

Appeal of 511 Oak Knoll Multi-Family Development

Concept Design Stage approved October 28, 2025

Pasadena City Council, March 23, 2026

Appeal by Amanda Eliooff and Brian Fulcher with support of South Oak Knoll and Surrounding Neighbors

Case No. DPH2024-00261



Basis of Appeal to City Council

1. Design Commission Findings for Concept Design Approval: **The design as accepted does not comply with the Design Guidelines for Neighborhood Commercial and Multi-Family Residential Districts** (Design Guidelines) as stated in the findings.
2. Findings for Compliance with the Tree Protection Ordinance: **The City's tree protection ordinance is cited for the City's Trees, however protection of the tree "OP1" is not sufficiently addressed in the Concept Design or the conditions of approval**
3. Environmental Determination. **Environmental impacts/effects from noise, light, traffic, and parking, street lighting and other previously noted concerns have not been adequately studied or addressed in the Conditions of Approval.** The reports also contain errors that would likely contribute to incorrect conclusions.



Background and Summary of Presentation

- Non-compliance with Guidelines results in a Building Design that is not sensitive for the community
- Building location and construction methods will impact a magnificent, protected Canyon Live Oak tree.
- **Since October 2024 (over 18 months) the Design Commission and community have offered many suggestions to improve the design – in particular, massing of the building and adding perimeter landscaping**
- **Design Commissioners had long discussions about the design (Preliminary and Concept) – in particular, agreement that massing was problematic. Two of 6 commissioners voted against the design, 3 were not present**
- City Staff offered additional solutions after our Appeal
- **Changes requested would save substantial construction time and cost**
- **Seeking building that achieves design excellence, accommodates density, and that is mutually beneficial for the Developer, new residents and maintains the neighborhood character.** (and complies with Guidelines and Ordinances).



Current Proposed Concept Design

Context – Surrounding Properties and Street



661 E. California



500 S. El Molino



Landmark Home with Oak Tree

Over 50% of buildings on Southern block over 100 years old



Craftsman home now Architect and Engineering offices



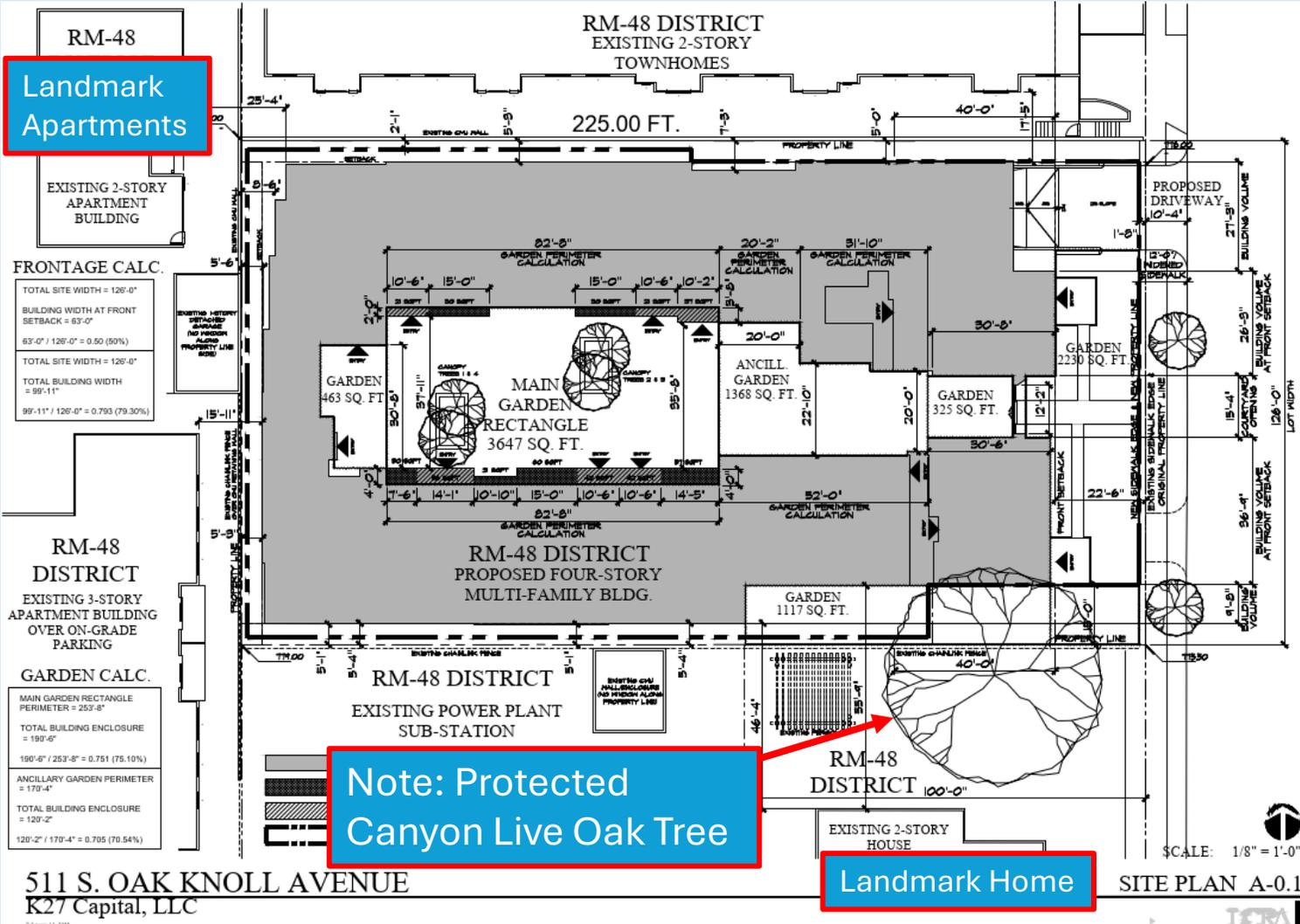
Building across Oak Knoll Ave designed around a tree



Oak Knoll Ave. lined with mature trees

Summary of Design Issues

- Minimum (5 ft) setbacks from adjacent property
- Allows no planting around most of the perimeter (~ 65 %) essentially non usable space
- Narrow Interior Courtyard
- Massing: 4 stories (47 ft-10 in.) and no height variations for upper floors
- Site Constraints:
 - Rectangular lot
 - PWP substation on SW side
 - Protected oak tree on neighboring property



Landmark Apartments

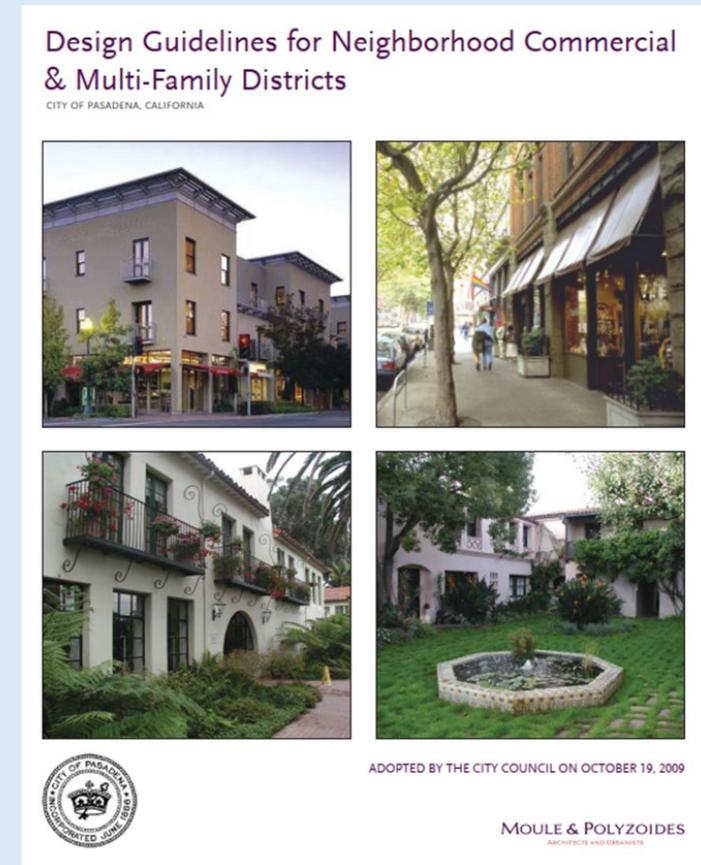
Note: Protected Canyon Live Oak Tree

Landmark Home

511 S. OAK KNOLL AVENUE
K27 Capital, LLC

City of Pasadena Design Guidelines¹

- Relate that the City's Comprehensive General Plan promotes architectural and **design excellence** in buildings, landscape, open space, and urban design. It also stipulates **that preservation of Pasadena's character and scale**, including its traditional urban design form, **shall be given the highest priority in consideration of future development.**
- Design Guidelines Address:
 - **Street Character**
 - **Maintaining Block Character (relation to existing buildings)**
 - **A building's fitting in or standing out**
 - **Relating to Neighbors by Massing and Scale**
 - **Landscaping and Hardscape**
 - **Privacy**



