

City of Brisbane

Agenda Report

TO: City Council and Planning Commission via City Manager

FROM: William Prince, Community Development Director

SUBJECT: Public Realm Design and Supporting Development at Sierra Point

MEETING OF: June 25, 2007

CITY COUNCIL GOALS:

1. To design infrastructure and public facilities to be as efficient cost effective and to contribute to the cohesion and character of the community.
2. To promote economic development that stabilizes and diversifies the tax base.
3. To develop plans and pursue opportunities to enhance open space.
4. To preserve and enhance livability.
5. To encourage community involvement and participation.

RECOMMENDATION:

Receive presentations from staff and consultants, Greg Tung (FTB) and Tim Kelly (KMA), and conceptually approve the design for a revised public realm at Sierra Point, including the land trades necessary to establish and locate a new public park/plaza. In addition, provide direction to staff regarding City participation in support of a level of retail commercial development that will ensure the activation of the new public space.

BACKGROUND:

Peter Calthorpe, one of the new urbanism movement's founding members, identified a principle of fundamental importance to the planning of all communities when he stated, "The public realm is formative not residual." This simple, yet profound, statement recognizes the important role that the public realm has played in creating healthy communities and supporting civic life, from the days of the ancient Greek agora and the Roman forum to the establishment of the village greens, in the early towns of New England. To further emphasize this point, it is worth noting that in 1573, King Philip II of Spain issued the "Laws of the Indies," a series of ordinances regulating the design of

colonial cities in the New World. The Open Space Ordinance stated that “the main plaza is to be the starting point for the new town.”

Lennard and Lennard, in their excellent publication “Livable Cities Observed” state that:

“Urban public space is the single most important element in establishing a city’s livability. A centrally located public space can function as the heart of the community generating positive energy and a sense of membership. In the streets and squares accessible to all the dialogue essential to a democratic society may flourish.”

While a number of authors have noted the importance of the public realm to the development of healthy communities, the Lennards also observe that there appears to be a relationship between the lack of public space and increased social disorder (see attachment “A,” Public Space Design and The Public Realm and the Good City). This concern further underscores the importance of providing public realm.

The second reading by Hedman and Jaszewski (see attachment “B,” Fundamentals of Urban Design), argues that one of the consequences of modern architecture’s radical departure from traditional architecture has been the neglect of urban design (the space between the buildings). The basic attitude behind the modern architectural movement was to do the extreme opposite, in every way, from traditional architecture. As the authors note,

In the high excitement of the architectural revolution, when the symbols of an oppressive past were being jettisoned, something else at the heart and soul of urban design that constituted the acquired wisdom of great importance was also tossed out. Hidden in the belt courses, capitals and brackets was a concern for the definition and dramatization of exterior spaces. Encapsulated within traditional architecture was an attitude toward the street that viewed architectural expression as a form of urban theater. Individual buildings played well-defined parts in the larger drama, subordinating themselves according to the requirements of the role. What was lost was the understanding that urban design is a function of architecture.

This neglect for urban design, in much of modern architecture, has social consequences that are not often adequately appreciated. Winston Churchill once said that, “we shape our buildings; thereafter they shape us.” Churchill recognized the important social role that architecture can play.

In the aforementioned reading, the authors also state that:

“Space has a quicksilver nature that makes it an elusive quarry to capture and define. Holding space in place requires not only strong walls but walls that grip and hold slivers and chunks of space. This is accomplished by deep large scale indentations, bold sculptural projections and rich texture.”

Further they state, that “light and airy buildings ultra-flat smooth facades and polished reflective surfaces are opposite in character to the masonry wall and do not define space well.” Decoration, long viewed as a useless activity and a waste of material, now can be viewed in light of the requirements of spatial definition.”

SIERRA POINT:

In the late 1970’s, Sierra Point was planned as a suburban style commercial office park including hotel, convention center, restaurant and recreational uses. As part of the approval, the City required the dedication of the easterly 20 acres for a marina. The Design Guidelines for Sierra Point indicate that “the style of the architecture will be very contemporary with the design stressing the grandeur of simple forms.” In addition, that “the same forms should be further articulated by creating exterior balconies, terraces and many corner office spaces which increase the tenants contact with the bay and the Brisbane Marina.”

Of particular interest, the design guidelines also stress that “a rhythmic repetition of certain design elements is essential to maintain continuity of the dual office/recreational theme.” Included in these repetitive design elements is the thought that “open plazas near the buildings along the Bay should be contiguous to public open space.” Further, that “buildings should be grouped to create substantial plaza areas and to provide opportunities for office users to enjoy the out doors as well as to provide place for people to congregate.”

