

Perkins&Will

DRAFT Architectural and Urban Design Review for 8825 Washington Blvd, Pico Rivera CA Round 2 Comments

Date: 6.10.2022

Authored by: Martin Leitner

INTRODUCTION

This is the second round of design review for the proposed development project located at 8825 Washington Blvd. Perkins&Will provided an initial review of the project design on 1.10.22. This memo provides an updated review based on the revised project design documents and comments provided by the applicant. Key consideration for the second review is the response to round one comments. Brief summaries of initial review comments are provided for convenience. See initial review document for full comments.

This review considers the proposed design relative to the existing development context and urban design best practices. We also consider the extent to which the proposed design serves as a precedent that will guide future transit-oriented development around Rosemead Station.

This review is prepared in support of the governmental review and discretion to be exercised by the City of Pico Rivera. This review does not supplant or take the place of such discretion and governmental action.

Documents Reviewed

The following documents were provided and reviewed:

- Development plan set dated 3.24.22
- Response comments 3.24.2022

Unless noted otherwise, all dimension and metrics cited are based on information provided in the reviewed documents. Indication of cardinal directions are called out relative to the plan set's orientation, e.g., "plan north."

SUMMARY

The project continues to propose significant density on a somewhat constrained site. The removal of one of the two fire lanes has decompresses the site. Design changes to the ground floor frontages along the street and pedestrian walk frontages provide considerable improvements to the project. The applicant team incorporated multiple design review recommendations into the revised design.

That said, the proposed 'wrap' building type and the site's integration with the adjoining commercial strip center continue to drive much of the project's site design. Furthermore, the project's site design continues to propose that site areas are either built out or paved over. From the standpoint of stormwater management and urban heat island effect mitigation, this arrangement is unfavorable.

The massing and height adjacent to the existing single-family homes was revised and improved. A holistic review of heights and height transitions is still recommended to inform future development in the TDO area, even if this project proceeds as designed.

Finally, sustainability features including site permeability, solar, stormwater management, and other strategies should be explored to improve the performance of the building. While a commitment to explore sustainability measures was made, it would be desirable to see specific measures identified early in the design process to ensure sustainability is integral to the project's design.

PROJECT AND CONTEXT

Project and site description

The project description appears generally unchanged from the initial design review.

DESIGN REVIEW: SITE DESIGN

General site design strategy

The general site design strategy appears largely unchanged. A second fire access lane entering from Washington Blvd was eliminated (see below).

Street frontage

Public streetscape.

Initial Review Recommendation: The public streetscape design should be coordinated with the anticipated future build-out roadway section. Sidewalk, parkway, and frontage zones should be determined for the entire block frontage so that they are consistent across multiple adjoining developments.

Round 2 Comments: While a coordination of the public streetscape design with the anticipated future roadway section does not appear to have been conducted, several improvements to the streetscape have been made (see below). The public sidewalk does not appear to have been widened. In anticipation of future foot traffic in this TOD area, a 10 to 12-foot sidewalk should be considered.

Private streetscape.

Initial Review Comments: The initial review comments recommended reconsideration of the sloped planters along the street frontage.

Round 2 Comments: The private setback design provides several improvements over the initially reviewed design.

- The sloped planters were eliminated and replaced with private porches with level planter areas providing a transition to the public sidewalk.
- Palm trees were replaced with canopy trees.

Street wall.

Initial Review Recommendation: Establish minimum facade lengths for buildings fronting major streets to enhance the pedestrian environment.

Round 2 Comments: The length of the Washington Blvd-facing street wall was lengthened significantly—an improvement to the project design that will set a positive precedent.

Activation.

Initial Review Comments: Initial review recommended considering alternative designs of the Washington Blvd street frontage to improve ground-floor activation. Proposed alternatives included relocation of retail or ground-floor stoops.

Round 2 Comments: Ground-floor stoops are implemented for units along the Washington Blvd frontage, a significant design improvement.

- Porches provide direct access to the sidewalk and add activation to the length of the frontage.

Curb cuts.

Initial Review Comments: The project proposes two curb cuts along the Washington Blvd frontage. (Note. Two curb cuts existed in the existing development). Curb cuts disrupt the sidewalk and create areas of conflict between pedestrians and vehicles crossing the sidewalk. To promote walkability, it is recommended to limit the number and the width of curb cuts as much as possible. We recommend reviewing the necessity of the western curb cut. This curb cut appears to provide fire access and access to the electrical transformer. It will likely see very limited use while creating a significant disruption to the street frontage.