*1. Referenced in Notice of Decision
(Concept Design Approval)*



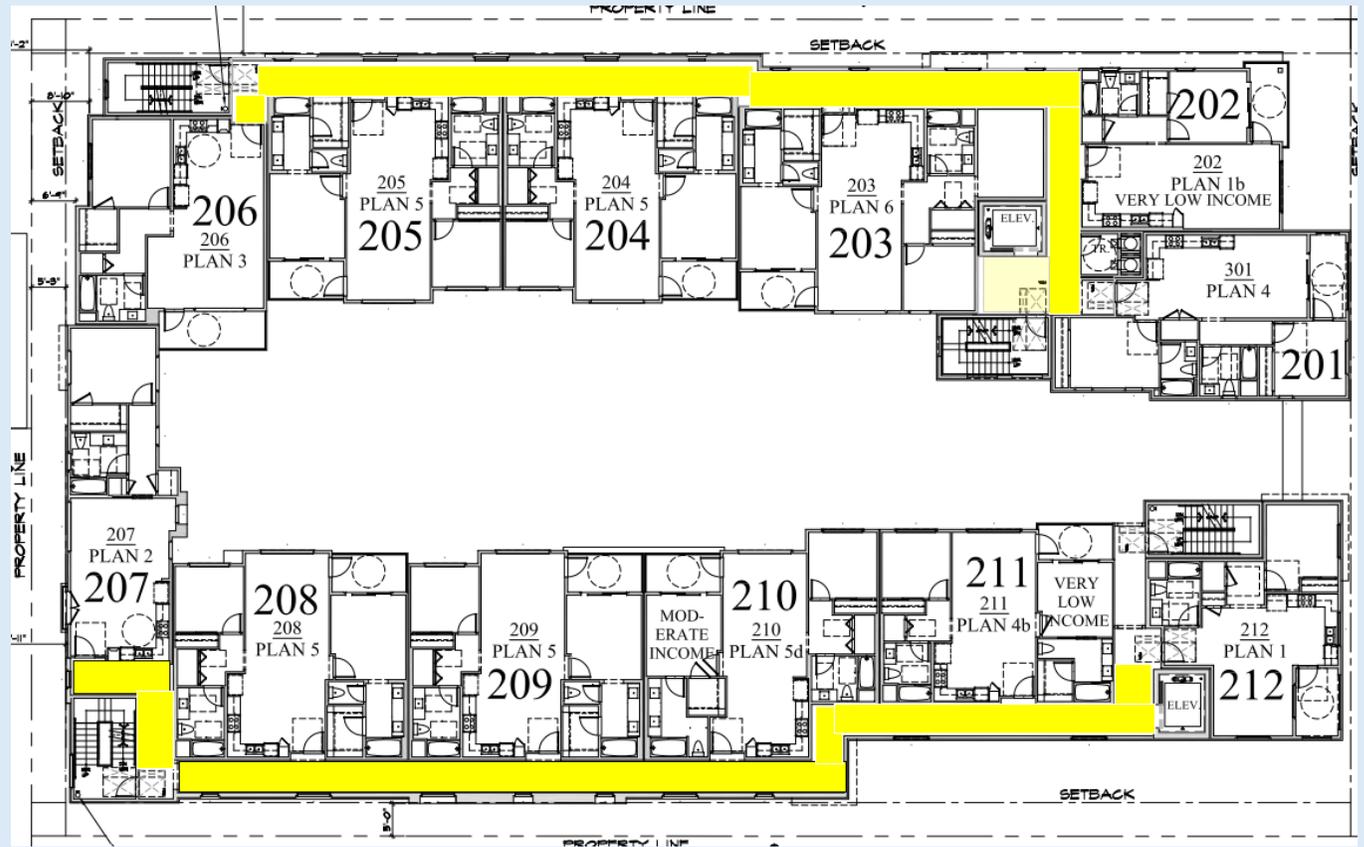
The 511 Building as Proposed Does Not Comply with the Design Guidelines

Guideline	Meets?	Why not?
Street Character	Partial	Setbacks consistent, however Minimal view of gardens from sidewalk
Matching or Complementing adjacent building heights, and Massing and Scale	NO	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 4 stories, big box, large scale – Taller than anything on the block • No setbacks to respect adjacent properties and reduce scale • Sunlight blocked to adjacent 2 story properties • no green space or planting on exterior – to reduce volume and scale
Block Character (Fitting in or standing out)	NO	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gardens are hidden • Light emissions from hallways will shine all hours (Light Trespass)
Historic Adjacency	Partial	15 ft setback for Historic Adjacency (not enough for Protected Oak tree)



Design with Enclosed Exterior Corridors Poses (unintended) Problems for Designer, Residents and Neighbors

- Most residents can't see outside
 - **No mountain views**
 - **Will only have views of neighbors living rooms across the shallow courtyard**
- **More floor space needed for two separate hallways – could be living space**
- Exterior Hallway Lights will be on 24/7 for Fire/Life Safety. Can be seen all night
- **Additional Hallway / Exterior wall to maintain, Heat and cool**



Night time view with illuminated exterior corridors

**Design is
Unprecedented**



Design Does Not Allow Sunlight for the Future Residents and Neighbors

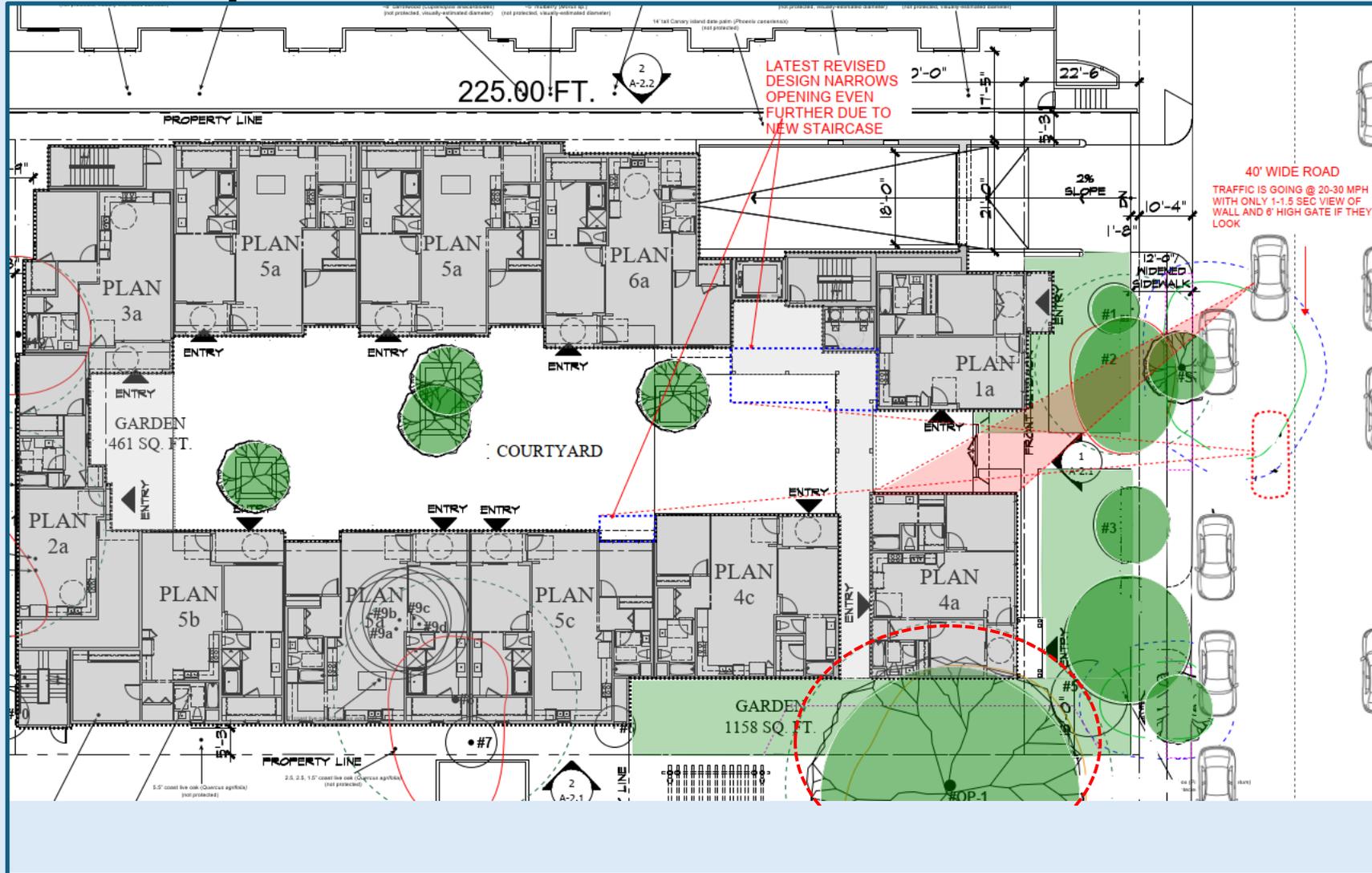
- 4 stories with long narrow courtyard. Most times of year no direct light will get to lower units
- Neighbors at 501 Oak Knoll Ave to the north will not see ANY direct sunlight in winter months

