



Legislation Text

File #: 22-863, **Version:** 1

Report regarding consideration of a Conditional Use Permit, Design Review, and Transportation Demand Management Plan for the repurposing of a structure into commercial and office space and a Parking Reduction at 201 Baden Avenue in the Downtown Transit Core (DTC) Zoning District and a Class 1, Section 15301 categorical exemption under CEQA in accordance with Title 20 of the South San Francisco Municipal Code. *(Stephanie Skangos, Associate Planner)*

RECOMMENDATION

Staff recommends that the Planning Commission determine that the proposed Conditional Use Permit (UP22-0002), Design Review (DR22-0006), and Transportation Demand Management Plan (TDM22-0001) for the repurposing of the old Firehouse into commercial and office space and a Parking Reduction at 201 Baden Avenue is categorically exempt under the provisions of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), Class 1, Section 15301, Existing Facilities, and approve a Conditional Use Permit, Design Review, and Transportation Demand Management Plan based on the attached Draft Findings and subject to the attached Draft Conditions of Approval.

MOTION FOR THE COMMISSION TO ADOPT STAFF RECOMMENDATION:

(1) Move to make CEQA determination and approve project subject to attached findings and conditions.

BACKGROUND/ DISCUSSION

This item was continued from the October 6, 2022 public hearing to the November 3, 2022 meeting.

Site Overview

The project site is located at 201 Baden Avenue in the Downtown Transit Core (DTC) sub-district of the Downtown Station Area Specific Plan (DSASP) District. The site is a through lot extending from Baden Avenue to Second Lane and is located mid-block between Linden Avenue and Airport Boulevard. The project site, currently owned by the City, is approximately 22,460 square feet (0.51 acres) and consists of three parcels (APNs 012-335-100 and 012-335-110, with the third not possessing an APN). There is an existing retired firehouse and surface parking lot on the site.

Proposal

The applicant is proposing to repurpose the retired firehouse into office space and potential commercial space. The project includes: 1) exterior modifications including painting, replacement of existing doors and windows, and signage; 2) interior tenant improvements to create a multi-tenant office space with shared facilities; and 3) associated site work for landscaping, pathways and surface parking.

This project is part of a larger proposal for the site. In September 2017, the City of South San Francisco issued a Request for Qualifications (RFQ) to create a high quality, mixed-use, transit-oriented development on the project site. Ultimately, a developer team that proposed to retain the existing firehouse for commercial purposes on one half of the site and develop housing on the second half of the site was selected - Firehouse Work LLC (the applicant).

The City has been negotiating the disposition of the project site with the applicant since August 2018. During this time, the applicant has worked with various housing partners to fulfill the housing aspect of their proposal, as submitted in response to the City's Request for Proposals (RFP).

The applicant is moving forward with the Firehouse Work component of the overall project, and the Firehouse Live (or residential) component will continue to be negotiated with the relevant parties and processed for entitlements at a future date. As part of the completion of this initial component, the project site will be reconfigured into two parcels, and a Vacation and Lot Line Adjustment will be processed through the Engineering Division. A Parcel Map for the Vacation and Lot Line Adjustment has already been reviewed and will move forward to City Council approval after Planning entitlements have been approved.

Historic Resource Evaluation

A Historic Resource Evaluation (HRE) was prepared for the project site to determine the historic significance, if any, of the existing firehouse due to its age (Attachment 3). The building was constructed in 1949 as the location of South San Francisco Fire Department's Central Station. Designed by architect William Henry Rowe, the subject building served as the City's first purpose-built fire station between 1949 and 2006, when it was vacated, and fire operations were relocated to a newly constructed station.

The HRE evaluated the building based on the California Register of Historical Resources (CRHR) criteria for historic significance, as well as the City's criteria for designation of historic resources found in South San Francisco Municipal Code (SSFMC Chapter 2.56 (Planning Commission)). The subject building appears to be individually eligible for listing in the CRHR under two of the four criteria for historic significance and also appears to qualify under several evaluative criteria for local historic listing under the SSFMC.

At this time, the City has not opted to undergo the application process to designate the structure as a historic resource. The structure is also not listed in the CRHR at this time. However, because the HRE concluded that the existing firehouse appears to be individually eligible for listing in the CRHR, the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) Guidelines generally requires the City, as the project's lead agency, to treat the structure as a historically significant resource (Pub. Res. Code Section 5024.1; CEQA Guidelines section 15064.5(3)-(4)). In order to confirm that the proposed alterations to the structure included in the project would not have a significant impact on the historic integrity of the resource, a Standards Compliance Review to provide guidance on the compliance of proposed alterations to the structure with the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation (SOI Standards)(codified at 36 C.F.R 68) was prepared as a supplement to the HRE (Attachment 4). The SOI Standards are a series of administrative regulations that provide guidance on, among other things, the protection of historic building materials and character-defining features as a historic building or resource is altered to meet continuing or new uses while retaining the building's historic character. Compliance with these guidelines would preserve a historic resource instead of creating a significant adverse effect upon its features and characteristics.

