

Agenda Report

October 18, 2010

TO: Honorable Mayor and City Council

FROM: Planning Department

**SUBJECT: APPEAL OF A DECISION BY THE DESIGN COMMISSION –
CONCEPT DESIGN REVIEW, 680 E. COLORADO BOULEVARD –
IDS PLAYHOUSE PLAZA**

RECOMMENDATION:

It is recommended that the City Council:

1. Find that this project was subject to an environmental review in the Environmental Impact Report, Statement of Overriding Considerations, and Mitigation Monitoring and Reporting Program adopted by the City Council on November 16, 2009, and that there are no changed circumstances or new information which would trigger further environmental review;
2. Find that the concept-level design is consistent with the Purposes of Design Review set forth in §17.61.030 of the Zoning Code, as well as the following design guidelines adopted by the Council: Citywide Design Principles in the Land-use Element of the General Plan and the Design Guidelines in the Central District Specific Plan;
3. Affirm the decision of the Design Commission to grant Concept Design approval with the conditions adopted by the Design Commission on August 30, 2010 (ATTACHMENT A);
4. Affirm the decision of the Design Commission to adopt the findings for a height-limit exception through height averaging (§17.30.050 P.M.C.) to permit increased height in the portion of the building fronting on Colorado Boulevard and a corresponding decrease in height on the southern portion of the building (ATTACHMENT A);
5. Direct that an advisory 50% review and final design review be conducted by the Design Commission.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

The Design Review process is established by Pasadena Municipal Code section 17.61.030. Pursuant to the Code, Design Review is intended to implement urban design goals and policies and the citywide design principles in the General Plan.

Concept Design Review is the primary step in the Design Review process. Applications for Concept Design Review normally address the basic design of a project, including compatibility with surroundings, massing, proportion, siting, solid-to-void relationships, and compliance with applicable design guidelines.

The Design Commission has reviewed the IDS Playhouse Plaza project on five occasions: two advisory reviews prior to the City Council public hearing on November 16, 2009 and four Concept Design reviews from March through August, 2010. At the Concept Design review meeting on April 26th, the Design Commission failed to reach a decision. The outcome was a “failure to act,” which has the effect of disapproving the application.

On June 7, 2010, the City Council reviewed this decision. The Council remanded the project back to the Design Commission with instructions for an ad-hoc subcommittee to work with the developer and staff on alternative designs and to complete the design review process within a reasonable period of time. Alternative designs, as discussed by the Council, included “a redistribution of square footage and possible compromise on mass and scaling of the project.”

Following this action by the Council, a three-person subcommittee of the Design Commission met five times with the applicant and the architectural team—with a sixth teleconference on August 6, 2010. The subcommittee sought to shift mass from the upper stories of the building along El Molino to the north (on Colorado Boulevard) and to limit the impact of the new structure on nearby smaller-scaled historic buildings (in particular, the Pasadena Playhouse). Through the efforts of the subcommittee, the principal mass of the building has shifted to Colorado Boulevard, thereby significantly reducing the height along EL Molino and responding more appropriately to lower-scaled existing buildings on the west side of the street. The plaza area was also reconfigured during these meetings to better respond to the courtyard of the Pasadena Playhouse.

After the six meetings of the subcommittee, the Design Commission formally reviewed the redesign of the building on August 30, 2010 and approved the application for concept design. As part of this approval, the Design Commission also adopted findings to support height averaging. Height averaging allows the northern mass of the building to exceed the 75-foot limit (up to a maximum of 90 feet) if elsewhere a corresponding mass of the buildings is lower than the permitted height.

Pasadena Heritage and Pasadenans for a Livable City appealed this decision on September 8, 2010. This appeal and a response from staff to the six issues cited in the appeal are in ATTACHMENT B.

The design approved by the Design Commission on August 30, 2010 differs from previous iterations in the following ways:

1. The public plaza on El Molino has been aligned with the open courtyard of the Pasadena Playhouse and expanded to make this component of the project a meaningful attribute, large enough for public gatherings, outdoor dining and specialty

- events. The square footage allotted for public space has increased from 9,600 square feet to approximately 10, 515 square feet.
2. The substantive mass of the five-story building has been moved to Colorado Boulevard and to the south the lower-scaled, two-story, building volume is more responsive the buildings on El Molino Avenue.
 3. The corner tower on Colorado and El Molino has been removed and the main entrance to the building has been placed, more centrally, on the Colorado façade.
 4. The central entry to the office building, flanked by retail, has introduced a heavily glazed, recessed feature, offset by more traditional symmetrically arrayed, engaged pilasters. The building hierarchically articulates to emphasize the main entry on Colorado as the focal point.

BACKGROUND:

The revised design for the project, IDS Playhouse Plaza, is a six-story office building with ground-floor retail. The ground-floor level is 17 feet in height and portions of the building (with height averaging) reach a maximum height of 90' at the northern portion of the site. The exterior building materials are preliminarily proposed as pre-cast concrete panels; large areas of glazing, offset by punched window openings and vertical bands of glazing with traditional ground-floor retail storefronts.

