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PROJECT SITE AND SURROUNDING AREA

The approximately 15-acre site is located in the Uptown District of downtown Oakland. The nine-block site is generally bounded by Thomas L. Berkley Way, San Pablo and Telegraph Avenues, and 18th Street. There are also some parcels on Telegraph Avenue between 22nd Street and Thomas L. Berkley Way. The project site is occupied by a combination of parking, commercial, and residential uses. The surrounding area includes a mix of predominately commercial, residential, and civic uses.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Forest City is proposing a phased redevelopment of the site with up to 1,000 apartments, 270 condominiums, 1,050 beds of student/faculty housing, 43,000 square feet of ground-floor commercial space, 1,959 residential and retail parking spaces, and a 25,000 square foot public park. Phase I will include approximately 600 apartments to be developed on blocks 1, 2, and 4, streetscape improvements, and the public park. Future phases of the project will include construction of the remaining apartments, the condominiums, and the student/faculty housing on blocks 3, 5, 6, and 7. The project will also entail the relocation of the Sears Auto Center to either block 8 or 9. The proposed units will range in size from approximately 560 to 1,300 square feet and will be a combination of studios, and one-, two-, and three-bedroom units. There will be a mix of for-sale and rental units, and 250 apartments will be provided at both moderate and very-low income affordability levels.

The project includes buildings that will range in height from four to six stories. This height is between that of high-rise office buildings and smaller scale commercial and residential structures in the surrounding areas. The residential levels will be constructed on a podium over partially below-grade parking. There will be multiple residential and vehicle access points with primary vehicle access from Williams Street. The parking levels will be wrapped with retail liner space and stoops for the residential units. Open space will be provided via a combination of landscaped mews between the buildings, private patios and balconies, and common interior courtyards at the podium level. A public park will be created on the west end of block 3, with a finger park extending along William Street to Telegraph Avenue. The project sponsor is also proposing to construct new north-south streets, to incorporate traffic calming measures such as narrowing streets, creating angled parking, and providing bulb-outs, and to provide extensive streetscape improvements.

GENERAL PLAN ANALYSIS

The General Plan designation for the project site is Central Business District. The Central Business District designation allows a maximum floor area ratio (FAR) of 20.0, and a maximum residential density of 500 units per net acre. The intensity of the proposed project is within the allowable FAR and residential density, and the uses are consistent with the General Plan designations.

ZONING ANALYSIS

The zoning designations for the site include: C-51 Central Business Service Commercial, C-55 Central Core Commercial, and S-17 Downtown Residential Open Space. The intensity of the proposed project is within the allowable FAR and residential density, and the uses are permitted in these zoning districts.

It is anticipated that the proposed project will require the following planning approvals: a Preliminary Development Plan (PDP) for the entire project, a Final Development Plan (FDP) for each phase of the project, a Major Conditional Use Permit (for construction of over 100,000 square feet of floor area, and for demolition of a facility containing rooming units), Design Review, and a Subdivision Map. The project also involves the completion of a Disposition and Development Agreement (DDA) between the City's Redevelopment Agency and Forest City, as well as property acquisition. All applicable criteria for the planning entitlements will be analyzed and appropriate findings will be made in conjunction with review by the full Planning Commission, scheduled for some time in 2004.

ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW

A focused Draft Environmental Impact Report (DEIR) was prepared to evaluate the potential environmental impacts of the proposed project. The DEIR was released for public review on September 19, 2003 and the comment period ended on November 3, 2003. The Landmarks Preservation Advisory Board (LPAB) held a public hearing to receive comments on the project on October 6, 2003. On October 15, 2003 the Planning Commission held a public hearing to receive comments on the DEIR. A Final EIR (FEIR) is being prepared to address the comments received on the DEIR. The DEIR identified significant unavoidable impacts of the project in the following areas:

- Transportation (intersection of Frontage Road/West Grand Avenue)
- Air Quality (operation period impacts related to regional emissions)
- Historic Architectural Resources (Great Western Power Company Building)

PROJECT REVIEW PROCESS

In addition to the public meetings noted above, the project sponsor held community meetings on March 12th, October 11th, and October 13th of this year. After the FEIR has been released for public review, the Planning Commission will consider its certification. This certification will not be attached to a Planning Commission action, as is the usual procedure. Rather, the first discretionary action will be the City Council/Redevelopment Agency consideration of the proposed DDA between the Redevelopment Agency and the project sponsor. If the DDA is approved, the project sponsor will proceed with property acquisition and with the detailed design plans for the project. Those plans will then be brought before the Planning Commission for approval of the required planning entitlements.

