PLANNING & COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT DEPARTMENT
STAFF REPORT

DATE: JANUARY 11, 2022

TO: DESIGN COMMISSION

FROM: DAVID M. REYES, DIRECTOR, PLANNING & COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT DEPARTMENT

SUBJECT: PRELIMINARY CONSULTATION
PROPOSED DEMOLITION OF THREE NON-RESIDENTIAL BUILDINGS AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF A NEW 41,756 SQUARE FOOT SINGLE-ROOM-OCCUPANCY (SRO) RESIDENTIAL DEVELOPMENT WITH 80 UNITS AND ONE CARETAKERS UNIT INCLUDING 60 AT-GRADE PARKING SPACES
1501, 1515 & 1525 E. WALNUT STREET

Project Description:

This Preliminary Consultation is for the proposed demolition of three non-residential buildings and the construction of a new Single-Room-Occupancy residential development with a total of 81 units including one caretakers unit. The proposed project will have a maximum height of 45 feet encompassed within four floors and a total of 41,756 square feet. A total of 60 at-grade parking spaces are proposed, with a majority of them located behind the building. The project proposes to incorporate affordable housing through a density bonus, with 50 units proposed for market rate, and 30 as affordable (9 at Very Low Income, 10 at Medium Income); the base by-right allowable density is 60 units.

The site is located on the north side of East Walnut Street, approximately mid-block between North Hill Avenue, and North Sierra Bonita Avenue, two blocks south of the 210 freeway. The project site consists of five adjoining parcels. The far northern parcels were once part of the former Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad right-of-way and currently sit mostly vacant. The three street-abutting parcels are currently developed with a combination of auto-oriented businesses, a vacant building, and surface paving. The primary structures were constructed in 1947, 1967, and 1973. A cellular tower is located on the far eastern lot. All buildings and associated site improvements - including the cellular tower, with the exception of existing power poles in the rear yard, are proposed to be demolished for the construction of the new project. There are several protected trees located at various locations on the site, most of which are proposed for removal. A historical evaluation of the existing structures will be required as part of the next stage of the design review process.

Neighborhood Context:

The project site sits within a neighborhood block consisting primarily of auto-oriented businesses with some commercial and office uses interspersed throughout. The development context of the neighborhood block is reflective of the land uses, with mostly single-story industrial architectural styling and differing building ages. Located immediately to the west of the project site is a single-story auto repair business, and to the immediate east of the project site is a single-story commercial structure. Directly across the street, to the south of the subject site, are additional single-story commercial and auto-oriented businesses. Directly to the north of the project site are single-story single-family and low-density multi-family residential developments. There are no known designated or non-designated historical resources within the immediate vicinity. This particular part of East Walnut Street is zoned as Commercial General (CG) on both sides, with a multi-family residential zoning district (RM-16) abutting the subject site to the immediate north. Single-room-occupancy housing is allowed in the CG zone as a by-right use.

Architectural Design:

The applicant is proposing a simple block-type style development with a simple rectangular form, and associated massing. The overriding architectural theme is contemporary, rooted in historical vernacular building typology found in the City. The mid-block location of the project site allows the architecture to eschew architectural gestures to “anchor” a corner or serve as a gateway element. Rather, the proposed design incorporates a rational idiom of solids and voids with anchored solid end pieces flanking a repetitive cadence of window bays.

The south elevation features a rhythm of multi-floor recessed window bays that extend from the ground floor to the fourth floor, and are only broken at ground-level for the garage entries and main entrance lobby. The bays feature a modular sequence of windows and balconies for each unit on each respective floor level. The ground floor houses internal amenity spaces including a gym and lounge with a primary lobby that opens onto the street along with flanking drive aisles to access the at-grade garage and rear surface parking. The storefront glazing systems of the ground-floor are canted to provide a level of dynamism to pedestrians, while the upper floor individual unit systems run parallel to the street edge and overall building façade.

The corner forms read as foundational solid massing, that remains visible even with added flush window fenestrations. Around the corner, at the east and west elevations, the solid element of the corner forms is more apparent with symmetrical unit window patterning. The design of the south, front façade repeats along the rear, north façade of the building, with the exception of the ground floor storefronts.

