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Memorandum

Date: February 7, 2013
To: Councilmembers Tom Rasmussen and Tim Burgess
From: Seattle Design Commission
Subject: South Lake Union Rezone Proposal

Per your request, the Seattle Design Commission evaluated the South Lake Union Rezone proposal in light of our mission to help ensure the city's built environment exemplifies sustainable design that strengthens community, public life, and economic prosperity. The Commission supports the South Lake Union rezone proposal with the recommendations and comments detailed below. Following the summary, your specific concerns regarding protection of views; making linkages; providing adequate open space; skyline and building height adjacent to Lake Union Park; building design quality; avoiding the creation of an 'office environment'; overall sense of place; and response to the South Lake Union Community Coalition are addressed.

Process

Recognizing the significant analysis, community engagement, environmental review, and Planning Commission guidance behind the South Lake Union rezone proposal, as part of our review, a subcommittee of Commissioners met with David Cutler and Catherine Benotto (Seattle Planning Commission), Marshall Foster and Jim Holmes (DPD's Planning Director and SLU Rezone Project Manager), John Pehrson (spokesman for the South Lake Union Community Coalition), and Matt Roewe (owner/developer consultant and Seattle Planning Commissioner). The Commission would like to thank these individuals for making time to share their perspectives with the Commission, especially given the compressed timeframe.

Summary

The Design Commission supports the SLU rezone proposal, believing the combination of incentives and regulation will encourage more diverse development, provide a better public realm, and protect more neighborhood assets than development under the current code. To that end, the Commission agrees with the Planning Commission's assertion that strong

market conditions call for timely passage – opportunities will be lost if projects must build under the current code. That being said, zoning is not an ideal tool to ensure high quality design. The Commission's primary recommendations are to **commit resources to quickly develop interim guidance and update the neighborhood's design guidelines, develop street concept plans for key neighborhood corridors, and provide the Design Review Board with guidance and training on the new regulations.** If completed quickly, these tools will help to ensure better building quality and design, and encourage development of a diverse, ample public realm.

To help create a lively neighborhood environment and encourage diversity of uses, the Commission also recommends the items below. Suggestions for the zoning legislation are underlined; other recommendations would be accomplished with complementary tools or actions.

- Exempt a greater range of activating uses on the ground level from FAR calculations. (See item 8 on p. 6.)
- Adopt street concept plans already underway and recommend SDOT and DPD also plan Dexter, Harrison, and Fairview as important pedestrian and bike connections. (See item 2 on p. 3.)
- Ensure that the design guidelines strongly address the bulk and scale of the podiums neighborhood-wide and their potential impact on the public realm; tower design; and sustainable, integrated design. (See item 4 on p. 4.)
- Create policies and a plan to guide development of through-block crossings and open spaces as great public places that serve the evolving neighborhood (See item 2 on p. 3.)
- Adopt a stronger incentive for ground-floor open space and develop guidelines to ensure the public nature, design quality, active programming, and function as a linkage network. (See item 3 on p. 4.)
- Recognizing financial expectations, develop a portion of the "teardrop" site as a civic space, with a focus on creating a bookend to the 8th Ave residential corridor and linking with the Lake to Bay Loop. (See item 3 on p. 4.)
- Consider provisions to limit the width of the Mercer Block towers, to aid in reaching a slimmer profile and further limit the tower's bulk and scale. (See item 4 on p. 5)
- Focus design guidelines on the South Lake Union Park entrance area to allow design flexibility to best meet the goals of creating a generous, highly active, and welcoming public realm. (See item 4 on p. 5.)
- Require LEED Gold and focus design guidelines on measures to meet long held neighborhood values to lead the city in creation of a sustainable neighborhood. (See item 6 on p. 5.)
- Consider extending the incentives protecting landmark structures to encourage character building retention. (See item 7 on p. 6.)
- Encourage, or require, larger family-size units, and strengthen the incentive for inclusion of a school in South Lake Union. (See item 7 on p. 5.)

1 Territorial Views and Views Along Key Streets

Within the neighborhood, we believe the legislation responds appropriately to the view corridor analysis in the Urban Design Framework and protects SEPA-Designated views by requiring setbacks along Thomas, John, Westlake, Boren, and Fairview. Specifically regarding Fairview Ave, we understand that pedestrian level views to the lake are mostly blocked by trees, but believe the upper level setback requirements and significant slope from Denny to the Lake will protect views from the higher elevations to the south.