Guidelines:

*“New buildings over two stories in height should respect adjacent buildings by responding to their massing, scale, and need for **light, natural ventilation, and views**”.*



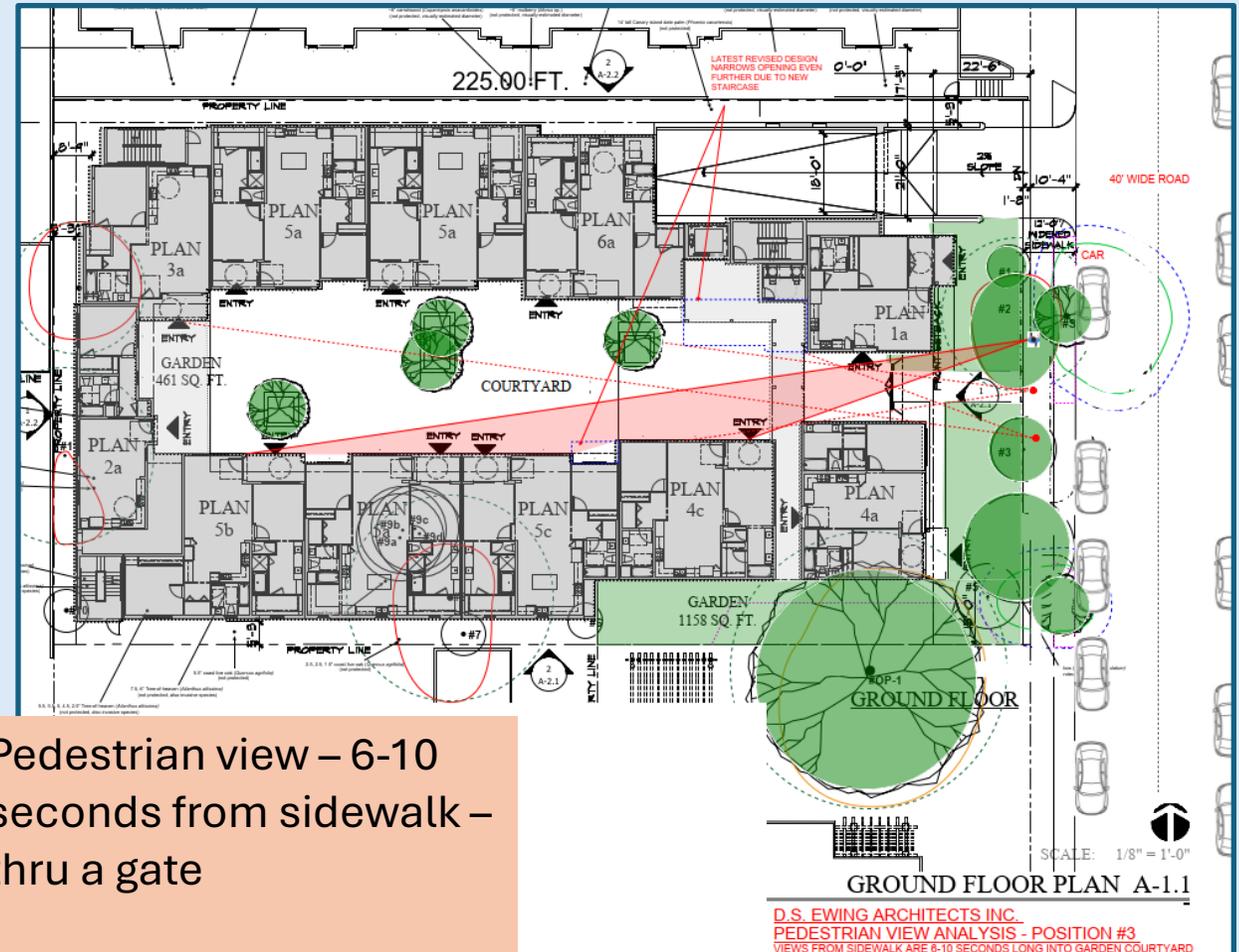
Design References City of Gardens Ordinance Requirements



- Does not meet City of Gardens Requirement for gardens to be visible from Street
- Due to size of opening and traffic at 20 to 30 MPH, only 1-1.5 second view of gate and walls (if they look)
- Pedestrian view 6 to 10 seconds (thru a 6 ft tall gate)

Application of City of Gardens Ordinance

- City of Gardens intent was to allow denser developments in transitional areas to be sensitive to neighbors
- The ordinance also encourages taking advantage of adjacent gardens, green spaces, and trees
- Needs to be done as application of City of Gardens courtyard requirements pose challenges for design when building over 3 stories (expected zoning)
- City Staff offered solutions (if required) to relocate gardens to the outside of the building

