

Washington Commons Cohousing

313-330 G Street, West Sacramento

Narrative for Design Review | 11.18.19

SUMMARY

The applicant requests Design Review and a “tentative condo map” for the development of a 35-unit condominium cohousing community on 0.55 acres in the Washington District of West Sacramento. The project will consist of flats on three levels above one level of parking and community facilities. Parking will be provided at a 1:1 ratio in two at-grade parking structures. The project is based on the cohousing concept which strives to create strong neighborhoods through physical design and extensive common facilities.

Attached exhibits:

- Drawing sheets
- Preliminary Title Report
- Arborist Report
- Cultural Resources Study
- Preliminary Geotech Investigation

BACKGROUND

The ownership group for the Project is Fourth & G Partners, LLC, a group of people who will buy homes in the development upon its completion. This group organized specifically to create a cohousing community in this area and has recently purchased the property. The group actively seeks and welcomes diversity in its membership. Most of the current members already live in the area, and several have deep roots in the Sacramento Valley.

The design of the community is the result of workshops during which the design team worked with community members to clarify their program, evaluate alternatives, and settle on this specific design. The design is the result of a thorough process of considering the resident group’s goals and priorities and considering various alternatives.

The community members have engaged an experienced development team to assist them with this Project. Kathryn McCamant is the group’s cohousing consultant, drawing from her expertise from developing numerous cohousing communities. Mahlum Architects has deep experience in urban, multi-family projects. Urban Development + Partners is providing development consulting.

To learn more about the people behind the project, see www.washington-commons.org

WHAT IS COHOUSING?

THE NEED

Dramatic demographic and economic changes have taken place in our society, leaving a mismatch between today's households and conventional housing. Single-family houses were designed for a 1950's model family. Contemporary households—characterized by smaller families, women working outside the home, and growing numbers of single parents, elders, and singles living alone—face a childcare crisis, social isolation, and a chronic time crunch, in part because they are living in housing unsuited to their lives.

At the same time, an increasingly mobile society has distanced many Americans from their extended families, a traditional source of social and economic support. Many of us feel the effects of these trends in our own lives. Things that people once took for granted—family, community, a sense of belonging—must now actively be sought out.

A HOUSING SOLUTION

Cohousing communities respond to the basic needs of today's households—social contact, informal childcare, and economic efficiency—by combining the autonomy of private dwellings with the advantages of community living. Over 130 communities have been built in the United States since 1991, 22 of which are in California. The success and growing acceptance of these developments attest to the viability of this housing solution.

Cohousing communities are neighborhoods designed with the future residents to facilitate cooperation. Like other cohousing communities, Washington Commons Cohousing will be owned as self-contained condominiums with extensive community facilities and will be managed by a homeowners' association. Although individual homes are designed to be self-sufficient, each with its own kitchen, the common facilities are an important aspect of community life, both for social and practical reasons. The community facilities in this development include a library room, meeting rooms, a large kitchen and dining/gathering area, laundry facilities, storage, a workshop, and a number of flexible rooms which can be used as the residents see fit. Community facilities also include outdoor spaces including a terrace and gardens.

In many respects, the cohousing model is not new. Many of us remember places where people knew their neighbors and were familiar with each other's families over time. Cohousing communities offer a contemporary model for recreating neighborhoods with a sense of place, and the security and the sense of belonging which accompanies it.

WHAT COHOUSING COMMUNITIES HAVE TO OFFER

- A balance of privacy and community.
- A safe and supportive environment for children and elders.
- A practical and spontaneous lifestyle, not dependent on driving.
- Intergenerational neighborhoods.
- Environmentally-sensitive design emphasizing pedestrian access and maximizing open space.

RESIDENT INVOLVEMENT

The homebuyers participate in the planning and design of cohousing communities ensuring that the development responds to their needs and priorities. Residents also fund most of the pre- development costs and are significant investors in the projects from the very beginning. This resident participation creates “pre-sold” custom neighborhoods.

The cohousing model incorporates ideas that have already proven successful. Planned retirement communities often include shared dining and other common facilities. Resident involvement is recognized as a critical aspect in increasing buyer satisfaction and reducing housing management costs. Utilizing conventional forms of ownership such as condominiums, cohousing builds on accepted legal and financial structures. Yet, cohousing communities are unique in combining a participatory planning process, neighborhood design, shared facilities, and resident management to attract all ages and household types. As a result, cohousing communities become cross-generational neighborhoods that support traditional values of family and community.

DESIGN NARRATIVE

The proposed design strives to reinforce urban patterns envisioned for the future of the Washington District, rather than react to the current context of low-scale residential buildings and vacant lots. The residents of Washington Commons Cohousing wish to strengthen the neighborhood by being a catalyst for thoughtful and appropriate growth.

To minimize the impact of car-oriented areas on this corner lot, as well as enhancing the sense of community, the optimal site strategy requires placing the parking in two separate structured parking garages. A fully secured garage accessed from G Street will contain 12 spaces. A second curb cut on 4th street will provide access to an additional 23 spaces. The parking garage elevations will be enhanced with a landscaped setback, trellises, and windows.