The Standards Compliance Review analyzed the proposal against 10 key elements listed by the SOI Standards that should be considered when new uses or architectural modifications are undertaken within historic resources and determined that the proposed alterations are compliant with seven of the 10 key elements and marginally compliant with three of the 10. A compliant rating indicates that the alteration has little or no impact on the resource. A marginally compliant rating indicates that the overall historical significance of the resources is not impacted enough to warrant re-evaluation, but modifications to the proposed design are strongly recommended.

The Standards Compliance Review concludes that the proposed project is compliant overall with the SOI

Standards. Overall compliance is not necessarily a direct sum of the level of compliance with each individual standard. However, that information is weighed with the overall impact on both the design and historical significance of the resource. Depending on the reasons for significance and the level of importance of the resource, different levels of overall compliance may result. The majority of character-defining features and most of the remaining historic steel windows would be retained by the proposed project. For those elements with a marginally compliant rating, inclusion of a minor modification is suggested to decrease the impact on the historic resource and raise its proposed design into more compliance with the SOI Standards. The suggested modification is listed below related to infill of three steel windows and included as a recommended Condition of Approval in Attachment 1 with slight modifications to language as necessary. It should be noted that the report conservatively assumes the infill of these windows as a possibility for the project.

Proposed Infill of Steel Windows

The proposed infill of the three historic steel windows next to the proposed trash enclosure should be avoided if possible. It is unclear if this would be needed due to structural or aesthetic purposes. If based on structural issues, this should be noted, and the proposed infill of the three windows in question should be indicated on the final drawing set. If solely based on aesthetic reasons, the necessity for infill should be re-evaluated and reconsidered by the architect so that the building might retain as many historic windows as possible.

ZONING CONSISTENCY ANALYSIS

Proposed Use

The project site is located in the Downtown Transit Core (DTC) sub-district of the Downtown Station Area Specific Plan (DSASP) District. Per SSFMC Section 20.280.003 (Land Use Regulations-Downtown Station Area Specific Plan Sub-Districts), office uses are allowed by-right, and a variety of commercial uses are allowed, either by-right or with the approval of a Use Permit. At this time, the three new tenant spaces are proposed for office use with the potential for one tenant space to possibly be used for retail. A condition of approval has been recommended that requires that any potential commercial use for the one tenant space to be evaluated for zoning consistency during the business license process and/or building permit process for interior tenant improvements.

Design Review

The project includes the renovation and exterior modification of the existing firehouse. Exterior modifications include new paint, the replacement of overhead doors with storefront windows and doors, and the infilling of some doors and windows. Additional site work, including new landscaping, pathways and a surface parking lot, as well as the expansion of the existing sidewalk along Baden Avenue, are also proposed. The exterior modifications present an improvement over the present conditions and is compatible with the design guidelines for the Downtown Station Area Specific Plan, as well as current development standards.

Parking Reduction Request and TDM Plan

The conversion of the existing firehouse into new office tenant spaces requires a reevaluation of required parking for the site. Pursuant to SSFMC Section 20.330.007 (Required On-Site Parking Spaces, Downtown Districts), a total of 29 parking spaces is required, using the required parking ratio for business and professional office use. If one of the tenant spaces will be used for commercial use, the total number of parking spaces required decreases to 25. The parking ratio for retail use is the same as the ratio for business and professional use, but no parking is required for the first 1,500 square feet of floor area for retail sales.

A new surface parking lot containing five parking spaces with access from Second Lane is proposed, which is 24 spaces less than what is required. As mentioned above, this proposal is part of a larger project for the site that includes the reconfiguration of the parcels that make up the project site, and this proposal will be located on a parcel of its own. The new configuration for this parcel will cause the existing building to take up a majority of the site, creating limited opportunity to provide additional parking spaces on-site.

Pursuant to SSFMC Section 20.330.006, applicants may obtain a parking reduction for any use through applying for a Conditional Use Permit, which the Planning Commission would review and may only grant such permit if it finds that: (a) special conditions-including but not limited to the nature of the proposed operation; proximity to frequent transit service; transportation characteristics of persons residing, working, or visiting the site; or because the applicant has undertaken a transportation demand management program-exist that will reduce parking demand at the site; (b) use will adequately be served by the proposed on-site parking; and (c) parking demand generated by the project will not exceed the capacity of or have a detrimental impact on the supply of on-street parking in the surrounding area.

