

# Agenda Report

March 2, 2026

**TO:** Honorable Mayor and City Council

**FROM:** Planning & Community Development Department

**SUBJECT: QUASI-JUDICIAL ACTION: APPEAL OF THE DESIGN COMMISSION'S APPROVAL OF AN APPLICATION FOR CONCEPT DESIGN REVIEW (DHP2025-00258) FOR A NEW FOUR-STORY, 93,539 SQUARE-FOOT RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT PROJECT WITH 260 AT-GRADE AND SUBTERRANEAN PARKING SPACES ON PROPERTY OWNED BY CALTECH AT 1364 EAST GREEN STREET**

## **RECOMMENDATION:**

Staff recommends that the City Council:

1. Find that the action proposed in the agenda report is categorically exempt from environmental review pursuant to State California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) Guidelines Section 15332 (Class 32, In-Fill Development Projects), and that there are no features that distinguish this project from others in the exempt class and, therefore, there are no unusual circumstances;
2. Adopt the findings in Attachment A finding that the project will comply with the purposes of design review, the design-related goals and policies of the Land Use Element of the General Plan, the Design Guidelines in the 2022 East Colorado Specific Plan, and the Design Guidelines for Neighborhood Commercial and Multi-family Districts; and,
3. Deny the appeal and approve the application for Concept Design Review subject to the conditions in Attachment B, which shall be further reviewed by the Design Commission during Final Design Review.

## **BACKGROUND:**

On August 8, 2025, the applicant, TC LA Development, Inc., submitted an application for Concept Design Review for a new 93,539 square-foot research and development building with 260 at-grade and subterranean parking spaces on a 41,573-square-foot site owned by Caltech located at 1364 E. Green Street. The Design Commission

reviewed the application for Concept Design Review on December 9, 2025 and approved it on January 27, 2026; the staff reports for those two meetings are in Attachments C and D. The January 27, 2026 staff report includes additional information in response to substantial public comments that were received at the December 9, 2025 meeting.

On February 9, 2026, the appellant, Building a Better Pasadena, LLC, filed an appeal application citing disagreements with the CEQA determination and consistency of the project with the General Plan, East Colorado Specific Plan and Zoning Code. See Attachment E for the appeal application.

Outside of the required meetings for Design Review, the applicant and appellants have met on a few occasions to discuss matters of concern. The applicant did agree to delay the Concept Design Review hearing last year from November to December to allow time for the school and church to meet internally on the project. The parties involved on both sides have been open to discussions, however resolution has not been met.

At the January 27, 2026 public hearing, the Design Commission did include some specific conditions of approval to respond to the concerns of the neighboring site including condition #2 requiring restudy and consideration of stepping the fourth floor along the south elevation and further reducing the height of the mechanical screen or studying ways to reduce its visual prominence. In an attempt to address concerns related to construction traffic interfering with school drop-off and pick-up operations, the Commission included condition #9 which requests that the applicant consider utilizing Green Street for construction traffic; the applicant is required to coordinate with the Departments of Public Works and Transportation on any construction staging and traffic management (Conditions #31 and #56).

### **REQUIRED APPROVALS:**

The proposed Research & Development land use is allowed by right on the project site. The proposed project meets the development standards of the Zoning Code including those related to setbacks, parking, open space, floor area and height. The project is utilizing additional floor area and height provisions approved by the City Council in 2024 to accommodate and incentivize research and development projects (Section 17.50.240 Attachment K).

The only entitlement required for the project is Design Review, where the Design Commission reviews the project for consistency with adopted design guidelines and the purposes of the Design Review. Modifications to the buildings can be required related to articulation, modulation, or other design-related standards. However, the square footage, maximum height and other development standards in the Zoning Code cannot be reduced beyond what the code allows. As this is an appeal of a Design Review application, the City Council's review is also limited to the project's consistency with applicable design guidelines and the environmental determination.

Design Review is a three-phase process starting with Preliminary Consultation, followed by Concept Design Review and then Final Design Review. Each phase builds upon the other as the applicant must respond to comments provided during the previous phase of review. Preliminary Consultation is informational only; Concept Design Review requires a public hearing, a CEQA determination, and if approved, grants the entitlement. Final Design Review focuses on items such as colors, materials, and final details.