The materials of the proposed structure are reflective of the architectural style, a minimal palette consisting primarily of stucco, aluminum storefronts, and composite unit door and window systems. A stone cladding is proposed as an accent material to accentuate the lobby entrance, and steel fins at the jambs of the unit bays that are proposed to be painted in various accent colors. Rounding out the preliminary material palette are steel balcony railings and fiberglass shutters for the unit window systems.

The building is located near the street edge to provide a continuous street wall, while the majority of the rear yard is devoted to surface parking with vegetation and trees proposed in

accordance to required development standards. A dog run, swimming pool, and barbeque are also proposed for the rear outdoor space.

Trees and Landscaping:

The property currently contains several trees, some of which are protected. In total, the applicant has identified eleven trees, mostly located in the far north end of the subject site, within the vacant former rail road right-of-way. Although some trees are shown in the plans to be retained, the applicant has indicated that they are potentially proposing to remove all the trees, including one native Quercus agrifolia that is located directly underneath overhead power lines. Two additional trees appear to be mature trees with a DBH of over 19 inches. Per the City's Tree Protection Ordinance, if the three identified protected trees are removed they must be replaced by a minimum of 12 trees at 36" box size, or 24 trees at 24" box size. As part of the development proposal, the applicant is proposing to plant 12 trees in the rear parking lot.

Schematic and final landscape plans will be required as the project progresses through the design review process.

Applicable Design Guidelines:

- Design-Related Goals and Policies in the Land Use Element of the General Plan
- Design Guidelines for Neighborhood Commercial & Multi-Family Residential Districts

Previous/Existing Entitlements:

- Predevelopment Plan Review (PPR). A PPR comment letter is currently pending along with a review by City Council.

Approvals Needed/Project Scheduling:

- Historical Resource Evaluation (Design & Historic Preservation staff)
- Affordable Housing Concession Permit (Hearing Officer - may be required dependent upon requested concessions)
- Concept Design Review (Design Commission)
- Final Design Review (Design Commission)
- Building Permits (Building & Safety Staff)

CEQA Clearance:

This is preliminary consultation regarding design review and is not subject to the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA).

Zoning Clearance:

The project is currently under review for Zoning compliance through the Pre-Development Plan (PPR) process and that review has not been finalized. Any comments or issues that arise from the Zoning review will be forwarded to the applicant and will be required to be addressed prior to the project's submittal for the next application step in the design review process.

Staff Observations:

Applicable Design Guidelines:

The following design guidelines are applicable to the project and should guide further development and study of the project as it moves forward in the design review process:

Design-Related Policies in the Land Use Element of the General Plan:

5.7: Pedestrian Connections. Support and enhance the pedestrian experience along public and private pedestrian passages, pathways, courtyards, paseos, alleys, and public walkways with increased connectivity and infrastructure, as well as businesses located along these pedestrian corridors.

7.1: Architectural Quality. Design each building as a high-quality, long term addition to the City's urban fabric; exterior design and building materials shall exhibit permanence and quality, minimize maintenance concerns, and extend the life of the building.

7.3: Compatibility. Require that new and adaptively re-used buildings are designed to respect and complement the defining built form, massing, scale, modulation, and architectural detailing of their contextual setting.

Design Guidelines for Neighborhood Commercial & Multi-Family Districts:

1.5: Holistic Design. The constituent parts of new projects (such as building, open space, landscape, and parking) should be internally integrated in image and form, while relating compatibly to those of neighboring buildings.

6.3: Contexts in transition should receive projects in either a contemporary or traditional style with no limitations that will help to shape the future character of their surroundings.

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.
- Including elements such as porches, galleries, arcades, etc. to relate the scale of facades to those of existing buildings.
- Introducing landscape and/or trees as a screen between existing and new buildings.

7.2: Side and rear elevations. The rear and/or side elevations of new buildings that are visible from the public realm should be designed with equal care and quality as the front or principal facade.

7.4: Existing site features. Unique natural characteristics, such as mature trees and topography, on both the project site and adjacent sites should be respected and taken into account in new building design.

7.5: Multiple lot projects. The massing of projects on combined lots should be broken down into increments that relate to surrounding buildings. On very large lots, the division of projects into two or more separate buildings of different type, density, height, and massing is encouraged.