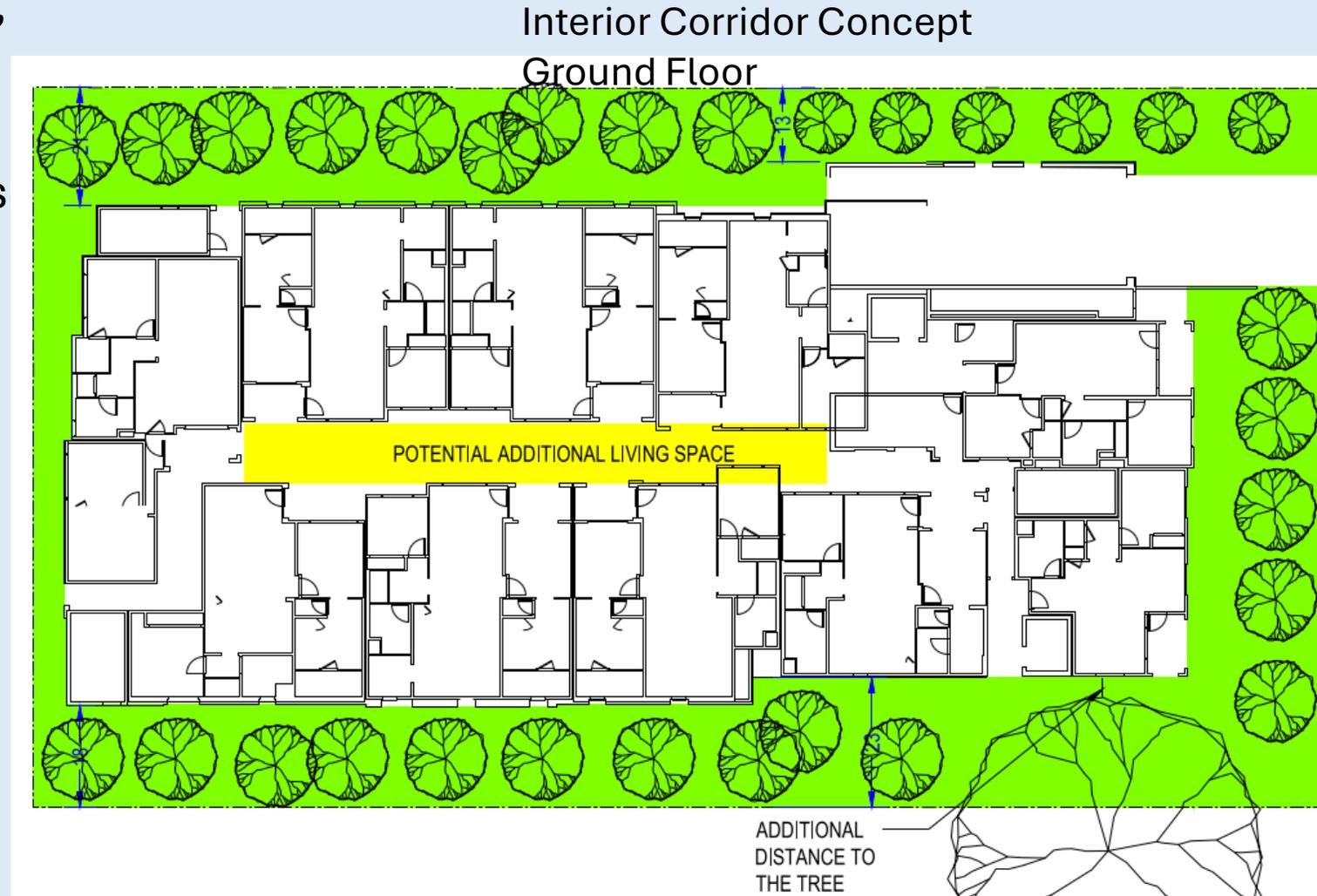


Pedestrian view – 6-10 seconds from sidewalk – thru a gate

Gardens on the Outside Would Benefit All

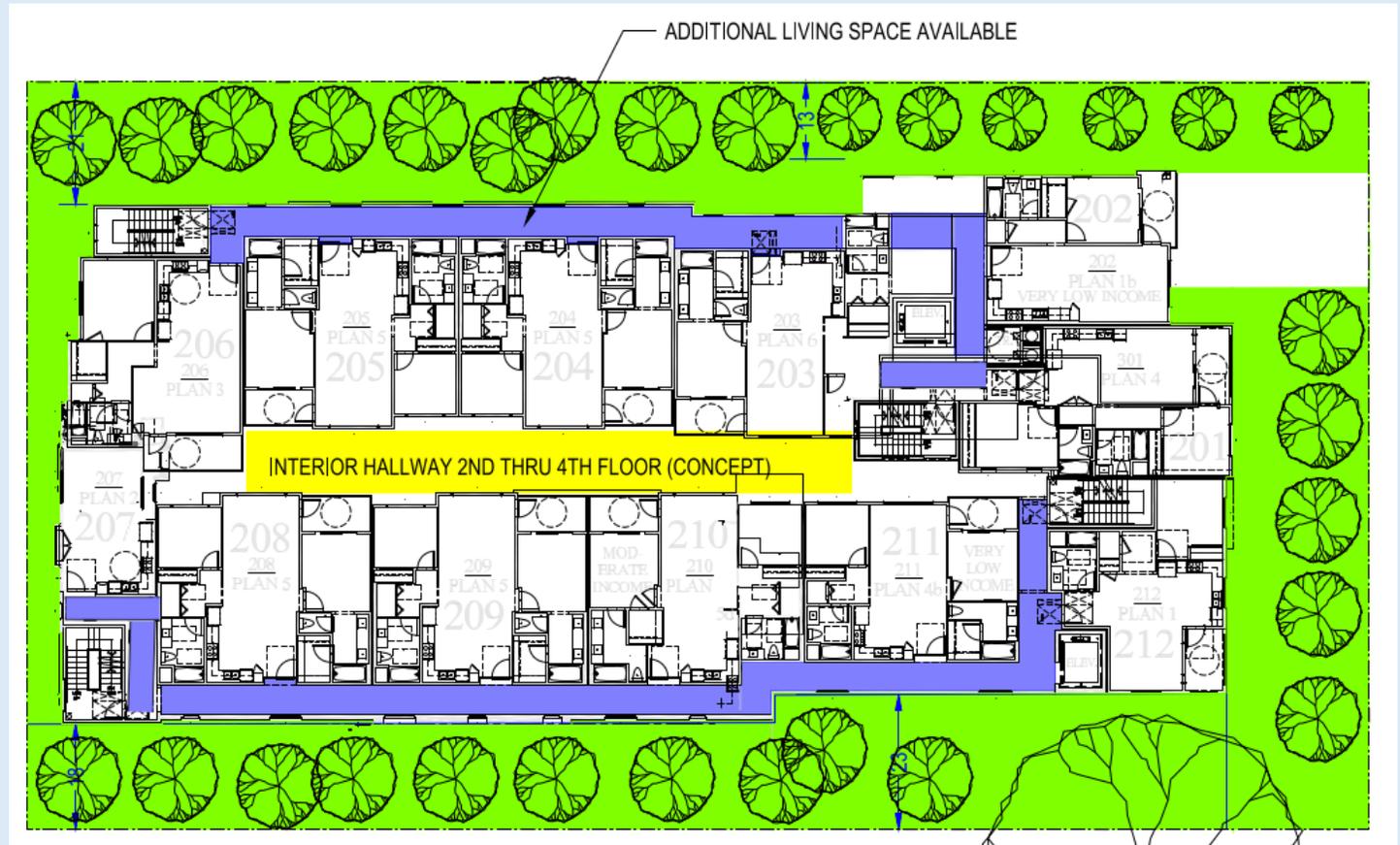
- Over 9,000 SF on outside of building, uses the current 5 ft set back allowance far more efficiently
- Improves building massing and gives back livable interior space
- Additional space for landscaping and Oak tree protection
- Additional privacy (space) and landscaping for adjacent neighbors
- Improved emergency access
- Could save additional Protected trees presently on lot

DESIGN COMMISSIONERS AGREED
“Gardens on the outside would vastly improve the relationship with the neighbors”



Additional Living Space Gained with Elimination of the Exterior Hallways (floors 2, 3 and 4)

- 2,500-3,000 SF for three floors
- More living space on ground floor
- More desirable and valuable units with Mountain Views



Acceptable, More Appropriate Building Design

Provide a better transition into the neighborhood and Reduce the scale of the massive building



4 story multi-family with variation of height and facades



Multi Family building that transitions from three to 5 stories on San Pasqual (from 2-story Historic condos)



Additional Design to Reduce Apparent Massing

- Results in more space between buildings for light and privacy
- Room for landscaping and exterior gardens



Upper floor
stepbacks would
further improve scale
appearance



Scale Model Illustrates Tree Conflict with Exterior Corridor and Interior Courtyard



Scale Model Illustrates Benefits of Two-Way Interior Corridor – More space for landscaping and Oak Tree



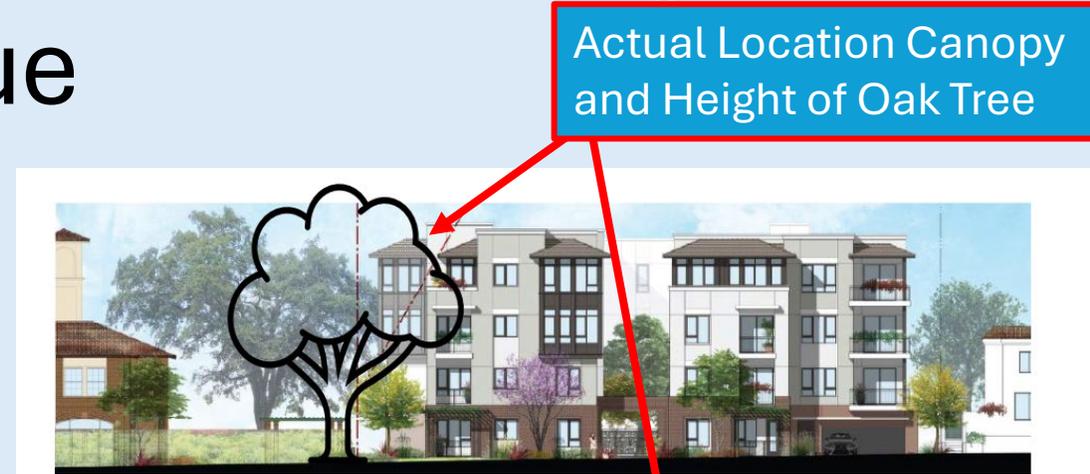
Significant Commercial Advantages Could be Realized with Elimination of External Corridors

Item Description	Potential Cost Savings or Additional Revenue (\$M)	Notes
Saleable living space with elimination of exterior corridors (~3,000 SF)	3.2	Used \$1,100/SF for cost analysis (say for 2027). Could be more
Reduction in exterior wall construction (no reduction in garden area)	0.5	Used \$20/SF for cost analysis, subject to final material selections
Functions more efficiently, easier building maintenance	TBD	Better massing and systems consolidation
Mechanical/Electrical/Plumbing Systems	TBD	Simplifies design, construction, and operations by grouping core systems
Window and Door Adjustments throughout building	TBD	Can be a signature feature throughout the building
Higher value/more desirable with new design (e.g. mountain views)	1.3	Say 5% increase in sales price for views (upper floors)
Total (Preliminary)	5.0	Before additional refinements