The design proposes a minimal setback from both streets to optimize the use of the property and to establish an urban street edge. At the northwest and southeast boundaries, 10' side yards provide a landscaped buffer from the adjacent neighbors and will feature water quality swales. A deeper setback to the north maintains maximum views and solar access for both the neighbors and the cohousing community. Typically, private living spaces and bedrooms face the street, and unit entries and kitchens face inward.

The scale and mass of the proposed development is greater than surrounding development, but well below that allowed outright by Zoning. The building is massed in two slender L-shaped volumes separated by an open-air gap. This break in the massing visually connects the public realm to the site interior and is aligned with the entry lobby, vertical circulation, and the common dining room at the terrace level.

The perception of building mass is further reduced by a deep wall offset at the ground level. This area is contiguous with the sidewalk and features pavers, short-term bike parking, furnishings, landscaping, and the primary building entrance. The ground-level building design features prominent windows into active areas of the ground level, with increased transparency at the street corner. Each primary residential street elevation is further articulated with semi-recessed balconies, large windows, accent materials, and projecting window trim.

The design excels in providing open space and attractive community amenities. In addition to a large, central terrace, the site plan allows for shared gardens and outdoor gathering areas of various sizes. The outdoor areas in the middle of the community are specifically designed to bring residents together. All the homes have entries off the exterior walkways, and many also have adjacent windows and entry alcoves. Most of the flats have private balconies, with the typical location on the street elevations.

Proposed cladding materials are durable and high-quality. The predominant field cladding is shingle-style fiber cement. This material is “quiet” – revealing its character with texture and shadow. Given the transitional nature of the neighborhood, this cladding is compatible with adjacent properties, whether existing residential structures or future mixed-use development. Stucco is used in moderation as a contrast to the field material, and wood cladding is used as an accent in areas well-protected from weather and sun. Painted steel railings will provide a hint of identifying color against an otherwise neutral color palette.

The landscape design will use native and adaptive plant materials that are appropriate for the climate and will need minimal irrigation and fertilization. Residents will install much of the internal landscaping themselves (like single-family homeowners) to reduce upfront costs, allow for greater variety, and encourage residents to care for and maintain the landscape over time.

All outdoor lighting will be “Dark Sky” compliant to minimize ambient light. Most of the outdoor lighting will be provided by front porch lights and other building-mounted fixtures.

ZONING SUMMARY

General Data

316 G Street – 010-475-010-000 – 0.16 acres
330 G Street – 010-475-011-000 – 0.39 acres
Total Area – 0.55 acres (24,360 sf)

Intersection of G Street and 4th Street. Both streets are designated as “Local Roads.”

Zone (WF) Waterfront
All property lines are adjacent to or abut other WF properties
Land Use Mixed-Use – RMU – Riverfront Mixed Use
All property lines are adjacent to or abut other RMU properties

17.09 Commercial and Mixed Use Zones

Permitted Uses *Multi-Unit Residential, Retail Sales* (with some limitations), and other uses per table 17.09.020.

Min. Density 40 units / acre
Max. Density 120 units / acre
Proposed +/- 60 units / acre

Min. FAR 0.5
Max. FAR 3.0 (non-office or other)
Proposed +/- 2.5

Max. Height 250 ft
Proposed +/- 50 ft

Min. Setbacks 0 ft (all sides)

Section 17.09.030 C. Limitations on Location of Parking: Most of the proposed parking spaces meet the location requirement of more than 40 feet from the street frontage. To the extent feasible, the design incorporates habitable space close to the public sidewalk. However, the site is small and constrained such that fitting all spaces deep into the site is not feasible. To lessen the impact of the garage walls, the design incorporates a landscaped buffer with trellises. The applicant requests an exception as accommodated by the language of this section.

17.09.040 Supplemental Regulations

A. Building Transparency / Required Openings. Given the length of required garage elevations and shear walls, it is not feasible to meet the 50% requirement without reductions allowed for relief, detail, and landscaping enhancements. Multi-level garages are exempt from this requirement, but no mention is made for single-level garages. The proposed south elevation meets the 50% opening requirement, but the garage wall is longer than 30 feet. The proposed west elevation is short of both requirements. To lessen the impact of the garage walls and create visual interest at the pedestrian level, the design incorporates a landscaped buffer with trellises. Openings into the open-air garage will be infilled with a decorative metal screen. Generous setbacks at the building corner and entry provide further architectural relief and detail. The applicant requests reductions as accommodated by the language of this section.

B. Building Articulation. The proposed building mass is broken into two distinct masses. Each mass is further articulated by deep recessed balconies. A distinct ground-level “base” further breaks down the scale of the facades.

C. Building Orientation. The proposed building directly faces both street frontages. Required windows and balconies are minimized on internal property lines. Setbacks are landscaped to provide additional screening from future development. Given the transitional nature of the district and the high-intensity mixed uses intended for the Waterfront (WF) zone, the adjacent, low-density lots are likely candidates for redevelopment.