Initial Review Recommendation: Limit the number and frequency of curb cuts along public streets. Provide design standards for vehicular ingress and egress points that include criteria for width, curb radii, and ensure sidewalk continuity wherever possible.

Round 2 Comments: The western curb cut was eliminated, reducing the number of project curb cuts to one. This curb cut is shared with the existing retail center. The revised design is a significant improvement over the initial design.

On-site circulation

Pedestrian circulation.

Initial Review Recommendation: Require primary building entrances to be located at public streets. Encourage connected sidewalk systems on large sites and between adjoining developments. Integrate ground-floor open spaces with the pedestrian circulation.

Round 2 Comments: Multiple entries are proposed along the pedestrian walk. While the final distribution of entries will likely depend on the number and size of commercial tenants, the design intent is positive.

Towards the northeast corner of the site, a new “vehicular accent paving” area was introduced. While the intent of this feature is not immediately apparent, it could be interpreted as a designated pedestrian crossing area. Given that the backup space of multiple parking stalls adjoins this accent area and that it does not resolve clearly the intended pedestrian circulation, removal of this feature should be considered. Furthermore, a comprehensive review of the pedestrian circulation and connections between dedicated walk areas should be considered.

Vehicular circulation.

Initial Review Comments: Potential conflicts between surface parking and access to the parking garage entry were called out.

Round 2 Comments: The vehicular circulation was modified and improved.

Parking areas.

Initial Review Recommendations: Consideration of urban heat island effect in parking areas.

Round 2 Comments: Palm trees are replaced with shade trees and will provide increased shading.

Fire access.

Initial Review Recommendations: Recommendation to eliminate on fire access lane as feasible.

Round 2 Comments: The western fire access lane off Washington Blvd is eliminated, a very positive evolution of the site plan.

Open spaces

Game lawn and dog run area.

Initial Review Recommendations: Require minimum areas for permeable or unpaved areas in at-grade open spaces.

Round 2 Comments: Recommendation not implemented. Site areas designated as “open space” and shown in green on landscape plans continue to be dominated by impermeable materials.

Green setback areas.

Initial Review Recommendations: Require clarification of intended plantings, dimensions, and irrigation for proposed landscape areas.

Round 2 Comments: Some of the setback areas have been widened and new pedestrian walkways provided. These are significant improvements. The intent for planting and irrigation of the adjoining landscape areas was not clarified.

Emergency vehicle access and dog run.

Initial Review Comments: Comments highlighted the extensive use of synthetic lawn and narrow dimensions of the paseo.

Round 2 Comments: The revised massing lowers the building height at the courtyard and the synthetic lawn was replaced with paving.

Landscape materials.

Initial Review Recommendations: Consider medium to large canopy trees to provide shade in on-site open areas.

Round 2 Comments: Canopy trees replace palm trees in several landscape areas. Synthetics lawn area is unchanged.

DESIGN REVIEW: BUILDING DESIGN

Building typology

No new comments.

Massing and height

The building height and massing strategies were revised. The proposed building now steps down to three stories at the northwest corner of the site.

Façade articulation

No new comments.

Ground floor design

Retail design.

Initial Review Recommendations: Require minimum height, depth, and façade glazing percentage standards for active ground floor frontages.

Round 2 Comments: Retail façade design is improved with expanded glazing areas and a clear height of 12 feet.

Residential lobby.

Round 2 Comments: Residential lobby remains at the back of the site.

Washington Blvd. entrance.

Round 2 Comments: The resolution of the ground floor entry appears better resolved and the street wall was extended.

Parking garage design.

No new comments.

Utilities.

Round 2 Comments: The applicant has committed to locating utility connections out of public view where possible and screening exposed equipment connections with landscape materials or enclosures.

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Date: 1.10.2022

Authored by: Martin Leitner

INTRODUCTION

The City of Pico Rivera has retained Perkins&Will through Rincon Consultants Inc. to provide an architectural and urban design review of the proposed development project at 8825 Washington Blvd. The project is a mixed-use infill project consisting of residential uses partially over ground-floor retail uses with an integrated parking structure and adjoining site improvements. The project proposes 255 residential units and approximately 5,500 sq. ft. of retail uses. It is situated in proximity to the intersection of Washington Blvd and Rosemead Blvd and the future Rosemead transit station.

This review considers the proposed design relative to the existing development context and urban design best practices. We also consider the extent to which the proposed design serves as a precedent that will guide future transit-oriented development around Rosemead Station.

This review is prepared in support of the governmental review and discretion to be exercised by the City of Pico Rivera. This review does not supplant or take the place of such discretion and governmental action.