The purpose of Design Review is to “implement urban design goals and policies and the Citywide design principles in the General Plan and to apply the City's adopted design guidelines to Design Review.” As part of the Design Review conducted, staff and the Design Commission reviewed the project as it relates to a number of design guidelines/policies that are contained in the Land Use Element of the General Plan, the 2022 East Colorado Specific Plan and the Design Guidelines for Neighborhood Commercial and Multi-family Residential Districts. Consistency with these guidelines is the basis for the findings for approval in Attachment A. The full analysis of this work is contained in the staff reports for the Concept Design Hearings on December 9, 2025 and January 27, 2026 (Attachments C and D, respectively). The CEQA exemption was also approved based on traffic, air quality and noise technical reports that were prepared (Attachment F). The Design Commission reviewed and unanimously approved the application and CEQA determination (5-0 with three members absent) on January 27, 2026 (Attachment G). For additional information, the project plans are provided in Attachment H and links to the Design Guidelines in the 2022 East Colorado Specific Plan and the Design Guidelines for Neighborhood Commercial & Multi-Family Residential Districts can be found in Attachment I. Further, the list of Design Guidelines staff determined applicable to the project during Preliminary Consultation is provided in Attachment L.

### **STAFF RESPONSE TO APPEAL:**

The appeal application received states the following reasons for the appeal:

“Findings for Categorical Exemption cannot be made as there are sufficient technical inconsistencies and inaccuracies in the published technical studies. Furthermore, the studies fail to fully study and understand the impacts with the associated use relative to the operation of the building. Finally, the project is inconsistent with the fundamental provisions of the City's General Plan, and East Colorado Specific Plan, and the Zoning Code relating to Design Review.”

The appeal application does not include the specific inconsistencies that are the basis of the appeal, therefore this report evaluates and responds to the comments that have been submitted in opposition to the project.

## Responses to Appeal Points

### *Insufficient analysis to support the Categorical Exemption*

EcoTierra Consulting and Fehr & Peers, environmental consulting firms under contract to the City, prepared noise, air quality and traffic analyses for the project (Attachment F), which concluded that there will be less than significant impacts on the environment; the Design Commission therefore determined that the project is exempt from environmental review pursuant to the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), §15332, Class 32, In-Fill Development Projects.

The appeal application does not state the specific inconsistencies and inaccuracies that the appellants allege in the published technical studies or the aspects of the project operation that the technical studies allegedly fail to fully study or understand; however, during both public hearings for the Concept Design Review application, a number of public comments were received regarding the environmental studies. The staff report for the January 27, 2026 Design Commission meeting in Attachment D summarizes comments that were received and provides responses to these comments. The staff position is that the technical studies sufficiently study the project and it qualifies for a Class 32 exemption. No substantially new or different comments were presented to the Design Commission at the January 27, 2026 hearing. A summary of the CEQA determination for the project is provided beginning on page 5 of the report. This report, under ENVIRONMENTAL ANALYSIS also provides a more detailed explanation of the Class 32 exemption and the supporting reasons the project qualifies.

### *The project is not consistent with General Plan/Specific Plan/Zoning Code*

Similarly, the appeal application does not state specific inconsistencies of the project with the General Plan, the 2022 East Colorado Specific Plan or the Zoning Code however as part of past hearings concerns have been raised that the project is too large and does meet the intent of these plans.

The General Plan designation of the property is Medium Mixed Use (0 – 2.25 FAR; 0-87 du/acre) and its Zoning designation is EC-MU-N (East Colorado Specific Plan, Mixed-Use Neighborhood). As stated in the Land Use Element, the Medium Mixed-Use designation is “intended to support the development of multi-story buildings with a variety of compatible commercial (retail and office) and residential uses. Development is characterized by shared open spaces, extensive landscaping, small to medium separations between buildings, and shared driveways and parking. Sites may be exclusively commercial or exclusively residential, or with buildings vertically integrating housing with non-residential uses.” Additional information on the projects consistency with the General Plan is located on page 5 of this report, under the GENERAL PLAN CONSISTENCY analysis.

The EC-MU-N Zoning designation repeats much of the language of land use designation in its purposes as outlined in Pasadena Municipal Code (PMC) Section

17.31.030.C and allows Research and Development as a permitted by-right land use as reflected in PMC Section 17.31.041, Table ECSP-2. Staff reviewed the proposed project for compliance with the development standards of the EC-MU-N Zoning District and the standards for Research & Development Facilities in PMC Section 17.50.240 and found the project to be in compliance with all of these standards. For research and development projects, Section 17.50.240 allows the following:

- The height limit of the base zoning district to be exceeded by a maximum of 12 feet (excluding the appurtenance height).

*The height limit for the base zoning district is 51 feet. The proposed building has a height of 63 feet and complies.*

- Appurtenances may exceed the height limit by a maximum of 18 feet.

*The proposed appurtenance has a height of 15 feet and complies.*

- Mechanical space and appurtenances are excluded when calculating floor area ratio (FAR).

