housing development. Realigning Grand St southward provides open space access to the retail of the market rate development and forms a barrier to the affordable housing residents.
3. Carry out on-going focused community group outreach to ensure the larger community vision and goals can be incorporated in this project.
4. Consider options that reduce bulk and scale of the affordable housing building. Refine the building design to further integrate it with the public realm, providing more porosity at the pedestrian level. Explore consistent materials across the base to align with adjacent buildings, challenging the architectural expression to better represent the residential use and avoid the office building appearance. Consider exploring greater depth at the gasket to more clearly signify the residential entry and division between the two masses.

The SDC did not vote on the public benefit package, but provided recommendations on the brief presentation of the proposal.

1. Work with SDOT to provide safe access to the open space from communities west of Rainier Ave S and east of 23rd Ave S. As long as it is dangerous for the greater public to reach the site the Commission will have difficulty recommending approval as a public benefit.
2. Examine the relationship of the proposed open space to the developments, open spaces, and plazas within the surrounding vicinity. The Commission is concerned that the open space is of more benefit to the market rate development and less to the affordable housing residents and greater public. This is of particular concern because the alley vacation is in an area undergoing gentrification. Explore how the alignment of Grand St and design interventions might address this.
3. If the alignment remains as proposed, work to ensure that it has a pedestrian focus, using traffic calming measures and keys to indicate to drivers and peds that this space is not a thru route between 23rd and Rainier. Explore a woonerf concept to improve the permeability across Grand so that the benefit of the open space is more connected to the GSC South building.
4. Explore solutions to the challenge of providing a public plaza along a loud, busy street.
5. Consider the nearby bus stop in the plaza design.
6. Engage in targeted community engagement building on the outreach you have already completed. Refine the design of the public plaza to reflect the vision and goals of the underserved communities that will use the spaces.
7. Work with city departments such as OH, DON, and OCR, who have developed a Community Preference Guideline and set of practices to support developers in addressing displacement and advancing racial equity in housing, to develop a contextually appropriate community preference plan and policy.
8. Consider additional public benefit items. The alley vacation is located in an area of high displacement where other public benefits might better align with the community's vision. The City Vacation Policies provide for this in a number of ways. Consider areas throughout the overall Grand Street Commons to locate public benefit. Some ideas to consider:
 - a. Public art reflecting the minority populations in the community
 - b. Indoor community space

Although retail cannot be provided as a public benefit, the overall vacation analysis weighs the broader benefit of the project to the public and the benefits to the developer. Please consider working with community partners and providing space for minority-owned and disadvantaged businesses, or organizations that provide employment related services. Consider making the community engagement connected with the retail space contracting a piece of a larger affirmative marketing plan for the project.