



5/28/2015

VIA EMAIL

Planning and Design Commission
City of Sacramento
915 I Street
Sacramento, CA 95814

RE: Park Plaza Walgreens

Dear Chair Nybo and Commissioners:

The staff report to the Planning and Design Commission for the May 28, 2015 meeting regarding Park Plaza Walgreens states that WALKSacramento has one outstanding comment on the project. Our letter, a portion of which is included in the staff report and dated 12/5/2014, indicated there was one outstanding issue we believed could be easily addressed.

We recognize that most of the issues identified in our 8/24/2012 letter would be challenging to resolve without major changes to the site plan. However, we would like to present that letter as background information to inform your deliberation on the project.

Our initial recommendations are summarized as follows:

1. Place the new building close to street, enlarge the plaza, and add trees
2. Existing trees should not be removed
3. Remove the median left turn lane from the project
4. Add more bike parking near the Walgreens entrance
5. Reduce the number of vehicle parking spaces
6. Straighten pedestrian walkway from West El Camino
7. Redesign pharmacy building to provide windows on all sides
8. Keep chain link fence along the west and south borders of the shopping center instead of constructing a soundwall.

Sincerely,

Chris Holm
Project Analyst

Enclosure: 8/24/2012 Letter



8/24/2012

VIA EMAIL

David Hung, Associate Planner
Community Development Department, Current Planning Division
City of Sacramento
300 Richards Blvd., 3rd Floor
Sacramento, CA 95811

RE: Park Plaza Walgreens (P012-016)

Dear Mr. Hung:

WALKSacramento has reviewed the Neighborhood Project Notification for Park Plaza Walgreens (P012-016). We appreciate the opportunity to provide the following comments with the goal of a more walkable project that contributes to more foot travel in the community of South Natomas.

Development projects that lead to more walking and active travel are critical to our community's future. Human beings need moderate exercise, such as walking, for about 30 minutes a day in order to prevent the development of chronic disease and overweight. Only 38% of the population in the Sacramento region is active at this minimal level, often due to limitations placed by a built environment not suited to walking and other types of physically active travel. A 30-minute walk is about one and a half miles. If more people could obtain regular exercise by walking and bicycling to their regular destinations, in lieu of driving, it could yield significant health improvements to the resident population of this area. It could also help reduce the current expensive burden on the health care system of providing medical care to more and more people with chronic conditions due to inactivity.

The site of the proposed project, Park Plaza Shopping Center at the intersection of West El Camino Avenue and Truxel Road in South Natomas, is well suited to encouraging more walking. Within 1/2 mile of the site there are six large apartment complexes, two condominium complexes, more than 185,000 square feet of commercial at three shopping centers, three elementary schools, three neighborhood parks, one community park, one regional park (Discovery Park), a community center, a public library, a private racquet club, and over 250,000 square feet of office space. In addition, the immediate area is well served by transit. There are bus stops on both West El Camino Avenue and Truxel Road. The Green Line light rail route is proposed for Truxel Road with a station next to the Park Plaza shopping center.

This community area should be able to support a significant amount of walking and biking due to the density of residents and employees, the diversity of land uses, the walkable distances to transit and destinations, and walkable design (the 5 D's of development). Following are WALKSacramento's recommendations to make the Walgreens project more likely to encourage walking and to contribute to the health and vitality of South Natomas.

1. Place the new building close to street , enlarge the plaza, and add trees

The project will demolish an existing building that has good pedestrian access and a landscaped area with mature trees as a transition between the building and the street. The proposed site plan is less pedestrian friendly than the existing site plan because the added parking spaces and associated drive aisle will be placed between the building and the sidewalk. This makes for a less attractive street view of the shopping center and introduces more potential conflicts with vehicles. The City of Sacramento General Plan urban form guidelines for suburban centers envision buildings adjacent to the street, attractive pedestrian streetscapes, and attractive landscaping of public right-of-way. Replacing street trees and the landscaped low berm with parking spaces and a drive aisle does not meet the General Plan guidelines.

The revisions to the shopping center site also eliminate the plaza, leaving only a small patio area for the Cheers Bar & Grill, which is at the west end of the existing 23,650 square foot building at the south edge of the shopping center. The patio area will be much less attractive for social gathering as directly across the walkway will be Walgreens' trash compactor and loading door.

We recommend placing the new building closer to the street and eliminating the proposed parking spaces between the building and the street. With the building relocated slightly north and closer to the street, there would be room to enlarge the plaza to its existing size at the south end of the building and to add more trees or retain all of the existing plaza trees. In addition, moving the trash compactor chute to the west side of the building would make the plaza more pedestrian friendly.