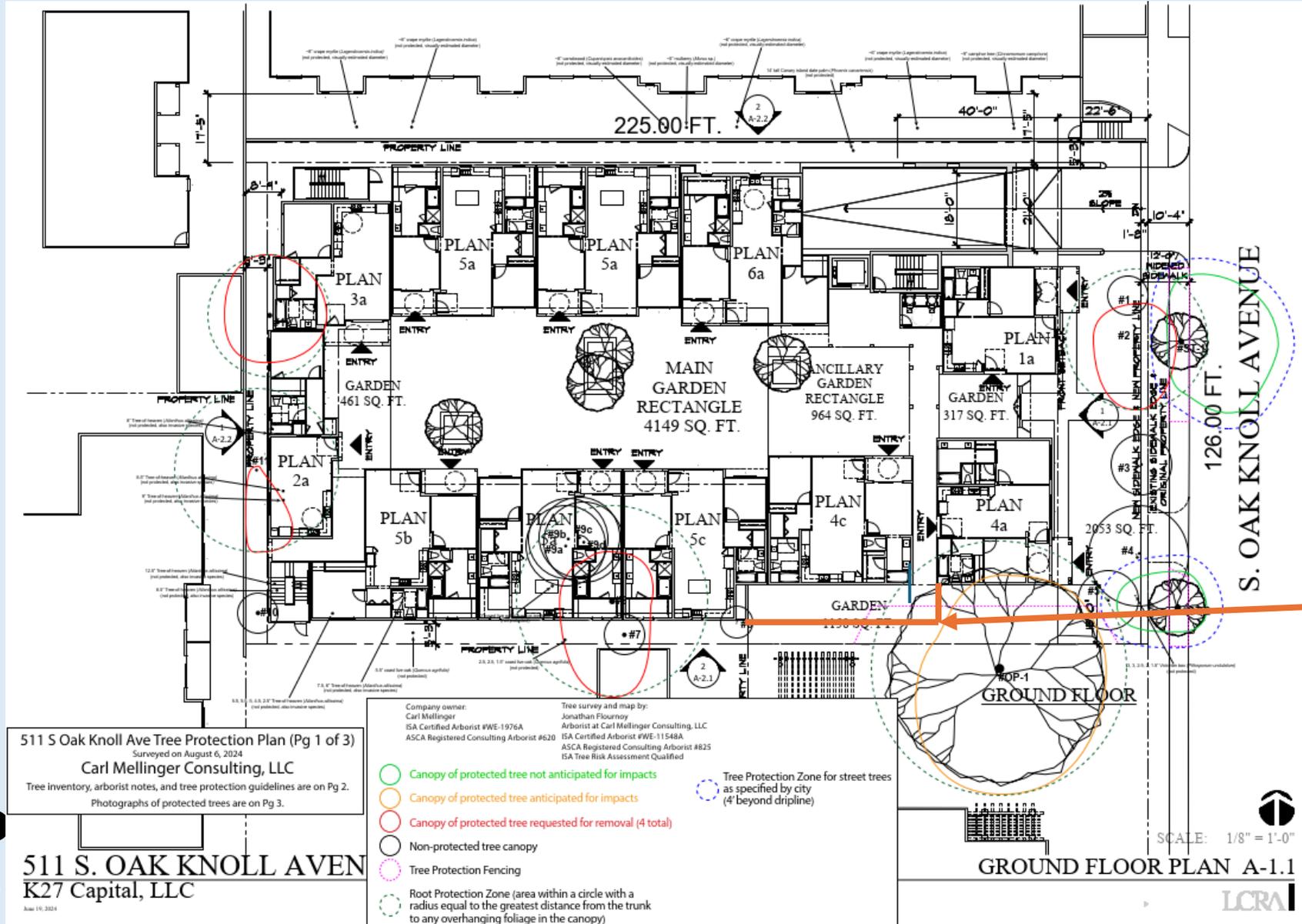


Magnificent Protected Oak Tree Overhangs the 511 Property Adds Value

- Tree approximately 60 ft tall with 60 ft wide canopy
- Location and height of tree has been mis-represented on Applicant's Drawings
- City's Tree Protection Plan should not be left for Final Design it is needed now – present building location will likely damage/kill the tree
- CONSEQUENCES OF TREE DEATH OR COLLAPSE ARE DEVASTATING TO NEIGHBORHOOD.
- WHY TAKE RISK?



Tree Protection Plan by 511 Arborist August 2024



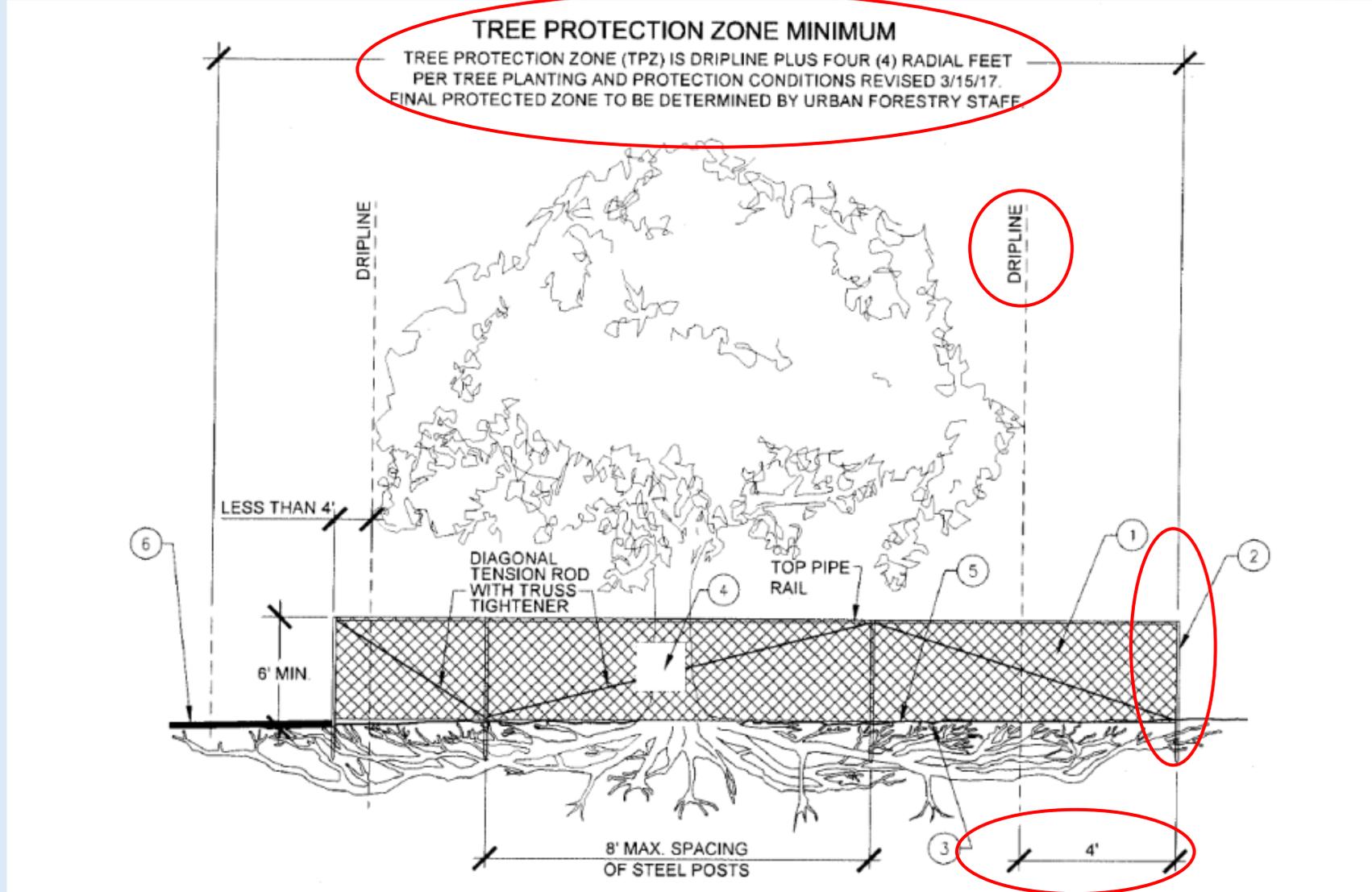
Foundation Outline

Protection of Oak Tree is Not Only for the Roots

- City of Pasadena requires Protection of all Protected trees by PMC 8.52 Ordinance
- Trees need to be protected from:
 - Root damage and cutting
 - Branch pruning
 - Damage to trunk
 - Compaction of soil in root ball
 - Overwatering or underwatering
- Since 2024 Tree Protection has been a primary concern for Appellants
- Very small accommodation made for roots but not branches (one parking place)
- Want same protections for the Canyon Live Oak Tree as required for all Protected trees
- 511 landscaping and watering (**NOT OVER WATERING**) are essential for Oak Tree Health.
 - Current plans show a Pet Relief area that will undoubtedly be washed down often



MINIMUM Tree Protection Zone per Tree Protection Ordinance (PMC 8.52) and Dwg S-642