Individually speaking, most of the buildings at Sierra Point have turned out to be above average for this “very contemporary” style of architecture (essentially Corporatism) exhibiting some interesting sculptural attributes. However, it is difficult to come to the same conclusion about the spaces around the buildings at Sierra Point. In fact, the arrangement of the buildings fails to adequately capture space for some of the very reasons cited in the reading material. Despite some sculptural interest, the buildings do not do a good job of defining space. Their smooth and somewhat curved surfaces and their location in the middle of the parcels let the surrounding space escape containment.

According to the design guidelines, “the buildings should be grouped to create substantial plaza areas.” While substantial open areas do exist around the buildings, they are ill defined and fail to create desirable places to congregate. This seems in conflict with the basic idea that a plaza should be enclosed like an “outdoor room.” The reading material suggests that the size, shape and floor configuration are important ingredients to the creation of successful plazas. One of the examples cited in the reading materials is the failed attempt to create “the modern equivalent of a Renaissance plaza” with the Boston Government Center Plaza. The excessive size of the space and the lack of sufficient enclosure from buildings surrounding the plaza are the problem. Although it is a completely different setting, this helps illustrate why the “open plazas” at Sierra Point don’t really work.

One of the consequences of the “sculptures in the park” suburban office park model is that the placement of the buildings leads to a considerable amount of surface parking in front of the buildings, rather than hidden behind. Although one parking structure has been built, it is an uninteresting monolithic concrete structure that detracts from the character of the

existing buildings and creates dead space. The importance of designing parking structures (especially those in highly visible locations) that don't detract from the architectural character of the buildings and public space should not be over-looked.

Considerable attention is given in the Sierra Point design guidelines to landscape design. Although there has been some degree of success with the establishment of the landscape at Sierra Point, a combination of insufficient plant materials and a hostile micro-climate (wind, soil depth and salt air) have resulted in a less than fully satisfactory outcome. This should be addressed in the revisions to the design guidelines to set higher expectations from subsequent development.

As the City Council and the Planning Commission are aware, after several years of inactivity, there has been a renewed interest in the remaining development potential at Sierra Point. The City is currently considering development permit applications for a five building biotech campus with a parking structure, an 800 room resort hotel/condominium project, and the staff has been approached by developers about the potential for additional office, retail and residential development. Whether or not these particular developments go forward, at some point, Sierra Point will eventually build out.

While the establishment of the marina and other public amenities at Sierra Point represents a great accomplishment for the City, notwithstanding the remaining vacant land, there is a lingering sense of a lack of completion to the public realm. From the lack of a "sense of entry," at the west end to the absence of a "sense of arrival" at the Marina, Sierra Point and the Parkway spine still lack a strong "sense of place." Despite these problems, there is still time and opportunity to redirect the remaining build out of Sierra Point, to ensure that the public realm is "formative." All subsequent development at Sierra Point, and particularly in the Marina area, should be made to support and compliment the public realm.

By including the attached readings, staff has tried to provide the Council and the Commission with concepts and examples of how space can be defined and captured to create great public places. In connection with the general plan update, we have also discussed new urbanism and place making which incorporate many of same principals. In fact, as the last part of their contract with the City, the Project for Public Spaces (Fred Kent) made a preliminary assessment of Sierra Point and developed a draft of "10 Guiding Principals for Sierra Point" (attachment C).

Since last year, we have been discussing the evolution of a new public plaza or park. Whether you call it a green or a plaza it is important to consider the relationship between the space and the surrounding buildings. As the examples from the readings demonstrate, "plaza space should have the feel of an outdoor room and possess an intense three dimensional quality." While this is somewhat more of a challenge at Sierra Point, because of the desirability of maintaining a relatively open view to the east, the principles are still the same. The visitor should feel a degree of enclosure that provides protection from the elements and a sense of intimacy that invites and prolongs social gatherings.

DESIGN CONSIDERATIONS:

To help with the revisions to the Sierra Point design guidelines to enhance the public realm, the City has retained the services of Freedman, Tung and Bottomley, (FTB), a local urban design firm. FTB has developed revised design concepts for the public realm for Council consideration. These concepts can be further refined and incorporated into the design guidelines for Sierra Point. Once established, these guidelines would help to ensure that all subsequent development conforms to the intentions of the City.

In November of last year FTB provided a strategy, in the way of a set of draft goals for the update of the design guidelines (attached D). In addition, FTB provided some draft design concepts for a new public park/plaza near the Marina and for an enhanced Sierra Point Parkway, as the main spine through the district. Greg Tung, a Principal of FTB, will be at the meeting to further describe the design of these public realm areas and to discuss the important relationship, between the public park/plaza and the design of the buildings that may eventually surround that space.