From a city-wide perspective, the Commission believes that some of the most critical views of the area are at the neighborhood scale, from Capitol Hill, I-5 heading south to downtown, and Gas Works Park. It is generally the view of the Commission that the rezone is likely to result in a more interesting urban form than development under today's code. Further, the distances and natural slope from the lake to Denny will help to maintain the gradual transition to the Commercial Core.

It is important to note that continued development of the neighborhood, whether under current code or the proposed rezone, will markedly change existing territorial views available across undeveloped lots. However, with its lot coverage maximums, podium height limits, and modulation requirements, the Design Commission believes the rezone will provide a more spacious feeling public realm than development under current code.

2 Linking Streetscapes and Parks

The South Lake Union Urban Design Framework identifies a desired public space network with linkages to and from Seattle Center, Lake Union Park, Denny Park, Cascade Park accomplished through Green Streets on Thomas and John, a Festival Street on Terry, a Woonerf on 8th, and the Lake to Bay Loop Urban Trail. It also suggests a number of mid-block crossings throughout SLU as a way to break up long north-south bocks. The legislation supports this initiative by providing for increased building setbacks along Green streets, 8th Ave, and Terry Ave, and by generating funds for streetscape improvements with a priority on Thomas St and 8th Ave. Also, in a forward-thinking creative approach we applaud, the programmatic EIS incentives providing sidewalk enhancements and shorter blocks as transportation mitigation.

The Commission encourages the City to complete and adopt the Thomas Street and 8th Avenue Street Concept Plans and to develop plans for other key streets. Harrison might be targeted to connect the neighborhood better to Seattle Center, design concepts could be developed for Fairview all the way to Eastlake, and street design planning for Dexter could build on the momentum of the bike infrastructure improvements on Dexter and planned for 7th. Planning should align with the Bicycle Master Plan Update and should take the opportunity to include state-of-the-art bicycle infrastructure.

Through-block connections can also help provide linkages and knit open spaces together. The Design Commission recommends collaboration between the Commission, DPD, and SDOT to identify a more systematic approach to through block connections and ensure they are high quality public spaces. The Commission encourages the City adopt design policies that maximize the beneficial effect of these connections as neighborhood linkages and a network of ground level open spaces and strengthens their legibility and function within the open space network.

3 Adequate Open Space

The Design Commission highlighted our concern regarding the amount of ground level open space in our review of the UDF in 2009. In its final form (2010), the UDF suggests encouraging private developers to create public pocket parks that provide amenities close to residential developments. The Commission is concerned that the legislation does not adequately address this goal.

We support the Planning Commission's suggestion to encourage stronger incentives for ground-floor open space in the legislation, i.e. allowing alternative development standards or design review departures that allow a 1:1 swap of floor area designed as a ground level public amenity for increased podium height. That being said, we recommend strong design guidance and support of strategic programming to ensure this space will be well designed, active, accessible for community use, and oriented to create a network of neighborhood open spaces.

While we are aware that there are financial issues regarding use of the site, the Commission also recommends developing part of the "teardrop" site as a neighborhood civic space. The focus should be on creating a bookend to the 8th Avenue residential district and connecting with the Lake to Bay Loop trail, which passes along the site.

4 Skyline and Building Height Adjacent to Lake Union Park

As introduced in item 1 above, the Commission believes that the rezone is likely to result in a more interesting urban form than development under today's code. Further, the distances and natural slope from the lake to Denny will help to maintain the gradual transition to the Commercial Core.

The podiums arose as a focus in our analysis of urban form because the commission believes they are likely to have a more tangible cumulative effect on the public realm and quality of the urban experience than the towers. We believe that the system of development standards in the proposal that regulate podium height, setbacks, open space, modulation, and lot coverage will provide more control over the bulk and scale of the podiums than existing standards.

The Commission recommends timely updates to the South Lake Union Design Guidelines to address the new types of development anticipated by the rezone. With these, further attention should be given to podium bulk and massing, street-specific ground floor design, and mid-block crossings, so that buildings will be designed to enhance the public realm. Because there are a number of projects already in the pipeline, the Design Commission further recommends quickly developing interim guidelines that, at a minimum, direct the Design Review Boards to use the Urban Design Framework and City Wide Design Guidelines in tandem with the existing neighborhood guidelines to shape the podiums and benefit the public realm.