In support of the parking reduction request, the applicant has voluntarily proposed a draft Transportation Demand Management (TDM) plan (Attachment 4). Pursuant to SSFMC Chapter 20.400 (Transportation Demand Management), a TDM plan is required for all nonresidential development expected to generate 100 or more average daily trips, based on the Institute of Traffic Engineers (ITE) trip generation rates. A trip generation analysis was prepared for the project and determined that the project would not generate more than 100 daily trips. Therefore, this project would otherwise not require the implementation of a TDM plan, but one has been submitted to help relieve parking demand and support a reduction in on-site parking spaces.

The draft TDM plan provides a concise description of TDM Measures that the project will implement in order to comply with the DSASP's goal to "provide for a balanced mix of travel modes - including pedestrians, bicyclists, transit and automobiles."

The location of the project site within the Downtown Station Area Specific Plan (DSASP) area, which promotes pedestrian and bicycle travel in a high-density area of complementary land uses, and within a ¼-mile radius of the Caltrain Station and four SamTrans bus routes, which promotes use of alternate modes of transportation, will help reduce the parking demand at the project site. The adjacent proximity of the Caltrain plaza and station, as well as four SamTrans bus routes and retail and amenity uses in Downtown, will promote opportunities for office employees to walk or use public transportation and reduce dependency on single-occupancy vehicles. Additionally, the installation of eight long-term bicycle parking spaces within the renovated building will promote alternative modes of transportation. For those employees opting for vehicular use, the project site is located within proximity to several existing Downtown parking garages that will adequately serve their needs.

Due to the project's transit-oriented location, implementation of the measures outlined in the draft TDM plan, and availability of public parking in the surrounding area, staff supports the request for a parking reduction from 29 to five parking spaces. Further, a Condition of Approval for project entitlements will be included to ensure TDM compliance.

It is worth noting that effective January 1, 2023, most projects within ½ mile of a major transit station such as SSF Caltrain will be exempt from Parking Minimums by State Law. Consideration of parking reductions like this in the areas of the City close to SSF BART, SSF Caltrain, the El Camino Real Corridor and near SamTrans high volume service will not be subject to local decision.

GENERAL PLAN CONSISTENCY ANALYSIS

The proposed project is consistent with the City's General Plan, which designates the site as Downtown Transit Core (DTC). This land use designation is envisioned to be a vibrant, mixed-use area, and due to its proximity to the Caltrain Station, this area is suitable for higher intensities to support transit ridership. The project includes repurposing a vacant, unused building into new office tenant space, which revitalizes and activates the area, meeting the intent of the adopted General Plan designation.

DESIGN REVIEW BOARD

The project was reviewed by the Design Review Board (DRB) on April 19, 2022. The DRB had a positive reception to the design concept and liked the re-use of the retired firehouse. Additionally, the DRB commented that the exterior modifications are an improvement to the project site. The DRB supported the design and recommended approval to the Planning Commission with minor comments, most of which have already been incorporated into the project plans (see Attachments 2 and 5). A Condition of Approval for any DRB comments that have not been addressed has been included in the draft Conditions of Approval found in Attachment 1.

ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW

It is staff's assessment that the proposed project is categorically exempt under the provisions of CEQA, Class 1, Section 15301, Existing Facilities. The project site is an existing developed property surrounded by existing commercial buildings. The proposal includes minor exterior modifications to renovate the exterior of the building and interior improvements to create new tenant spaces. As noted in the Discussion section above, the existing firehouse is potentially eligible but not included on any historic resources list, but the proposed project nonetheless is overall consistent with the Secretary of Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation of historic properties, and thus would not cause a substantial adverse change in the significance of a historical resource.

CONCLUSION

The project, as conditioned, is compliant with the City's Municipal Code, General Plan, Zoning Development Standards and Design Criteria. Therefore, staff recommends that the Planning Commission determine that the proposed Conditional Use Permit (UP22-0002), Design Review (DR22-0006), and Transportation Demand Management Plan (TDM22-0001) for the repurposing of the old Firehouse into commercial and office space and a Parking Reduction is categorically exempt under the provisions of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), Class 1, Section 15301, Existing Facilities, and approve the Conditional Use Permit, Design Review, and Transportation Demand Management Plan based on the attached Draft Findings and subject to the attached Draft Conditions of Approval.

Attachments:

1. Draft Findings and Conditions of Approval
2. Project Plans
3. 201 Baden Avenue Historic Resource Evaluation, dated May 28, 2019
4. 201 Baden Avenue Standards Compliance Review, dated October 20, 2022
5. Preliminary Transportation Demand Management Plan, dated May 10, 2022
6. Design Review Board (DRB) Comment Letter, dated May 2, 2022