*The FAR maximum for the base zoning district is 2.25 or 93,539 square feet. The proposed building has a floor area of 100,366 square feet, of which 6,827 square feet is devoted to mechanical space and appurtenance. Excluding the mechanical space and appurtenance, the size of the building is 93,539 square feet and complies.*

It should also be noted that there are a number of goals and policies in the General Plan that are design-related and evaluated through the Design Review process. The Design Commission considered these goals and policies in its deliberations and determined the project to be consistent with them. These include Goal 4 (Elements Contributing to Urban Form) and supporting policies 4.11 (Development that is Compatible), 4.12 (Transitions in Scale) and Goal 7 (Architectural Design and Quality) and supporting policy 7.3 (Compatibility).

### **GENERAL PLAN CONSISTENCY:**

As previously noted, the project site has a General Plan designation of Medium Mixed Use. The proposed project will develop a new research & development project that is consistent with this land use designation and with the goals and policies of the Land Use Element of the General Plan. This includes the following Guiding Principles of the Land Use Element:

- Guiding Principle 1: *“Growth will be targeted to serve community needs and enhance the quality of life. Higher density development will be directed away from residential neighborhoods and into the Central District, Transit Villages, and Neighborhood Villages. These areas will have a diverse housing stock, job opportunities, exciting districts with commercial and recreational uses, and transit opportunities. New development will build upon Pasadena’s tradition of strong sense of place, great neighborhoods, gardens, plazas, parks, and trees.”*

- Guiding Principle 3: *“Pasadena will be an economically vital city by providing jobs, services, revenues, and opportunities. A diverse economic base with jobs for Pasadena residents will be fostered; existing businesses will be encouraged to stay or expand; affordable housing will be provided for the labor pool; the continued fiscal health of the city will be ensured.”*
- Guiding Principle 6: *“Pasadena will be a cultural, scientific, corporate, entertainment and education center for the region. Long-term growth opportunities will be provided for existing institutions; a healthy economy will be fostered to attract new cultural, scientific, corporate, entertainment and educational institutions.”*

Further, the project is consistent with Goal 2 (Land Use Diversity) and supporting policies 2.3 (Commercial Businesses) and 2.4 (Job Choices), Goal 4 (Elements Contributing to Urban Form) and supporting policy 4.2 (A Diversity of Places), Goal 5 (Pedestrian-Oriented Places) and supporting policy 5.2 (Pedestrian-Oriented Development), Goal 11 (Job Opportunities) and supporting policies 11.1 (Business Expansion and Growth), 11.2 (Workforce Development) and 11.3 (New and Complementary Businesses), Goal 13 (Innovation) and all supporting policies 13.1 (Environment), 13.2 (Business Sectors), 13.3 (Adaptation to Evolving Market Demands), 13.4 (New Businesses) and 13.5 (Creative/Innovative Employment Centers), Goal 27 (R&D Flex Space) and supporting policies 27.1 (Diversity of Uses), 27.2 (Business Attraction) and 27.2 (Buffering from Adjacent Properties) and Goal 32 (East Colorado) and supporting policy 32.6 (Innovative Businesses).

The project provides a land use that will enhance the local economy by providing space for research and development of new technologies in close proximity to Caltech and PCC, where such space is needed and lacking in the City. The proposed use would serve local and regional needs, would provide job opportunities, and capture local spending and the economic value induced by proximity of the site to local businesses. In addition, the project has been determined to be consistent with the adopted design-related goals and policies of the General Plan and of the 2022 East Colorado Specific Plan and meets all required standards of the Zoning Code.

### **ENVIRONMENTAL ANALYSIS:**

Following a detailed environmental analysis conducted by EcoTierra Consulting and Fehr & Peers, included in Attachment F, staff recommends that the project should be determined to be exempt from environmental review pursuant to CEQA, §15332, Class 32, In-Fill Development Projects.

The City required the supporting technical studies for a Class 32, Categorical Exemption. The applicant asserts that this application is not a project that is subject to CEQA. The applicant argues “as a code compliant project that only requires Design Review approval and no other discretionary land use approval, no CEQA review is required or warranted for the Project pursuant to the appellate court’s holding in

*McCorkle Eastside Neighborhood Group v. City of St. Helena* (2019) 31 Cal.App.5th 80 (“McCorkle”).”