D. Building Entrances. The primary building entrance faces the public sidewalk on G Street. All dwelling units are accessed via internal stairs and an elevator.

E. Exterior Building Materials and Colors. The exterior materials palette is unified by a consistent field cladding and accent materials specific to the building functions. All proposed materials are durable and high-quality. Stucco used at the ground level covers less than 50 percent of the front façade.

F. Pedestrian Access. The proposed on-site pedestrian circulation is minimal as access to the dwelling units occurs via a central elevator lobby that is directly connected to the public sidewalk.

G. Limitations on Curb Cuts. Curb cuts have been intentionally located distant from the street intersection.

17.22.060 Fences, Walls, and Hedges

The proposed perimeter fence is limited to seven feet in height and will be constructed of steel and/or wood. Chain-link and plain concrete block will not be used.

17.22.090 Open Space

Req'd Total 5,250 sf (150 sf per unit)
Proposed +/- 6,000 SF

Req'd Private 50% of units; 50 sf minimum; minimum dimension of six feet
Proposed 22 of 35 units

Common Req'd 3,500 sf (100 sf per unit); minimum dimension of 15 feet
Proposed The second-level terrace exceeds 3,500 sf.
Additional open space is provided at the northeast corner of the ground level.

17.22.120 Refuse and Recycling Areas

The proposed trash/recycling/compost facilities have been reviewed by Paulina Benner (Environmental Services Manager) and Jeremy Berry (Waste Management). No objections to the size or access have been noted. The Zoning Administrator shall have the authority to approve exceptions, or consider modified design standards, to the requirements of this Section.

17.22.130 Screening

All proposed exterior mechanical and electrical equipment is located at side yards, screened, or incorporated into the design of buildings so as not to be visible from adjacent at-grade public rights-of-way. Roof-mounted equipment is limited to a zone set back approximately 20 feet from the parapet.

17.25 Landscaping

The members of this cohousing community have a strong interest in gardening. Thus, they propose to install perimeter landscaping and new trees with the initial construction, but only the infrastructure (sprinkler system and soil amendment) for future landscaping in the internal areas. Like single-family home neighborhoods, the homebuyers will complete their own landscaping after move-in. A visit to any cohousing community in the country shows that the residents create more interesting and varied landscaping when they do it themselves. The landscape design is based on the following goals:

- Use native and adaptive plant materials that are appropriate for the climate and will need minimal irrigation and fertilization. Where required, use water-efficient irrigation.
- Place deciduous trees appropriately to assist with summer passive cooling.
- Provide a community vegetable garden area so that everyone has access to a sunny area for growing vegetables, thus making it more fun to garden together.

Landscaping shall be installed consistent with the following:

- A. Landscape Development Guidelines;
- B. Development Engineering Post Construction Standards Plan;
- C. Chapter 8.24, Tree Preservation, of the Municipal Code; and
- D. Chapter 13.04, Article XII, Water Efficient Landscaping, of the Municipal Code.

17.27.040 Required Parking Spaces

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| Calculation | 1.0 space per one-bed; x 15 = 15.0 spaces 1.25 spaces per two-bed; x 20 = 25.0 spaces 1.0 guest space per every 10 units = 3.5 spaces Total required spaces = 43.5 spaces |
| Minimum | Reduce by 50% for projects located in the Washington Specific Plan $43.5 \times 0.5 = 21.75 = \underline{22 \text{ minimum spaces}}$ |
| Maximum | Multiply required spaces by 150% $43.5 \times 1.5 = 65.25 = \underline{65 \text{ maximum spaces}}$ |
| Proposed | 35 spaces |

A minimum of one electric vehicle charging station will be provided for every five parking spaces.

17.27.070 Bicycle Parking

Secure parking for approximately 42 bicycles is provided in a central dedicated room. Because of the location near the American River Parkway, it's a community priority to encourage bike use.

Short-Term Proposed At least five percent of the required parking spaces, with a minimum of four spaces.
Six spaces near the main entrance.

Long-Term Proposed Minimum of one space shall be provided per every five dwelling units.
Greater than one space per unit.

17.27.080 Loading

This is a condominium project and therefore will have infrequent turnover as compared to an apartment building. The patio at the northeast corner of the site is intended to be used as a short-term loading area for the occasional building-wide event, or to bring in materials to the adjacent workshop. The Director may approve a Modification to this requirement with the finding that adequate loading space exists due to characteristics of the project site and nature of the use.

Washington Specific Plan (May 15, 1996)

Chapter VII – Urban Design Guidelines

Fourth Street – Historic Area; G Street – Pedestrian Connector

Written over twenty years ago, the Applicant and Jurisdiction acknowledge that the Washington Specific Plan (WSP) is outdated in many ways. Some language in the WSP conflicts with the allowed zero-setbacks, height, and density of the Title 17 Municipal Code and therefore deviations are likely required. In general, the proposed design accommodates the intended multi-family objectives for the area. The building architecture directly addresses the street and utilizes harmonious and compatible massing, articulation, and details.