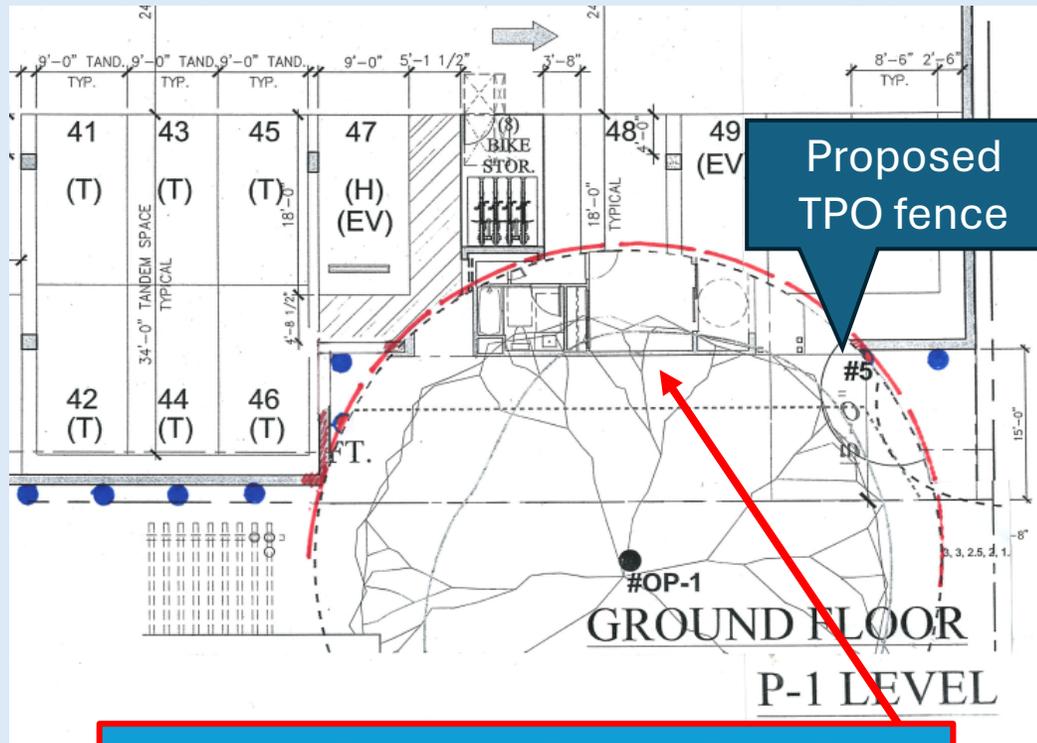


PMC Chapter 8.52



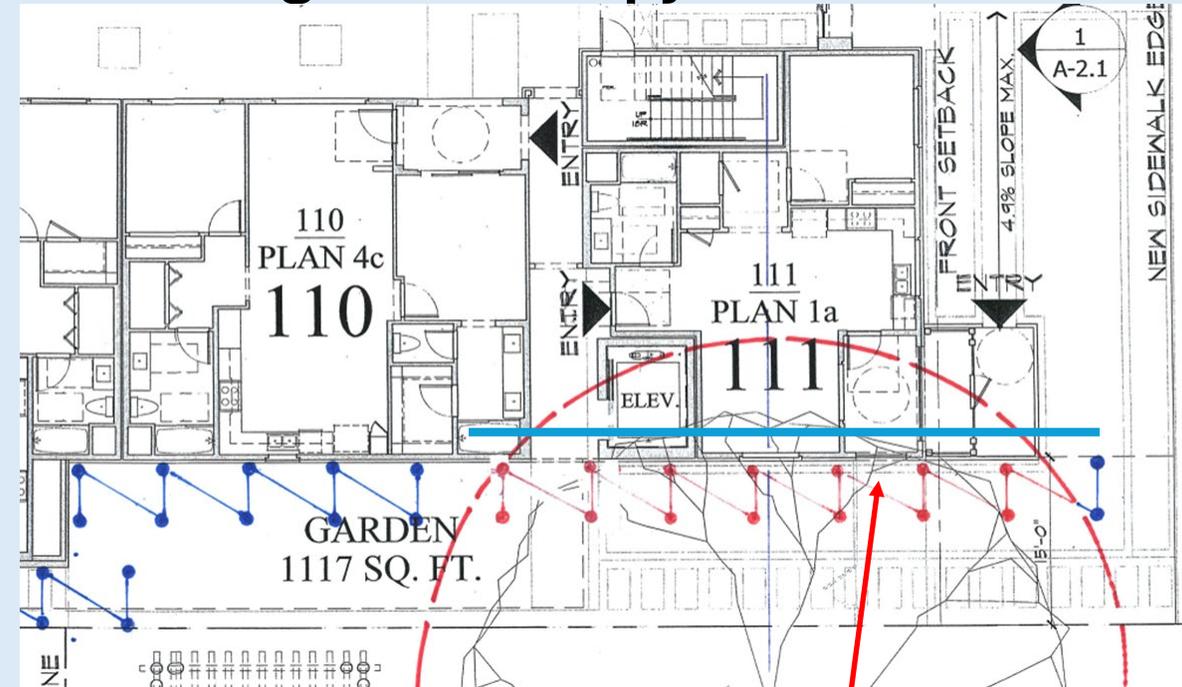
The Protected Oak Tree is NOT Sufficiently Protected per PMC 8.52 (TPO)

Shoring installation will damage the tree – roots and canopy



Heavy equipment to install piles will compact the soil and cause damage

Scaffolding adds another 5 ft and will damage the Canopy



Scaffolding in the TPZ

Environmental Concerns Have Not Been Addressed Sufficiently in Concept Design

- Impacts from noise, light and Traffic not addressed
- Noise:
 - Ambient measurements not at right time of day
 - No analysis of nighttime noise
 - Analysis of building reflected noise from substation now under review
- Light
 - Exterior Corridors
- Traffic:
 - Did not consider additional school population due to Eaton Fire



Conclusions

We are Not Objecting to the Density of the Project

- Density Bonus does not exempt developer from applying established Design Standards
- In the words of the Pasadena Design Guidelines (p. 26)

*The long-term character and vitality of Pasadena's neighborhoods, districts, and corridors are more important than any one architectural project. Yet, because the development process is incremental, **the insertion of an infill project into an existing context can contribute either to a long-term process of harmonious city building or its slow unraveling.***

THIS BUILDING'S CONCEPT DESIGN WILL UNQUESTIONABLY CONTRIBUTE TO THE UNRAVELING OF OUR MATURE NEIGHBORHOOD CHARACTER



Conclusions and Actions Needed

General

- We support additional housing in our neighborhood, but it needs to be thoughtfully designed for both new AND existing homeowners within the South Oak Knoll neighborhood.
- The Concept Design does not meet Pasadena's well developed standards for design excellence and sensible growth. Pasadena should insist on an improved design.
- Developer has an opportunity to show how higher density buildings can be designed sensitively while respecting neighborhood character (and for less cost).
- This Concept Design will set a precedent for other neighborhoods and Districts.

Actions Needed

- Adjust Concept Design and resubmit to the Design Commission. These necessary changes must not wait until Final Design submittal.
- Concept design should have gardens visible to all and no 24/7 light emissions.
- Provide sufficient protection for the Native Canyon Live Oak Tree.
- Please vote yes to our Appeal – for the sake of our community and Oak tree.



Ask of City Council

- City of Pasadena has spent much effort and years to develop its planning documents, standards, and guidelines to maintain the City's sought after character – and grow sensibly. We are faced with additional challenges because of State mandates
- Now is the time to adapt smartly through more creative design and application of standards

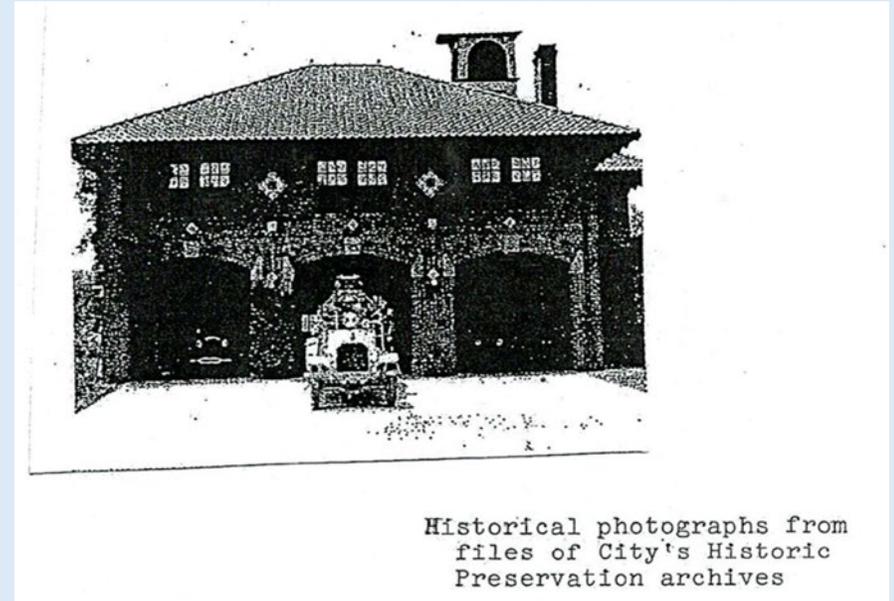


Additional Slides

Pasadena Character and History

Pasadena Historic and Green City

- We are a city of trees and historic property.
- Pasadena is unique in Southern California. People want to live here for the trees, architecture, and walkable neighborhoods.
- City Maintains this character through Specific Plans and Design Guidelines
- Our landmark home on South Oak Knoll (south of 511) was previously a Fire Engine house – specifically built to **look residential to seamlessly blend into the neighborhood.**
- The block between Oak Knoll, CA and El Molino has a number of significant and historic buildings.
- The Building on the north (501) has only 2 stories and 9 units



