

Case File Number: CMDV03-051

May 28, 2003

Location:	1357 5th Street
Proposal:	To construct a five story, 775 space parking garage and three six-story buildings containing a total of 110 residential units with 35,800 square feet of ground floor commercial space.
Owner/Applicant:	Jabari Herbert, West Oakland Alliance
Planning Permits Required:	General Plan Amendment changing the General Plan designation of the site from Business Mix to Community Commercial to allow proposed residential activities. Zoning Text Amendment to conditionally permit auto fee parking in the S-15 Zone. Major Conditional Use Permit for a facility over 100,000 square feet in the S-15 Zone. Minor variances for height (55'-0" maximum; 79'-0" proposed) and required loading births. Design Review for new construction in the S-15 Zone.
General Plan:	Business Mix
Zoning:	M-20, Light Industrial Zone; S-15 Transit Oriented Development Zone
Environmental Determination:	Initial Study being prepared.
Historic Status:	Non-Historic Property (NHP); survey rating: N/A
Service Delivery District:	I – West Oakland
City Council District:	3
For further information:	Contact case planner Neil Gray at (510) 238-3878.

SUMMARY

The proposal consists of 110 residential units, a 775 space parking structure, and ten ground floor commercial spaces. The site is across the intersection of 5th Street and Mandela Parkway from the West Oakland BART Station and is considered part of the West Oakland Transit Village area (see Background Section, below). The parking structure would be for fee and serve BART patrons.

The project is within an area that was the topic of a report that studied the economics and land uses of the West Oakland BART Station area. The report supports a "transit village" concept of concentrating housing units within walking distance of transit stations, thus increasing ridership, easing traffic congestion, and reducing the dependence on the automobile. In that study, the subject site was identified as an opportunity to accommodate a 1,400 to 1,600 space parking structure. Parking at the site would replace surface parking removed by development in the Transit Village area, including development of the BART parking lot.

Staff requests input from the Design Review Committee regarding several design related items, in particular:

- Whether the generous provision of parking support the transit oriented development intent of the S-15 Zoning Designation;
- The proposed building designs in terms bulk, visual variety, materials, detail, and height;
- The design of the proposed commercial façades;
- The quality of the open space; and
- The adequacy of light and air for the units.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The proposal, located at a 152,800 square foot triangular site defined by 5th Street, Mandela Parkway, and Interstate I-800, consists of 110 residential units, a 775 space parking structure, and ten ground floor commercial spaces. The project would include 184,970 square feet of gross residential building area and 38,600 square feet of commercial space; the parking garage would be 270,500 square feet. The site is across the intersection of 5th Street and Mandela Parkway from the West Oakland BART Station and is considered part of the West Oakland Transit Village area (see Background Section, below). The parking structure would be for fee and serve BART patrons. The commercial space would be designed to contain either retail or office activities.

Three 75'-0", six-story concrete buildings (Buildings A, B, and C) containing the residential units and commercial space would face Mandela Parkway and 5th Street. Each building would contain separate five story 45'-0" wide towers on platforms above the commercial space. Rounded windows would establish bay-shaped architectural elements on the towers. The proportions of the tower and the shapes created by the bay windows have been designed, according to the architect, to relate to the turn of the century homes in the neighborhood and throughout West Oakland.

The towers vary in height from approximately 70'-0" to 75'-0", with the higher towers toward the middle of the buildings. Open areas would be located between the towers on platforms above the ground floor commercial space; at the sides of buildings, open areas adjacent to towers would provide an upper story setback from ground level open spaces and entrances. Green colored metal roofs, light orange colored concrete facades, and cement reliefs of African motifs on ground floor columns and other locations would establish a Pan-African architectural design theme. Each unit would be 1,200 square feet and have two bedrooms and two baths.

The five-story parking structure would be sited behind the residential buildings and in front of an I-880 overpass that ranges in height from approximately 30'-0" to 50'-0". Automobile entrances to the parking structure (and the entire development) would be from 5th and Kirkham Streets and on 3rd Street near Mandela Parkway.

A pedestrian bridge from the fifth floors of the residential buildings would connect with recreational space on the top floor of the parking structure. This open space would consist of a pool, gym, tennis courts, landscaping, and other facilities. A plaza area is located at the corner of 5th Street and Mandela Parkway to take advantage of the many pedestrians that would walk between the BART station and the parking lot during peak commuting hours. A large gazebo shaped structure that would contain cafés and/or other vendors would dominate this open area. The project would also include a community building and open space between the northeast building, the parking structure, and the freeway; this building would stage community meetings, events, and recreational activities.