The site plan includes an east/west-oriented pedestrian paseo in the middle of the site on El Molino. The covered paseo connects to the Arcade Lane retail shops through a proposed opening in the Arcade's western wall. The project also proposes a public plaza on S. El Molino Avenue. The plaza would be landscaped and available for public use and pedestrian access to the new retail shops. The building has significant setbacks that promote publicly accessible outdoor spaces and to provide a wider sidewalk area to accommodate pedestrians for special events. Vehicles access the six-level subterranean parking garage from a driveway on southern edge of the site on El Molino Ave.

Minor Change to an Approved Project (Adjustment Permit) for Height and FAR

The proposed modification to the massing of the building came about in response to the directive from the City Council on June 7, 2010. At that time, the City Council members had encouraged a subcommittee of the Design Commission to study a redesign that transferred massing from zones 2 and 3 to zone 1 (i.e., the area closest to Colorado Boulevard). A subcommittee of the Design Commission, acting on this direction from the Council, agreed that a major redistribution of the massing to increase the presence of the building on Colorado Boulevard—and to lower its height and mass on El Molino—would be appropriate.

The Design Commission reviewed a redesign of the building on August 30, 2010 and approved the application for concept design. This approval included changes to the massing of the building and height averaging. It did not authorize a change to the FAR, however, because this entitlement is through the adjustment permit, which may only be changed through a separate action (changes to an approved project).

Height Limit Exception through Height Averaging

The code (§17.30.050) permits the Design Commission to approve height averaging in some sub-districts in the Central District. With height averaging, additional building height on one portion of a building is counterbalanced by lower heights across or elsewhere on a development site, provided that the average height over the entire footprint does not exceed the otherwise required maximum building height. In this case, the applicant was granted an adjustment permit to increase heights in zone 2 (from 50 feet to 75 feet) and in zone 3 (from 35 feet to 44 feet), and the maximum building heights used for height averaging are those entitled through the adjustment permit. The purpose of height averaging is to “punctuate important intersections or other prominent locations.... [and to] contribute to a more visually compelling skyline. It is also designed to “achieve an economically viable project that also protects view corridors and/or historically or architecturally significant building, structures, or landscapes...[and] a visual transition in height and massing” may be achieved through height averaging.

The findings to approve a request for height averaging, which the Design Commission approved on August 30, 2010 for this project, are:

1. The additional height provides for a more interesting skyline;
2. The additional height will not be injurious to adjacent properties or uses, or detrimental to environmental quality, quality of life, or the health, safety, and welfare of the public;
3. The additional height will promote a superior design solution that enhances the property and its surroundings, without detrimental impacts on views and sight lines; and
4. The additional height is consistent with the objectives and policies of the Central District Specific Plan and the General Plan.

Certified EIR

On November 16, 2009, the City Council certified an EIR for the project and found that the project would not result in significant effects on historic resources or aesthetics. The certified EIR anticipates that the City’s design review process and application of adopted design guidelines, including the Playhouse District Design Guidelines in the Central District Specific Plan, ensure that the project, as it progresses through design development, would not create any further adverse effects on historic resources or aesthetics. Accordingly, in conducting the appeal of the decision by the Design Commission, the Council shall begin with the premise that the building as already approved on November 16, 2009 does not have significant aesthetic impacts and is consistent with the City’s General Plan, zoning code and other applicable regulatory requirements as set forth in the EIR and land-use findings made by the Council. Prior to granting concept design review, the Council is asked to find that any changes arising from changes required through design review or voluntarily provided by the applicant continue to have a less-than-significant aesthetic and historic effect and remain within the findings already adopted by Council.

FISCAL IMPACT:

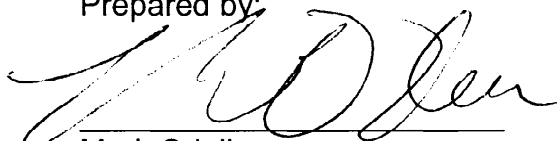
The applicant has paid the fee for Concept Design Review (\$11,705) as well as for the other land-use entitlements and environmental study, totaling \$14,823.39 (plus the cost of the traffic study). The City will require further additional fees for Final Design Review, as well as plan check, permits fees and a construction tax on a building permit.

Respectfully submitted,



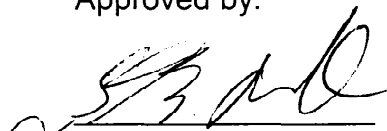
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Approved by:



MICHAEL J. BECK
City Manager

Attachments:

- Attachment A — Decision Letter, Decision by the Design Commission on an Application for Concept Design Review, Playhouse Plaza (August 31, 2010)
- Attachment B — Appeal of Decision by the Design Commission on an Application for Concept Design Review, Playhouse Plaza (September 8, 2010)
- Attachment C — Staff Response to Issues Cited in Appeal
- Attachment D — Chronology of Design Review, Playhouse Plaza
- Attachment E — Plans, renderings and elevation