2. Existing trees should not be removed

Shade trees cool the temperature of the urban environment on hot days, which reduces the formation of ozone.¹ Near areas with heavy traffic, neighborhoods with tree canopies are have lower concentrations of particulate matter than neighborhoods without trees. Children living on streets with more trees have up to 25% lower rates of asthma than children on streets with fewer trees.² Neighborhoods with trees have higher levels of social interaction and lower levels of violence and crime.

¹ Taha H, Chang S, Akbari H: Meteorological and Air Quality Impact of Heat Island Mitigation Measures in Three U.S. Cities. Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory, April 2000. Accessed August 23, 2011 at http://www.sactree.com/assets/files/greenprint/benefits_of_trees/air_quality/lbnl-44222.pdf

² Lovasi GS et al. Recent Findings: Children living in areas with more street trees have lower prevalence of asthma. *J Epi and Comm Hlth* 2008; 62:547-649.

The preliminary site plan drawing appears to show that 14 existing shade trees and two ornamental trees will be removed. The areas affected include

- The area between the sidewalk and the building will lose six trees. The preliminary site plan has two of the existing tree centers marked as parking lot lights and two marked "demo tree" and the tree canopy outlines for four trees are shown, so it's difficult to know which trees, if any, will remain.
- The landscape planter along the west fence will lose six shade trees because the existing 10-foot-wide landscaping strip is reduced to a width of 4 feet and the trees are where the widened driveway is proposed.
- Three of the four shade trees in the plaza to the south of the existing building will be removed. The one tree remaining is the only tree marked on the preliminary site plan as "Ex. tree shall to be protected".
- Two ornamentals in existing planters on the building's east frontage walkway appear to be removed.
- Five trees in the median will be removed to make room for the left turn lane that is proposed to provide direct access for west-bound traffic.

This project will remove too many trees with no plans to replace them. For the health and enjoyment of South Natomas residents, WALKSacramento recommends the site plan be revised to retain all existing trees on site.

3. Remove the median left turn lane from the project

The area surrounding the project site, although classified as "suburban", has a number of high-density residential and commercial land uses. The area needs more features to accommodate pedestrian travel, such as street crossings, instead of auto-oriented designs and street modifications. The left turn lane proposed for the West El Camino median will encourage more car trips to the site and expose pedestrians to more vehicle conflicts at the driveway.

While walking across West El Camino mid-block near the west driveway of the project site may be unsafe due to traffic speed, people make the crossing anyway. The existing median provides refuge for those people making the mid-block crossing and only two lanes of traffic in one direction need be negotiated at a time. The proposed median left turn lane will make the mid-block crossing less safe as pedestrians will have a narrower median on which to take refuge, placing them closer to high-speed east-bound through traffic heading and in the path of west-bound drivers preparing for a left turn across the east-bound lanes.

Pedestrians on the sidewalk on the south side of West El Camino will also be at greater risk when crossing the west driveway, which will be widened from a single-lane driveway to one ingress lane and one egress lane. The left turn from the median will be unprotected and drivers may be so focused on finding a gap in approaching traffic that they may not see pedestrians crossing the driveway.

WALKSacramento recommends eliminating the proposed left turn lane to reduce pedestrian-vehicle conflicts at the west driveway and on West El Camino.

4. Add more bike parking near the Walgreens entrance

The proposed site plan shows a bike rack will be located near the southeast corner of the Walgreens; more than 100 feet from the store entrance. This bike rack location is appropriate for the existing building proposed for demolition and the adjacent building to the south, but it will not serve Walgreens patrons well. Bike racks should be near building entrances to reduce the likelihood of bike theft and to improve the convenience for the bicyclist.

5. Reduce the number of vehicle parking spaces

The vehicular traffic during peak hours for a site well served by transit and within walking and biking distance of so many people is unlikely to be as high as an auto-oriented suburban location. The transportation consultant for the Creekside Oaks PUD, in which the project is located, stated in a response to comments on the DEIR that the peak hour factor for the development density anticipated for South Natomas would be lower due to improved transit, transportation system management programs, and normal spreading of peak traffic. The peak hour factor indicates how much of the daily traffic occurs during the peak hour of the day. This effect should apply not only to the roadways but to the land uses such as a drugstore.

The project application is requesting 65 parking spaces for the Walgreens, which is five more than required by code. We question whether the 60 required spaces are needed for a store the size of the proposed Walgreens. Considering the surrounding residential density and the existing transit service, we recommend the number of parking spaces be kept to a minimum with any additional space allocated to pedestrian improvements.