9.1: Garage entrances. Parking garage entrances should be designed and composed as an integral part of the building facade and should not interfere with existing adjacent buildings. The garage entrances should be designed as doorways and be gated or secured by doors scaled in proportion to the overall form of the building. Automobile entrances to buildings should be less prominent than pedestrian entrances. This can be accomplished by way of size, massing, or detail variation.

9.3: Screening of surface lots. Landscaping and large canopy trees should be used to minimize the urban heat island effect caused by surface paving.

10.3: Blank walls. If blank walls cannot be avoided, then they should be detailed, painted, or landscaped in a manner that renders the walls attractive to pedestrians.

13.1: Durability of materials. Materials should be used that have a long life and age well. Materials at the ground floor, should be composed and detailed in a manner that enriches the pedestrian experience.

15.1: Indoor/outdoor relationships. In response to Pasadena's seasonal climate variations, building massing and landscaping should provide a balance between access to sunlight and to shade. Outdoor spaces should be designed to be inviting and useful places. Building elements such as open air, covered outdoor circulation (loggias, arcades, and porches) and balconies should be used to minimize the amount of mechanically heated and cooled space and to expand the building's useable outdoor area.

15.2 Passive solar design. Overhangs, shutters, louvers, canopies, and shade trees should be used to minimize solar heat gain. Buildings should be designed to foster the circulation of cooling breezes.

15.3: Water conservation. Buildings should incorporate water conservation and recycling techniques, such as rainwater collection and grey water systems.

17.2: Balconies and rooftop structures. Balconies should be designed to be large enough to be usable and in a manner that is consistent with the architectural language of the rest of the building. Rooftop trellises and other structures should also be designed in a manner that is consistent with the architectural language of the rest of the building.

Potential Design Issues:

- Although the immediate context can be considered as being in transition, the building should be designed in accordance to this existing context, or the context that is visibly in development. Consider how the building relates appropriately to the surrounding adjacencies in form, scale, and massing. Design moves such as undulating the façade plane to reduce its long expanse along the street edge, or stepping the façade as it

nears the side yards should be studied. As currently designed, the project is isolated in form and scale to the surrounding context.

- The proposed design concept should be applied to the entirety of the project including the surface parking, and outdoor amenities. Consider alternatives to surface parking to allow for provision of a sizable outdoor space for the residents to use and enjoy throughout the year and a more accommodating outdoor pool area that is not shaded by the building. Also consider ways to improve the design of linkages and sequence of travel from one amenity space to another such as to the proposed dog run in the far western corner of the property.

- Consider retaining and/or relocating as many of the existing on-site trees as possible. It is encouraged that the design of the structure, and site planning, revolve around existing natural elements such as protected trees. The tree inventory indicates a potential total of three protected trees that, if removed, will require a planting replacement of 12 trees at 36-inch box, or 24 at 24-inch box.

- Consider design elements that can further enhance the pedestrian experience through appropriately-scaled architectural features such as shading elements, façade softening through landscape, carefully applied expansion joints, an applied wainscoting, or beltcourse, particularly along the south elevation. Also, look at solutions to alleviate potentially large expanses of blank wall planes at the corner massing along the street edge.

- Consider providing larger balconies for the units, particularly along the south façade, to provide usable outdoor space and improve the reduction in solar heat gains.

- As the landscape design is developed, consider the use of alternative pavement materials that are permeable, and that reduce solar heat gains as further sustainability enhancements to the project.

- The building is largely mirrored on front and back and east and west. Consider applying the same design consideration to the rear façade as was applied to the front, particularly at the ground level. Look at accentuating the amenity spaces, and making them have a logical presence with clear connectivity to the outdoors. Also, consider providing a clear sight line through the main lobby, from the street, to the rear yard amenity spaces.

- As the design progresses and the material palette is further developed, consider the use of smooth cement plaster to provide a purity of form at the corner massings and make apparent the intention of their design. Regardless, carefully consider the expansion joints of the stucco or plaster finish and how that relates to the overall building design and how it affects the pedestrian interaction at ground-level.

Respectfully Submitted,

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Attachments:

A. Project Plans
B. Photos of Site and Context
C. Project Narrative
D. Project Evolution
E. Applicant Arborist Report, and Tree Inventory