Background

Timeline

- Since Sept 2024 the S. Oak Knoll community has been commenting on this design. Despite the constructive comments, very little has changed
 - Many public comments and letters with concerns about
 - Tree conflict, Noise, traffic, parking, light
- Sept 2024 commission had lively discussion about massing and said “lots of work to be done”
- Concept design (2025) showed minimal changes from 13 months earlier
- December 2024 Informal meetings with developers suggested changes would be made and they assured us it would be a beautiful building
- Design Commission Hearing 28 October 2025 -
 - **Much discussion about how the building could be improved - in particular – gardens on outside of building Commissioner Tyler said, “perimeter landscaping would vastly improve the relationship of the building to the neighbors**
 - **Two commissioners voted against the design, three were absent (world series night)**
 - **One felt unqualified to object due to new on the commission**
- **Subsequent discussions with Developer after appeal have not resulted in any significant changes (despite assistance from City staff)**



Background – 2024 Letters and Design Commission

- Tree protection zone encroached on – roots and canopy
- Architectural style. Recommended setbacks to respect scale of neighborhood and provide visual transition between adjacent properties. Setbacks would also and reduce noise amplification from substation on neighbors
- 4 story vertical walls will prevent light from adjacent properties
- No apparent respect of adjacent properties in design elements (all modern)



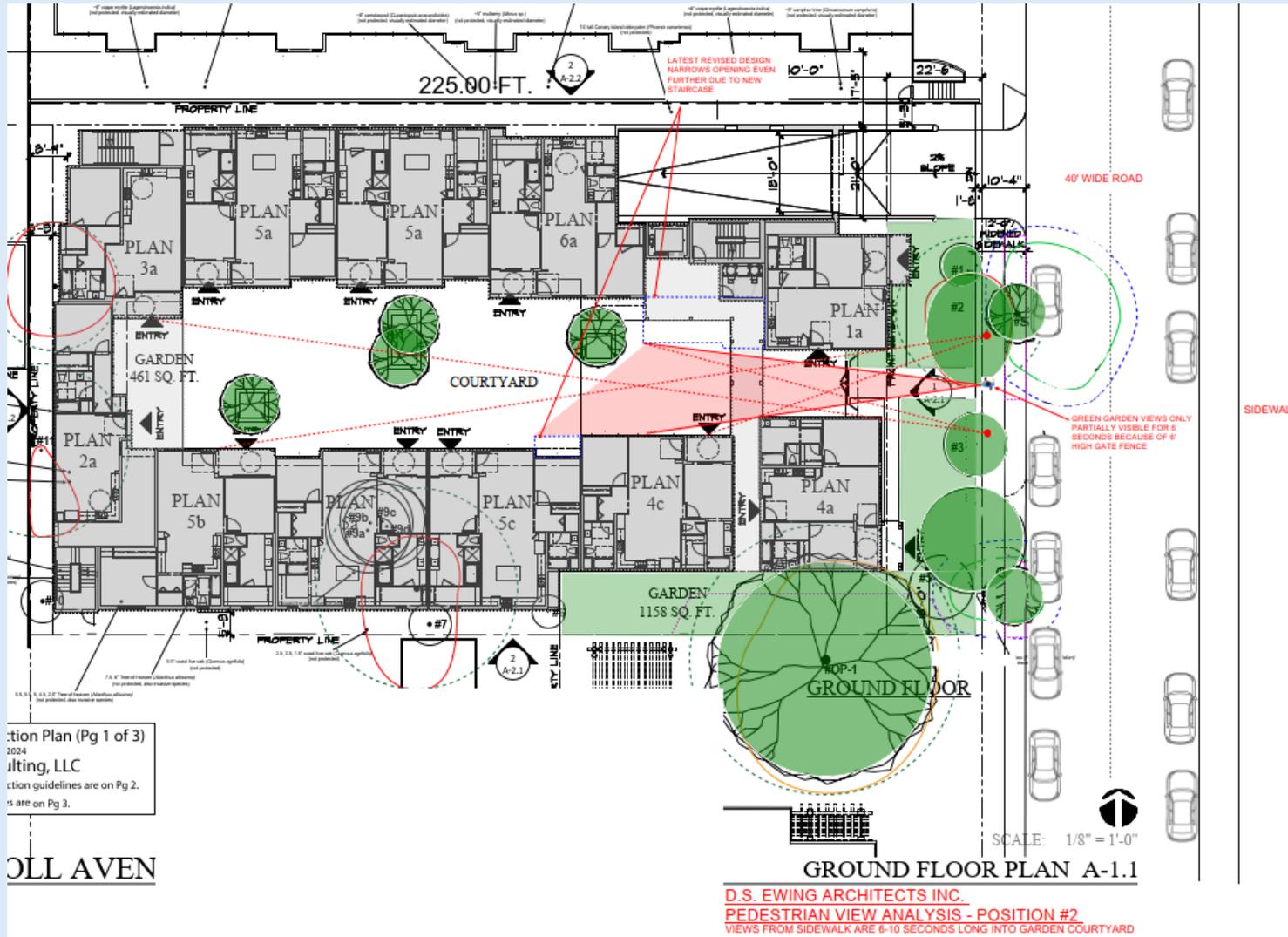
City of Gardens and Design Guidelines

City of Gardens

- Pasadena – City of Roses (and Trees)
- In February 1989, the city of Pasadena adopted the City of Gardens Ordinance, a set of zoning regulations introducing courtyard housing as the sole multi-family type in transitional single-family neighborhoods.
- The ordinance was an antidote to nihilistic residential development attitudes in parts of the city (beyond the Central District and major commercial corridors), where units were packed into lots without any significant open space and were **obstructed by opaque street walls or parking-dominated frontages. The intent of the ordinance was to allow denser development within such transitional areas, but in a form sensitive and compatible to their largely single-family neighbors.**
- Code is written to be compatible with expected City of Pasadena Zoning



Design For City of Gardens Ordinance



- Does not meet City of Gardens Requirement for gardens to be visible from Street
- Due to size of opening and traffic @ 20-30 MPH, only 1-1.5 second view of gate and walls (if the look)
- Pedestrian view 6-10 seconds
- Note: City of Gardens intent was to allow denser development in transitional areas to be sensitive to Neighbors

Notice of Decision - Basis

Burke Farrar
511 S. Oak Knoll Avenue (DHP2024-00261)
Page 2 of 3

Findings for Compliance with the Tree Protection Ordinance

1. Acknowledged that a tree inventory (Attachment B) identifies removal of three protected native trees.
2. Found that the removal of three protected trees meets finding 6 of the Tree Protection Ordinance (PMC Section 8.52.075.A): *“The project, as defined in Section [17.12.020](#), includes a landscape design plan that emphasizes a tree canopy that is sustainable over the long term by adhering to the replacement matrix prepared by the city manager and included in the associated administrative guidelines;”* and, therefore,

Approved the removal of three protected trees.

Findings for Concept Design Approval

Found that the project, upon implementation of the conditions of approval, will comply with the purposes of design review, the design-related goals and policies in the Land Use Element of the General Plan and the design-related goals and policies in the Central District Specific Plan, and **the Design Guidelines for Neighborhood Commercial and Multi-Family Residential Districts**; and

Based on these findings, **approved** the application for Concept Design Review subject to the conditions in Attachment A to be further reviewed during Final Design Review.