6. Straighten pedestrian walkway from West El Camino

The walkway from the sidewalk to the northeast corner of the Walgreens building includes four right-angle turns and more than 15 feet of deviation from a straight path. In contrast, the existing site has a straight walkway to the sidewalk. WALKSacramento recommends aligning the walkway with the building's eastern frontage walkway and eliminating any turns.

7. Redesign pharmacy building to provide windows on all sides

The urban form guidelines for the Suburban Center designation in the City of Sacramento General Plan includes "Building facade and entrances directly addressing the street and have a high degree of transparency on street-fronting façade." Buildings with windows providing views of the surrounding public and private spaces increase the sense of safety experienced by pedestrians. The only transparency apparent on the elevation drawings are the front entrance, a segment of the wall on each side of the entrance, and the drive-through service window. Most of the buildings wall spaces do not include windows or doors. About half of the elevation facing the main parking area and almost all of the store fronts in the shopping center is a blank wall. By comparison,

the existing building has windows and transparent doors spread out along two full sides facing the shopping center and the street.

In fact, the staff report in 1985 for the shopping center states that "Planning and Community Services staff, however, do have concerns regarding the rear elevations of the proposed buildings which are facing the park and library. These elevations do not take advantage of being next to the park and library sites and are flat and uninteresting. Staff recommends that the applicant redesign the south and west elevations by carrying the architectural features found on the front (north and east elevations) of the buildings to the rear of the structures. Design possibilities also include having entrances to the shops off of the rear of the buildings or wrapping glass around the ends of the structure."

Unfortunately, in this project the design has architectural features on only a portion of the north and east elevations. The west elevation of the building is only slightly improved with the inclusion of a drive-through window and bay. The south elevation facing the pedestrian plaza features only an aluminum door, a steel trash chute door, and a metal overhead roll-up door for loading.

WALKSacramento recommends the exterior elevations for the new building include more windows, articulation, and architectural features to provide an interesting appearance that blends with the surrounding buildings.

8. Keep the chain link fence along the west and south borders of the shopping center instead of constructing a soundwall

The PUD amendments narrative and the statement of intent in the application requests a sound wall along the park, yet the project narrative says the chain link fence is to remain between park and shopping center, and the preliminary site plan shows a chain link fence along entire existing and proposed boundaries. WALKSacramento does not believe there is a reason to replace the open chain link fence with a solid soundwall. It is better to leave the visual connection between the parking areas behind the buildings and the adjacent properties – the neighborhood park to the west and the office buildings to the south.

A soundwall along one side of the park would partially enclose the park and reduce the "eyes on" surveillance. A soundwall along the west and south sides of the shopping center property would enclose the rear parking and practically eliminate the "eyes on" of the parking. Employees and patrons walking between a soundwall and the wall of a long building in the rear parking areas will likely feel much less comfortable and less safe than if the area had a visual connection to inhabited areas.

The staff report for the original Creekside Oaks neighborhood shopping center entitlements in 1985 contained the following statements. "The PUD Guidelines state that in lieu of the placement of a wall along the south and west property lines: "...the shopping center shall be designed to be compatible with the adjacent park/library/community center uses with regard to vehicular and pedestrian circulation, landscape treatment and building design". The purpose of this requirement is to create a "campus-like" effect for the PUD and integrate surrounding land uses with one another... The site plan also

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indicates a pedestrian walkway at the southwest corner to connect to the library and park.”

At the time of the 1985 entitlements, both the property to the west and the south of Park Plaza Shopping Center were designated park/ library/community center. Since then, a library and community center were constructed about a half-mile to the north, the adjacent property to the south has been developed as office space, and most of the adjacent property to the west has been developed as a neighborhood park with the rear area unimproved. This rear area of the park is directly across the driveway from the plaza and is where the pedestrian walkway was to be located. While this may not be the time to construct the pedestrian connection between the park and the shopping center, the changes proposed will preclude making the connection in the future.

WALKSacramento is working to support increased physical activity such as walking and bicycling in local neighborhoods as well as helping to create community environments that support walking and bicycling. The benefits include improved physical fitness, less motor vehicle traffic congestion, better air quality, and a stronger sense of cohesion and safety in local neighborhoods. Following is a list of general criteria we use in commenting on projects.

Thank you for your consideration of these comments and recommendations. If you have questions or need additional information, please contact us at (916) 446-9255 or either cholm@walksacramento.org or tduarte@walksacramento.org.

Sincerely,

Chris Holm
Project Analyst

Teri Duarte
Executive Director