The Commission takes no exception to the 240-foot tower height on the Mercer Blocks for four primary reasons related to urban form.

a) The natural slope of the area will mitigate the visual impact of the additional height;

b) as the blocks immediately south are already developed at a much lower height, 65 ft., we do not believe the additional height will have a negative effect on the general urban form;

c) significant setbacks, floor plate limitations, and limit of one tower per block provide light and air around the towers;

d) we do not believe that the additional shadow thrown on the lakefront portion of the Park by the additional height to be significant

We are concerned about the podium design adjacent to the park, believing that the design and uses on this edge will have a substantial effect on the public experience. Quality building design, particularly on the ground floor, activating uses, and a gracious welcoming entrance to the park is essential. We do not believe the prescriptive ground floor setback at Fairview and Terry is the best design solution for this location and recommend allowing more flexibility to achieve the desired aim. We recommend significant attention be paid in the design guideline updates to this area in order to clearly state objectives and allow flexibility with design review to best meet these objectives.

We do recommend considering limiting the width of Mercer Block towers to provide a slimmer profile.

5 Building Quality

Though the rezone does require some design elements relevant to building quality (requiring ground level transparency, for example), it does not further incentivize building quality. The Commission believes this to be appropriate given other high priority areas it does incentivize: affordable housing, daycare, rural land protection, and historic preservation.

As zoning is not an ideal tool to address building quality, the commission recommends timely updates to the design guidelines to include standards for high-rise development, podium bulk and massing, street-specific ground floor design, and mid-block crossings.

6 Sustainability

Relative to the built environment, beyond mandating LEED silver for tower development, the rezone proposal does not include other features furthering the neighborhood's long-held objective to lead the city's efforts to meet sustainability goals. Considering the stringent energy codes, meeting LEED silver is almost a given within the city of Seattle.

The Commission recommends requiring LEED gold for towers and including measures in the design guidelines to encourage access to daylight and natural ventilation to meet long held neighborhood values and meet the city's climate action plan targets.

7 Creating a Lively Neighborhood and Avoiding an Office Park Environment

For South Lake Union, the most important element to creating a lively neighborhood beyond typical work hours is to bring residents to the neighborhood. As the Council is aware, residential growth has lagged well behind commercial in SLU. The legislation does a good job incentivizing development of residential uses over commercial by allowing extra height and removing FAR limits and incentivizing affordability. It also discourages an "office

park" environment by prohibiting surface and ground level parking and limiting commercial parking provided (1 stall/1,000 square feet).

To further attract residential uses and families, the Design Commission supports the Planning Commission's suggestions to encourage, or require, larger family-size units and to strengthen the incentive for inclusion of a school in South Lake Union. Both will help to create a dynamic, diverse neighborhood.

Active, diverse street-level uses are another key element to create a neighborhood, not an office park. The legislation encourages an active street by requiring retail and façade transparency on designated streets, and by removing retail from FAR calculations. The Commission is concerned that limiting this incentive to retail uses may result in vacant spaces or developers forgoing this incentive in areas less well-sited for retail.

To further increase diversity of uses, the Commission suggests exempting a greater range of activating uses on the ground level from FAR calculations, where this is allowed. These could include civic, cultural, and arts uses, appropriate light industrial (creative manufacturing) businesses and the "food processing and craft work" uses.

8 Creating a "Sense of Place"

Creating a "sense of place" is difficult to legislate. The Commission believes that, in general, the proposal's incentivizing residential uses and affordability, encouraging a relatively "skinny" tower form, and avoiding upzoning in Cascade, will help to reinforce SLU's distinct neighborhood identity. In addition to the recommendation below, our prior suggestions regarding updating design guidelines, developing streetscape plans, providing adequate open space, building great streets, and linking parks and amenities will also help to create a great neighborhood.

Though the legislation incentivizes preservation of designated landmark structures, it stops short of encouraging reuse of character buildings. Protection of these facilities will encourage a finer grain and more diverse urban form and tenant/resident mix – helping to reinforce sense of place.

Consider extending the incentives protecting landmark structures to encourage character building retention.

9 Opinion on the Proposal of the South Lake Union Community Coalition

The Design Commission reviewed the concerns and ideas of the South Lake Union Community Coalition on the rezone proposal and reviewed separate modeling by DPD, Via Architecture, and the SLU Community Coalition. The Commission agrees with the Coalition that the east-west widths of the towers on the Mercer blocks should be further limited (see item 4 on p. 5). The Commission agrees with assertion of the Coalition that development under the upzone will exceed growth targets set by the current Comprehensive Plan. We note however, that the Comprehensive Plan will be updated soon, and that the rezone will further many of the other goals encompassed by the plan. We believe that increased development in transit oriented communities can bring valuable benefits to the public including an attractive cityscape, quality public realm, protection of rural lands, and affordable housing. Other elements of the SLU Community Coalition's proposal are addressed in recommendations above.