LAND USE/ECONOMIC CONSIDERATIONS:

Another very important aspect of making a successful place making is to ensure that the uses in the adjacent buildings, especially at the ground floor level, support and activate the public space. To help understand the economics realities behind this issue, the City has retained the services of Keyser Marston Associates (KMA). Tim Kelly of KMA will also be at the meeting to review his firm's analysis of the degree to which various uses will serve to activate the new public park/plaza. His report (attachment E) recognizes that providing ground floor retail space is an important component in the success of the proposed new public space. Other possible uses, including residential, are also evaluated to provide information on the degree to which they would individually contribute to the activation of the public realm. The various uses and magnitude of development were chosen primarily for the purposes of illustration. Various levels and combinations of the land use mix would alter the outcome of the analysis.

One of the difficulties of sustaining retail businesses at Sierra Point is the relative isolation and the lack of a 24/7 resident population. Given the location, retail businesses can not expect much draw from the region and would be dependent on the population of local users. It is anticipated that retail development around the public space would take time to evolve. Certain uses are more likely to prosper in the early stages, until the demand for other uses can arise. In the early stages, it may be critical that the City its capacity as a redevelopment agency to help sustain a minimal level of retail activity around the plaza.

As part of the biotech project the staff and the applicants have discussed the possibility of the inclusion of a retail liner building in front of the proposed parking structure to make sure that it properly addresses the proposed park/plaza space with a complimentary architectural design and uses that would help activate the public space.

The EIR for the biotech project indicates that the proposed parking structure would have a significant visual impact at its current location. A retail liner in front of the parking structure would be one way to address that impact, as well as to create increased pedestrian activity for retail uses adjacent to the public plaza. It is anticipated that additional retail uses may eventually occupy the ground floor of the proposed UPC hotel and or the Opus building (discussed below under real estate matters).

It is also interesting to consider whether the proposed resort hotel could provide some sort of attraction, perhaps an iconic building, a small museum, or other public amusement, that could help create a draw from the region.

Finally it is worth noting the Project for Public Spaces (PPS) indicated the importance of programming the public space with activities. A new public square at Sierra Point could provide a new public focus for the activities already held as well as to provide a new venue for additional civic events.

REAL ESTATE MATTERS:

In order to create a new public space at Sierra Point it will be necessary for the Council, acting as the redevelopment agency, to authorize a land trade with both UPC and Opus. In concept, the southerly portion of the parcel owned by UPC that is currently designated for hotel development would be traded to the City, in return for a portion of City owned land to the north of the UPC parcel, so the potential resort hotel could move to the north and make way for the new public space. The western portion of the parcel received in the aforementioned transaction would, in turn, be traded to Opus for their current leasehold of the triangular parcel at the easterly end of Sierra Point Parkway adjacent to the Marina.

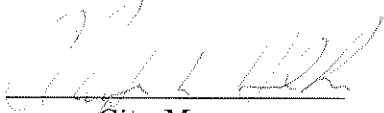
Opus's current leasehold entitles them to develop approximately 50,000 square feet of commercial retail in up to two stories. In return for giving up this leasehold, Opus would acquire the westerly portion of the land received from the UPC trade, on which they could build a multi-story building that would compliment the new public space.

There are advantages for all parties to participate in this trade. In addition to the City acquiring the appropriate location for a new the public space near the Marina at the eastern terminus of Sierra Point Parkway, it would also protect the public view from the new public space across San Francisco Bay, in perpetuity. Both UPC and Opus would gain more valuable location next to a new public space. Further, the trade with Opus could include ownership in fee, rather than in leasehold, and the potential to go up higher and capture more views than their current interest provides.

The staff has had preliminary discussion with the other parties regarding the real estate trades that would be necessary to create the public space. Subject to further Council direction, we have a conceptual agreement from both. At this point, staff is looking for direction from Council to further negotiate the details of the trades.

FISCAL IMPACTS: To be determined


Community Development Director


City Manager

ATTACHMENTS:

- A. (Excerpts from) Livable Cities Observed, S. Lennard and H Lennard
- B. (Excerpts from) Fundamentals of Urban Design, R. Hedman and A. Jaszewski
- C. Project for Public Spaces, 10 Guiding Principles/Themes for Sierra Point.
- D. Goals of Urban Design Update, Freedman Tung and Bottomley
- E. Keyser Marston Associates, Tim Kelley Memorandum of June 2007