Under *McCorkle*, CEQA applies only to discretionary projects, which are projects that require the exercise of judgment or deliberation when the public agency or body decides to approve or disapprove a particular activity. The application of CEQA to a design review ordinance depends on the scope and interpretation of the local ordinance; CEQA will not apply if the city lacks discretion to address environmental effects. Pasadena’s design review approval process is different from the City of Saint Helena’s design review process considered in *McCorkle*. In case this application is determined by a court to be a discretionary project for the purposes of CEQA, the staff recommends that the City Council find this project is exempt from CEQA review under an in-fill exemption. To qualify for this exemption, a project is required to meet the following criteria:

- a. The project is consistent with the applicable general plan designation and all applicable general plan policies as well as with applicable zoning designation and regulations.

*As described in detail in this report and supporting attachments, the project is consistent with the applicable general plan designation, all applicable general plan policies and the applicable zoning designation and regulations. The project does not require any variances and meets all applicable development standards.*

- b. The proposed development occurs within city limits on a project site of no more than five acres substantially surrounded by urban uses.

*The project site is less than one acre in size and surrounded by urban uses including a school and church, a community college, a day care center, a mixed-use residential and commercial building and multi-family residences.*

- c. The project site has no value as habitat for endangered, rare or threatened species.

*The site is a paved surface parking lot with no value as habitat for any special status species.*

- d. Approval of the project would not result in any significant effects relating to traffic, noise, air quality, or water quality.

*The technical studies in Attachment F demonstrate that the project will not result in any significant effects relating to traffic, noise or air quality. The project will adhere to applicable regulations and permitting requirements by the Los Angeles Regional Water Quality Control Board and the City’s Standard Urban Stormwater Mitigation Plan ordinance and will not have impacts to water quality.*

- e. The site can be adequately served by all required utilities and public services.

*The project has been reviewed by all utility providers, which determined that they are able to serve the project.*

In addition, to qualify for any CEQA exemption, the project must meet the following criteria per §15300.2 (Exceptions):

- a. Location. Classes 3, 4, 5, 6, and 11 are qualified by consideration of where the project is to be located – a project that is ordinarily insignificant in its impact on the environment may in a particularly sensitive environment be significant. Therefore, these classes are considered to apply all instances, except where the project may impact on an environmental resource of hazardous or critical concern where designated, precisely mapped, and officially adopted pursuant to law by federal, state, or local agencies.

*The proposed project qualifies for a Class 32 exemption and therefore this exception is not applicable.*

- b. Cumulative Impact. All exemptions for these classes are inapplicable when the cumulative impact of successive projects of the same type in the same place, over time is significant.

*There are no other proposed projects of the same type in the same place as the proposed project. There are no projects of the same type within the immediate area, and the nearest closest comparable facility is located more than a mile west at 26 N. Euclid Ave.*

- c. Significant Effect. A categorical exemption shall not be used for an activity where there is a reasonable possibility that the activity will have a significant effect on the environment due to unusual circumstances.

*There are no unusual circumstances associated with the proposed project. It is a land use that is authorized to be developed on the site by the Zoning Code and located on a standard flat, rectangular parcel at a standard street intersection in a developed urban area of the City of Pasadena. There are no other features that distinguish this from other in-fill projects in the exempt class.*

- d. Scenic Highways. A categorical exemption shall not be used for a project which may result in damage to scenic resources, including but not limited to, trees, historic buildings, rock outcroppings, or similar resources, within a highway officially designated as a state scenic highway. This does not apply to improvements which are required as mitigation by an adopted negative declaration or certified EIR.

*The only designated state scenic highway in the City of Pasadena is the Angeles Crest Highway (State Highway 2), which is located north of Arroyo Seco Canyon in the extreme northwest portion of the City. The project site is not within the viewshed of the Angeles Crest Highway. Therefore, the proposed project would have no impacts to designated state scenic highways.*

- e. Hazardous Waste Sites. A categorical exemption shall not be used for a project located on a site which is included on any list compiled pursuant to Section 65962.5 of the Government Code.

*The project site is not included on a list of hazardous waste sites compiled pursuant to Section 65962.5 of the Government Code. See further discussion of hazardous materials concerns on page 9 of the staff report prepared for the January 27, 2026 Design Commission meeting in Attachment D.*

- f. Historical Resources. A categorical exemption shall not be used for a project which may cause a substantial adverse change in the significance of a historical resource.