DESIGN ISSUES

Because this project entails a planned unit development for a nine-block area, the sponsor will construct the project in phases. The project description, site plan, and conceptual building massing have been developed for the entire project. However, building elevations have only been developed for the first phase of construction, which will include blocks 1, 2, and 4. The buildings on blocks 1 and 2 will range in height from four to five stories, while the buildings on block 4 will range in height from four to six stories. The building design successfully breaks up the facades by incorporating different materials and styles to make the buildings appear as if they were constructed separately over a period of time. The proposed architectural styles include a combination of traditional and modern design elements, which is compatible with the mix of styles in the surrounding area. The proposed exterior building materials include stucco, brick veneer, corrugated metal, metal panels, and aluminum windows. Proposed colors include a range of saturated earth tones as well as muted red, orange, and purple tones.

The overall site plan, circulation, and streetscape elements present a unified development concept for the project area. This unified set of improvements, including a major reconfiguration of Williams Street and well-established pedestrian linkages, will create a special and identifiable district in this area.

Staff believes that the proposed design is attractive, well modulated and articulated, and compatible with the surrounding area. Based on the schematic plans submitted for the project, staff has identified several design issues that are presented in the following section of this report. It is requested that the DRC comment on these issues as well as any other layout or design elements. Staff will then continue to work with the applicant to refine and further develop the design in anticipation of full Planning Commission review once the DDA has been approved and property acquisition is underway.

Outstanding Design Issues

- More information is required about the proposed materials and treatments including the brick veneer, metal siding and panels, and scored plaster, which are proposed for portions of the building bases. Staff's objective is to ensure that the materials have a high quality appearance, particularly at the pedestrian level of the building.
- The locations of the neighborhood park and finger park on block 3 seem appropriate to staff. The neighborhood park would provide a centrally located recreational area to serve the neighborhood, that would be surrounded by residents who would both use the park and provide "eyes" on the park to enhance its safety. The finger park that extends to Telegraph Avenue would be an amenity that links with the neighborhood park, while still allowing for continuity and emphasis of the retail frontage on Telegraph Avenue. Some members of the community have suggested that instead there should be a linear park prominently located on Telegraph Avenue between 19th and 20th Street, which would create an amenity near surrounding entertainment uses in the area.

- A variety of conceptual stoop treatments have been developed for several project frontages. These treatments include a combination of walls or gates and landscaping. Stoops will provide a visual connection at the base of the buildings with the street. Stoops also serve to more directly connect the residents to the neighborhood, thereby creating more activity. Once detailed plans have been prepared, staff will review the design to ensure that the stoops provide both a sense of privacy for the residents and visual interest for passersby.
- The streetscape is an important design element that needs to be further detailed. A variety of design elements such as public art, special pavement, sidewalk bulb-outs, and landscape treatments are proposed in the schematic plans. Given the scale and phasing of the proposed project, public improvements will strongly define the district. Staff will review the detailed streetscape plans once they are developed to ensure that paving treatments, landscaping, street lights, street furniture, and bollards are compatible with the surrounding area, are residential in scale, and provide project identification. The design of the street frontages should take into account the various street widths and levels of activity.
- The impacts to potentially significant historic buildings will be closely examined, and the LPAB will be solicited for comments on the design of each project phase that could potentially affect these resources. Comments received from the LPAB, the Oakland Heritage Alliance, and several community members expressed concern over the impacts of the project on historic buildings such as the Great Western Power Company Building, and the buildings on San Pablo Avenue between Thomas L. Berkley Way and William Street, as well as the desire to have these buildings retained.
- Window quality and window recess are an important component of the project design. More detail on the window types, amount of recess, and quality needs to be provided.
- A community room should be provided so that residents of the project have a place to hold meetings or social functions.

CONCLUSION

Staff recommends the Design Review Committee review and comment on the site plan and conceptual design of the proposed project, with emphasis on the issues discussed above, as well as any other issues the Committee may have.

Respectfully submitted:

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Attachments: A. Project Plans