Residents would have access to 142 parking spaces under the residential structures. Parking for the ground floor commercial space would be located in 94 surface parking spaces between the residential buildings and the parking structure.

NEIGHBORHOOD DESCRIPTION

As mentioned, the project is across an intersection from the West Oakland BART station and bounded by Mandela Parkway to the west, 5th Street to the north, and the freeway to the south. In general, industrial uses are in the immediate vicinity of the site and residential neighborhoods predominate beyond.

Industrial activities take place across Mandela Parkway while a residential street exists on the other side of that block. The U.S. Postal Service operates a large mail sorting and distribution facility approximately five blocks west of the site. Residential neighborhoods are located west of that facility. Industrial activities are located south of the freeway and east of the site.

The Red Star Yeast Factory is located to the north of the site but its owner has announced the facility's closure after community complaints regarding odor and possible environmental contamination. Above grade BART tracks, surface parking, and a gas station are located to the north of the Yeast Factory. A U.S. Postal Service driver training is north of the eastern part of the site. The Mandela Gateway project, a 187 unit affordable housing project developed by Bridge Housing Corporation, was approved by the Planning Commission on June 26, 2002 to be located further north across 7th Street. Like the subject proposal, that project was part of the West Oakland Transit Village study (see below). Predominantly single family homes, duplexes, some industrial activities, and the Peralta Public Housing development are located north and east of the Mandela Gateway project.

Industrial uses are located south of the freeway.

BACKGROUND

The West Oakland Transit Village study was undertaken in 1998 by a tri-agency team consisting of the City of Oakland Community and Economic Development Agency, the Oakland Housing Authority and BART. This team was formed to study the possibilities for creating a transit village around the West Oakland BART station. The study resulted in an Action Report, which was reviewed by the Planning Commission and the City Council in February 2002. The report supports a "transit village" concept of concentrating housing units within walking distance of transit stations, thus increasing ridership, easing traffic congestion, and reducing the dependence on the automobile. The concept also includes providing commercial opportunities for commuters and residents of the transit village.

This report estimates a potential for over 600 housing units to be created or redeveloped in the Transit Village area along with additional retail and parking structures to serve the BART station. In that study, the subject site was identified as an opportunity to accommodate a 1,400 to 1,600 space parking structure. Parking at the site would replace surface parking removed by development in the Transit Village area, including development of the BART parking lot. The report sites the preservation of the existing parking stock in the area as important to serve BART passengers and preserve BART ridership.

COMMUNITY MEETINGS

Staff has attended two community meeting involving the project. The first presentation was at the April Town Hall meeting for Vice Mayor Nancy Nadel. Attendees of the meeting expressed support of the project and had questions regarding the cost of the units and raised concerns regarding its location adjacent to the Red Star Yeast factory (the owners of the factory had not announced the closure of the facility at the time of the meeting). The second meeting was held at the project site. That meeting had low attendance from the community, although representatives from BART and the community group from South Prescott, the residential neighborhood near the site, were in attendance. Questions were raised by BART representatives regarding entrances at the site and the representative from South Prescott stated that his group was in support of the project, but they required more meetings to provide input.

KEY ISSUES AND IMPACTS

Staff is requesting design input from the Design Review Committee regarding the following issues:

Parking

Staff has concerns that the project provides too many parking spaces for the residential and commercial activities. The S-15, Transit Oriented Zone requires one-half a parking space per residential unit; no parking spaces for the commercial activities; and a conditional use permit if a proposal supplies *more* than these requirements. This limited parking standard and the required staff review of parking in excess of the standard is in place to preserve the intent of the S-15 Zone to “create, preserve and enhance areas devoted primarily to serve multiple nodes of transportation” (Section 17.100.010 of the Zoning Ordinance) surrounding BART Stations. Limiting parking for activities surrounding BART stations fulfills this intent by discouraging the use of the automobile in favor of mass transit. This reduces dependence on the automobile, benefiting the City and the entire region by reducing traffic and air pollution.

According to the requirements described above, the proposal would require only 55 parking spaces while the proposal would provide 236 parking spaces (142 residential parking spaces and 94 commercial parking spaces). This resultant parking ratio would be one parking space per approximately 410 square feet of commercial space and 1.3 spaces per living unit. For the sake of comparison, standard parking zoning regulations outside the S-15 area would require only 206.5 parking spaces (a ratio of one space per unit and one space per 400 square feet of commercial area). Thus, the project provides more than required even in non-transit oriented zones.