*The property is a vacant surface parking lot and does not contain any historical resources. St. Philip the Apostle Church at 151 S. Hill Avenue is adjacent to and east of the subject property. The church was constructed in 1949-1950 and designed by architect Roland Coate; however, it has not been evaluated for historical significance. Additional buildings associated with the church and school were built after the construction of the main church. A 2005 Initial Study prepared for the church and school's master plan did not identify any historical resources on the master plan site. Regardless of the church's potential for historical significance, the project would not result in a substantial adverse change to any of the buildings associated with the church and school. CEQA defines "substantial adverse change" to a historical resource as follows: "...physical demolition, destruction, relocation, or alteration of the resource or its immediate surroundings such that the significance of an historical resource would be materially impaired. The significance of an historical resource is materially impaired when a project:*

*(A) Demolishes or materially alters in an adverse manner those physical characteristics of an historical resource that convey its historical significance and that justify its inclusion in, or eligibility for, inclusion in the California Register of Historical Resources; or*

*(B) Demolishes or materially alters in an adverse manner those physical characteristics that account for its inclusion in a local register of historical resources pursuant to section 5020.1(k) of the Public Resources Code or its identification in an historical resources survey meeting the requirements of section 5024.1(g) of the Public Resources Code, unless the public agency reviewing the effects of the project establishes by a preponderance of evidence that the resource is not historically or culturally significant; or*

*(C) Demolishes or materially alters in an adverse manner those physical characteristics of a historical resource that convey its historical significance and that justify its eligibility for inclusion in the California Register of Historical Resources as determined by a lead agency for purposes of CEQA.*

*The project would not demolish or alter any of the physical characteristics of the St. Philip the Apostle Church and School property. It would be built on an*

*adjacent site that is currently a surface parking lot, which is not a characteristic of the church and school property that would contribute to its potential historical significance and, as such, replacement of the parking lot with a new structure would not have the potential to alter the physical characteristics of the church that would convey its potential historical significance. In addition, the setting of the church and school itself has changed significantly over time including construction of a library/auditorium building in 1961, replacement of the convent with surface parking in 2005, demolition of the former parish hall and expansion of the existing school buildings in 2008, and construction of a new rectory in 2021. A Master Plan was approved for the site in advance of the more recent construction and the CEQA document for the Master Plan did not identify any historically significant structures on the site. The setting surrounding the school and church has also changed significantly over time including expansion of Pasadena City College to the east and construction of several new structures in the immediate vicinity including the Pasadena City College Child Development Center at 1324 E. Green Street in 1995, several apartment buildings along Holliston Avenue constructed between 1953 and 1985, and a mixed-use building at 1299 E. Green Street in 2009. Therefore, construction at the adjacent site will not cause a substantial adverse change in the significance of a historical resource.*

#### **LOCAL MOBILITY ANALYSIS:**

Separate from the environmental (CEQA) analysis that was conducted for the project, traffic consultants Fehr & Peers, under contract to the City, conducted a Local Mobility Analysis (Attachment J) to determine if the project should be required to contribute to roadway improvements to address any vehicular, pedestrian or bicycle traffic deficiencies in the immediate vicinity of the project site. The non-CEQA analysis concluded that the project would not result in traffic deficiencies that would warrant roadway improvements. A number of public comments have been received regarding traffic concerns, which staff responded to in the staff report prepared for the January 27, 2026 Design Commission meeting in Attachment D.

#### **CONCLUSION:**

Staff recommends that the City Council uphold the decision of the Design Commission to determine the project to be exempt from CEQA under Class 32 as an infill development project and that the City Council deny the appeal and uphold the Design Commission decision to approve the Concept Design Review application subject to the findings in Attachment A and the recommended conditions of approval in Attachment B. Staff and the Design Commission conducted a thorough analysis of the project through Preliminary Consultation and Concept Design Review.

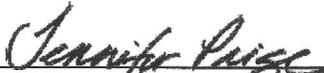
If the project is approved, the next step is Final Design Review. At the Final Design Review stage, emphasis and focus is placed on construction details, finishes, materials,

landscaping, and consistency of the project with the design approved during Concept Design Review and compliance with adopted conditions of approval.

**FISCAL IMPACT:**

There is no fiscal impact as a result of this action.

Respectfully submitted,

  
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JENNIFER PAIGE, AICP  
Director of Planning & Community  
Development Department

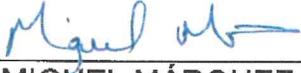
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Attachments (11):

- A. Findings of Consistency with Design Review
- B. Recommended Conditions of Approval
- C. Concept Design Review Staff Report, dated December 9, 2025 (without attachments)
- D. Concept Design Review Staff Report, dated January 27, 2026 (without attachments)
- E. Request for Appeal Application (with Attachments)
- F. Environmental Documentation
- G. Concept Design Review Decision Letter dated January 28, 2026 (with Attachments)
- H. Development Plans
- I. Weblinks to the 2022 East Colorado Specific Plan & Design Guidelines for Neighborhood Commercial & Multi-Family Residential Districts
- J. Local Mobility Analysis
- K. Research and Development Facilities, PMC Section 17.50.240
- L. Design Guidelines Applicable to the Project