Design not Compliant with Intent of Pasadena City of Gardens Ordinance

- In February 1989, the City of Pasadena adopted the City of Gardens Ordinance. The intent of the ordinance was **to allow denser development within transitional areas, but in a form sensitive and compatible to their largely single-family neighbors.***
- City Staff has offered ways/variance etc to relocate gardens to the outside of the building

*Bharne, V. 2015

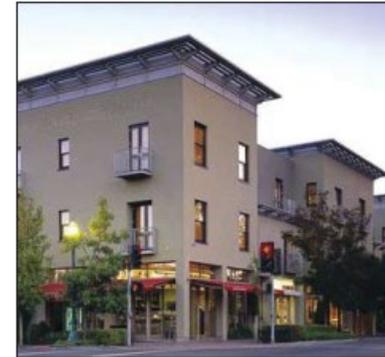


Design Guidelines Address

- Street Character
- Maintaining Block Character (relation to existing buildings)
- A building's fitting in or standing out
- **Relating to Neighbors by Massing and Scale**
- Landscaping and Hardscape
- **Privacy**

Design Guidelines for Neighborhood Commercial & Multi-Family Districts

CITY OF PASADENA, CALIFORNIA



ADOPTED BY THE CITY COUNCIL ON OCTOBER 19, 2009

MOULE & POLYZOIDES
ARCHITECTS AND URBANISTS

This Building Design does not comply with the guidelines



Design not Compliant with Design Guidelines

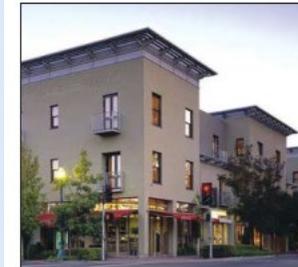
- Design Guidelines (2009) – in particular:

*“In this cultural setting, the process of adding new buildings to Pasadena’s existing built fabric is challenging. The character of most places in the City is clearly defined and often unique. Introducing infill projects compatibly into existing settings **requires an unusual degree of sensitivity and skill on the part of architects, and a great deal of insight and critical sense on the part of those sitting in judgment of their work.** (p4)*

- Block Character

*“The successful fit of a new project into an existing context depends on how it relates to neighboring buildings to its side and rear in terms of setbacks, height, massing, scale, arrangement of shared and private open space, and landscape. **This is especially important for lots located along the boundary between higher-density and lower-density zones where taller, larger buildings that are insensitively designed could pose a visual nuisance to existing, smaller scale buildings. For zones that are in transition from less intense to more intense uses, the issue of compatibility is particularly important. New higher-density projects need to respond to lower-density, existing buildings through compatible massing and thoughtfully designed side yard elevations.** (p.25)”*

Design Guidelines for Neighborhood Commercial & Multi-Family Districts CITY OF PASADENA, CALIFORNIA



ADOPTED BY THE CITY COUNCIL ON OCTOBER 19, 2009

MOULE & POLYZOIDES
ARCHITECTS AND URBANISTS



City-Wide Urban Design Principles Goals – Not followed. Goals allow:

1. Introduce new buildings and renovate existing buildings in a manner that preserves and promotes Pasadena's walkable urbanism of interconnected streets lined by pedestrian-friendly buildings that engage, frame, and activate the street.
2. **Ensure that new buildings fit into their existing context in a way that contributes to Pasadena's architectural and cultural traditions.** This entails relating well to the public realm as well as to neighboring private and public buildings. **Special care must be applied to properties located:**
 - **On the boundary between lower density and higher density zones, and**
 - **On streets and blocks predominantly occupied by single-family houses and small-scale multi-family buildings, but where current zoning allows these properties to be developed with higher intensity buildings that have taller building heights and smaller setbacks.**



Design not Compliant with Design Guidelines

– Block Character

“7.1 Scale. Buildings should be scaled to respond to their context by sensitively and positively addressing the scale and massing of their adjacent neighbors. This can be accomplished by:

- Matching existing building heights or **exceeding them by only one story. Additional stories should be modulated by setbacks.**
- Modulating side yard and rear yard volumes to **provide as much distance as possible between the facades of a proposed building and existing buildings in order to preserve the privacy of the outdoor spaces of both.**
- **Orienting the side yards of proposed buildings to face the side yards of adjacent buildings.**
- Including elements such as porches, galleries, arcades, etc. to relate the scale of facades to those of existing buildings.
- Reducing building bulk by introducing dwelling space in attic spaces.
- **Introducing landscape and/or trees as a screen between existing and new buildings.**



Commercial Advantages

Significant Commercial Advantages Offset Longer Design/Review Schedule

- Aesthetics and **more attractive, desirable property** that maintains the block character people desire in the S. Oak Knoll Neighborhood
- Additional SF with reduction in corridors
- Sought after/preferred building location with significant neighborhood amenities
- **Functions more efficiently** (vs. lack of sunlight on all sides, corridor maintenance (cleaning, heating and cooling) and dark courtyard landscaping, etc).
- More valuable units (e.g. space (\$/SF) and highly desirable mountain views)
- Reduced construction costs through design efficiencies and schedule savings – reduced exterior walls by ~40%



Design Advantages

Design Adjustments Needed to Improve Project

- All concerns could easily solved thru better and more thoughtful design
- Reduce footprint to adjust massing
 - Adds light to building residents and adjacent properties
 - Adds Green Space to Neighborhood and maintains for building residents
 - intent of City of Gardens Ordinance maintained
 - Increases privacy to adjacent properties
 - Reduced footprint especially important where the building height is two times higher than all adjacent properties
 - More respectful for historic and heritage properties
 - More attractive to new residents/buyers
- Other Benefits
 - Better access for FLS
 - Reduced Construction Cost to Developer
 - Could save other protected trees



Photos

El Molino – landscaped area above parking garage and along South side



Elegant Interior Hallway Example



Minimal Changes from Preliminary Design

Insignificant Changes Between Design Submissions

2024

2025



Insignificant Changes – continued

- 3rd and 4th level bridges removed (needed 2nd elevator added)
- Roofs added over balconies

2024



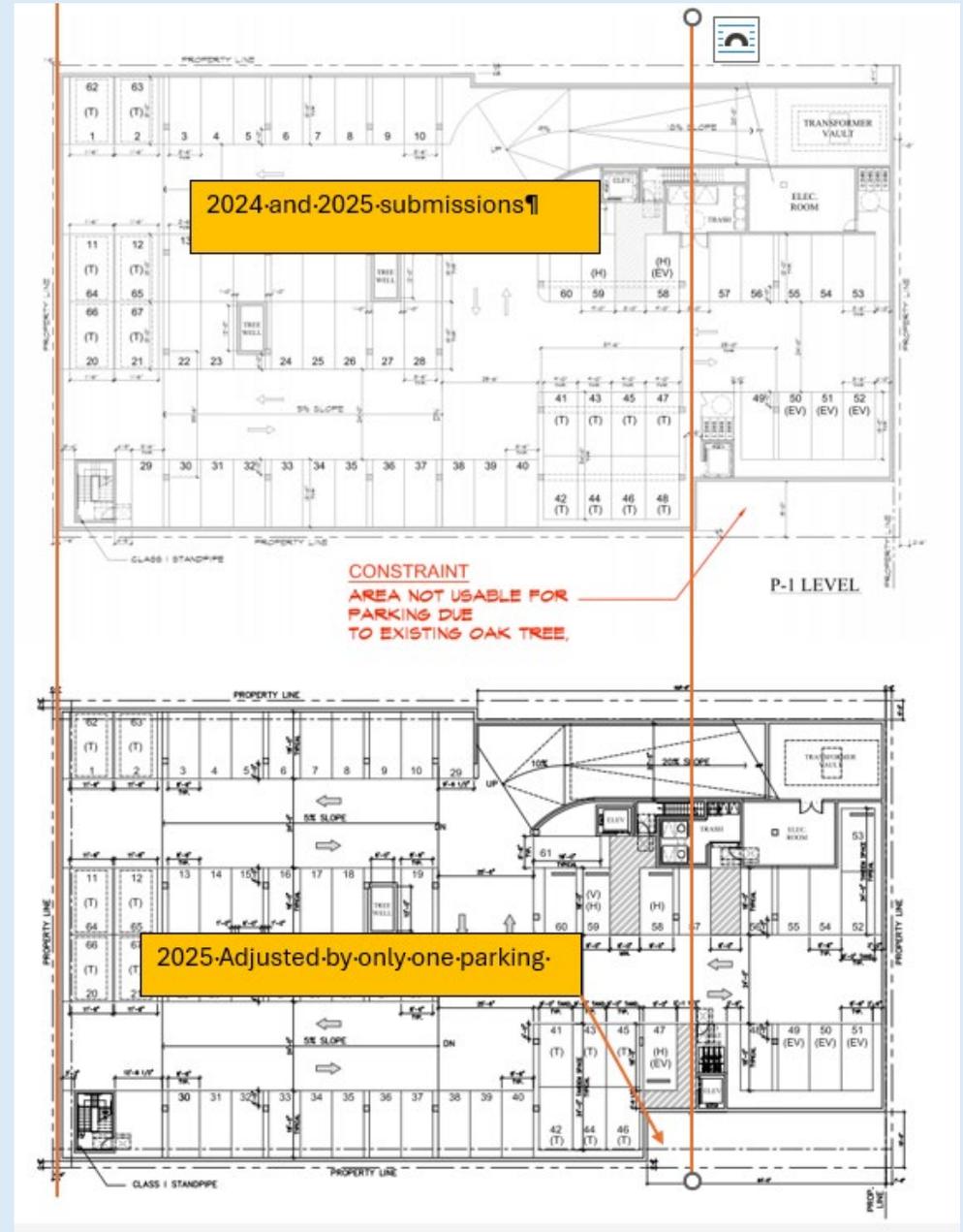
2025



511 S. OAK KNOLL AVENUE



Small Adjustment for Tree Roots



Building offset for Historic Encroachment – Not Tree Protection



Protected Oak Tree

Oak Tree Mis-representations