Staff believes that the parking ratio is too high and could be reduced without a detrimental impact on the project. A parking management plan could be instituted instead, providing parking and transit use incentives and other management tools. With such a strong supply of structured parking adjacent to the residential and commercial portion, a lease arrangement is also an option. The design implications of such a change are significant, for instance, existing parking could be used for landscaping between the garage and the residential buildings (see “Quality of open space” section, below). Also, the floor plans for the residential units include significant storage; some of this storage could be provided at the current location of the underground parking spaces.

Staff also believes that the project provides an important opportunity to participate in the City Car Share Program to further support a reduction of parking spaces because many residents will only need part time use of a car given the proximity of the BART station.

Bulk

The proposal would have a total floor area ratio (FAR), including the garage, of 3.7 and the site would contain approximately 560,000 square feet of total floor area (note that the Zoning Ordinance defines FAR as the total building square footage *not including parking* divided by the square footage of the lot; the garage is included in this calculation only to depict bulk using broadest possible method). With the exception of the U.S. Postal Service facility, a 3.7 FAR on a lot this size would create significant bulk compared to other developments in West Oakland.

The applicant proposes to mitigate this bulk through separating the buildings into the separate towers. The bulk of the parking garage would also be hidden from the street by the structures at the front of the property. The applicant has provided a scale model of the project to depict the proposed bulk and scale in relation to the surrounding neighborhood. Staff will bring the model to the Design Review Commission Meeting for review. A discussion of bulk in relation to other architectural features is also included in following sections.

Visual variety

Buildings A and B are each separated into four separate bay elements and Building C is separated into three of these identical elements. This creates eleven nearly identical tower shaped structures with uniform scale, treatments, shapes, and roof forms. The proposal also repeats identically designed stories above the ground floor commercial space. Each unit having the same floor plan contributes to this uniformity in exterior appearance.

Staff believes a) the repeating of architectural elements negates the reduction in the appearance of bulk described above, and b) more variety in architectural elements would improve the visual interest of the project. Staff believes more variety in height and façade treatments are necessary to create an acceptable design. For instance, further reduction in the appearance of bulk and increased visual interest can be attained by providing each tower a defined top, middle, and bottom. One method discussed with the applicant would be to lengthen the reliefs at the top of the towers to the bottom of the top floor and provide other treatment of the cement elements on the sides of towers.

Materials and other architectural detail

Staff requests input from the Design Review Committee regarding concrete being the most significant exterior material on the structures. There is concern that this material, the proposed bulk, and repeating architectural elements would give the development an austere or institutional character. Staff believes the project could avoid this appearance if the plans included quality architectural detail to the finish of the concrete, windows, balconies, reliefs with African motifs, and similar elements.

Ground floor commercial

The ground floor commercial space is a critical element of the project because it defines the space that will be most directly experienced by pedestrians and local motorists. The façade windows under the bay windows above create a canopy and define an appropriate pedestrian scale and the African motif columns could be a successful design concept, but the plans submitted to staff are conceptual and not at a scale that allows a sufficient analysis.

Like the residential towers, the details of the ground floor façades are critical in assessing the proposal.

Height

With the exception of the U.S. Postal Service facility, the proposed cluster of 70'-0" to 75'-0" tall buildings would be significantly taller than other developments in West Oakland and the Victorian style residential buildings found throughout West Oakland.

The height impacts, however, are mitigated by the following factors:

- The height may a benefit to the community by mitigating the noise and visual impacts of the freeway and the parking garage;
- View impacts would be limited because the area is flat;
- The height allows for more units at the site, thus supporting the transit village concept of concentrating housing near the BART station (see Background, above).

Staff has asked the applicant for shadow studies to further access the impacts of the proposed height.

Staff requests input from the Design Review Committee in regards to the appropriateness of the proposed height and whether the proposed height should be mitigated through stepping back the upper stories of the buildings. Staff will bring a scale model of the project to the Design Review Committee meeting to facilitate a discussion of height issues.

Quality of open space

Staff requests input from the Design Review Committee on the following concerns regarding the quality of the proposed open space:

Plaza at 5th Street and Mandela Parkway. It is critical that the corner of 5th and Mandela have visual interest and be a successful location for interaction and gathering because it will be so highly trafficked and visible. The current plans show a circular commercial building designed for small vendors and cafés dominating the middle of this plaza; staff believes that this would be an obstruction to pedestrians and take up space that could be used for a fountain or public art with seating that would encourage interactions and gathering. Staff agrees that commercial activities, especially small retail shops and cafés would be an important element to serve BART patrons and attract people to the plaza, but believes that these spaces should be located toward the sides of the plaza. Staff also believes that the side elevations of the buildings facing that plaza require upgrading to provide more visual interest.

Staff also believes that the corner of the parking structure closest to the plaza would be a focal point for people walking through the plaza and, therefore, should have a prominent architectural or artistic feature to create visual interest. The applicant could also open up the parking area to the open space by replacing some the proposed parking spaces at the northwest corner of the on-grade parking lot with landscaping. Furthermore, expanding the use of alternative paving methods between the open space and the parking structure would open up the plaza to the garage area and improve the appearance of the on grade parking lot.

Garage roof open space. Staff believes that the open space on top of the garage has an opportunity to be an important amenity to residents of the development but has some concerns regarding its usability. As designed, staff is concerned that the enjoyment of the space would be hampered by automotive fumes and noise from the adjacent freeway and cars in the garage. Another concern is that the narrow walkways from the residential buildings will not sufficiently integrate the open space with the rest of the development, discouraging its use. Also, the rooftop would need significant landscaping and other features in order for the open space to be usable and this is difficult to accommodate on the roof of a concrete garage due to the heavy weight load. Staff believes that these concerns may be addressed by the following additions:

- A six to eight foot trellis constructed of thick wood and landscaping along the sides of the open space would somewhat mitigate the fumes and noise of the freeway. The trellis could have intermittent openings with benches to look at views over the freeway;
- A landscaping plan for the rooftop showing significant groundcover, trees, seating opportunities, and plantings developed by a licensed landscape architect with experience in designing quality rooftop open space environments;
- If possible, the ventilation system of the parking garage should direct fumes away from the open space; and
- The walkways could widen as they get closer to the roof, opening up the space to residents walking across the bridge. These walkways should be heavily landscaped, particularly in their wider segments, to make the open space more inviting.

Southeast open space. Staff believes that the open space at the southeast portion of the site will be particularly loud and not have significant solar access given its location between the freeway and the residential buildings.

View from freeway

Staff is concerned about the appearance of the development from the freeway. This highly visible freeway view would consist of the backs of the parking structure and the residential buildings. The current plans show outdoor concrete walkways that lead to the entrances of the structures on the back of the residential buildings and an unadorned side of a cement parking structure. Staff believes that the visual interest of these elevations should be upgraded given the number of people that will view the development from the freeway. Staff suggests that appearance of the parking structure could be significantly upgraded through the extensive use of façade design treatments as well as vines, planter boxes, and other landscaping.

Area between parking structure and buildings

Staff is concerned that the space between the parking structure and the residential buildings needs improvement because it would be defined by approximately 50'-0" cement parking structure on one side and 58'-0" of cement walkways on the other. Like the mitigations listed in the "View from freeway" Section above, staff believes that this could be mitigated through creating visual interest on the parking and residential elevations. This area would be further improved using the methods described in the "Quality of open space" Section, above of opening up the northwest corner of the at grade parking to the open space at the corner of 5th Street and Mandela Parkway.

Adequacy of light and privacy for residential units

Staff has concerns that the limited amount of space between the towers will create light and privacy issues for residents. The floor plans proposed include two bedrooms on each unit getting its significant sunlight from the windows facing the area between the towers. Staff has concerns that the sunlight available for these rooms would be limited given the approximately 63'-0" height and narrow, 13'-0" width of the area between the buildings. Light would be particularly limited for the bottom units.

The narrow width of the open space would also compromise the privacy of the units because the bedrooms, bathrooms, living room, and balcony of each unit would be separated only by the 13'-0" wide space.

Conclusion

With the exception of the parking issues raised above, staff believes that the project is consistent with the intent and vision of the West Oakland Transit Village Study. The provision of a significant number of housing units, supplying replacement parking to allow construction in the BART parking lot, providing retail opportunities for BART patrons, and creating employment near the BART station are all consistent with the "transit oriented development" vision described in the study. However, as shown above, there are significant design issues that require serious consideration by the Design Review Committee and the community before the plan goes in front of the full Planning Commission. Further, the project requires more detailed drawings for staff, the Planning Commission, and the community to make a full evaluation including details of the ground floor and special areas such as the plaza.

Respectfully submitted:

CLAUDIA CAPPIO
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Attachments: A. Project Plans