Documents Reviewed

The following documents were provided and reviewed:

- Development plan set dated 5.7.21
- Specific plan application dated 11.9.20

Unless noted otherwise, all dimension and metrics cited are based on information provided in the reviewed documents. Indication of cardinal directions are called out relative to the plan set's orientation, e.g., "plan north."

SUMMARY

The proposed mixed-use infill development achieves significant density on a highly constrained and irregularly shaped site with limited street frontage. It utilizes a cost-effective 'wrap' building type with residential uses lining an internal parking structure. This building type requires a large footprint and limits flexibility in terms of massing articulation.

While the proposed mixed-use program and residential density are consistent with transit-oriented development goals, the proposed site and building design misses the opportunity to establish good urban development patterns. As proposed, the design does not establish a pattern of connected, walkable urbanism appropriate for a transit-oriented community. Instead, it enshrines the logic of the adjoining commercial strip center into future development phases.

It appears that the selected building type, a desire to maximize the residential unit yield, compliance with fire access requirements, and maintaining the existing commercial strip center's vehicular circulation patterns significantly drive the project design. From the site arrangement, the location of retail frontage and building lobby, to the lack of height articulation next to existing single-family homes the building does little to activate the public realm or respond to the existing context.

The site design proposes that most of the site is either built out or paved over while providing only limited shade. From the standpoint of stormwater management and urban heat island effect mitigation, this arrangement is unfavorable. Alternative and more sustainable solutions should be explored.

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Modifications to the ground floor design, building entrances, circulation, and open space arrangements would help connect the project to its context and establish a stronger TOD precedent for the area. A revised massing and height development adjacent to the existing single-family homes could be considered for this project and the entire TOD area. In addition, sustainability features including site permeability, solar, stormwater management, and other strategies should be explored to improve the performance of the building.

PROJECT AND CONTEXT

Project and site description

The project is situated on an approximately 2.9-acre site (124,366 sq. ft.). The infill site is located mid-block with a street frontage on Washington Blvd. The mixed-use project consists primarily of residential uses totaling 255 dwelling units (DU) with an effective density of 86 DU per acre. The retail uses are located at grade and total approximately 5,500 sq. ft. The residential and retail uses enclose ('wrap') a vehicular parking structure that serves the project.

Neighborhood context

Immediate context. The south side of the project fronts onto Washington Blvd, a multi-lane arterial street. In the future, a new Metro light rail line will run along Washington Blvd. Commercial strip development adjoins the site on three sides, the west, north, and south. The site also shares property lines with 12 single-family properties to the north and west.

Larger context. The context is characterized by almost exclusively single-use buildings ranging between one and three stories in height. Strip commercial development is the predominant use on the Washington Blvd corridor. Low, one to two-story buildings with large footprints are surrounded by large surface parking lots. Individual apartment buildings on and around Washington Blvd rise to three stories. Beyond the corridor, single-family homes are one to two stories in height with significantly smaller footprints.

Planning context

TOD area. We understand that the project site and surrounding areas have been identified as a future transit-oriented development district. A TOD specific plan effort for the area is underway. This project's timeline is tracking ahead of the specific plan initiative. It is assumed that the existing commercial strip properties may redevelop in the future.

Housing opportunity sites. The project site and surrounding areas have also been identified as housing opportunity areas in the City's Housing Element Update.

DESIGN REVIEW: SITE DESIGN

General site design strategy

The project design proposes locating a new mixed-use building at the center of the site occupying most of the site. The site perimeter accommodates vehicular and pedestrian circulation, fire department access, code-required fire separation distances, and open space areas.

The parking structure is located at the center of the building with building wings lining it on four sides. This development typology is customarily referred to as a 'wrap' project.

The vehicular circulation areas are integrated into the circulation and parking patterns of the existing adjoining commercial strip center. While this arrangement provides efficiencies for the project, it will require that future developments on adjoining sites maintain lanes to accommodate vehicular and fire department access for this project.

Street frontage



Washington Blvd street frontage design shown on Landscape Concept Plan (L-1)

Public streetscape. The project’s primary and only street frontage is at Washington Blvd. It measures approximately 272 ft. along the public right of way (Source: LA County Assessor’s Map). The project design proposes a continuous planted parkway between the curb and the public sidewalk. The parkway is planted with medium-sized regularly spaced canopy street trees. Sidewalk shade is an important feature of a successful and resilient streetscape.

If the future configuration of Washington Blvd envisions a vehicular travel lane along the project frontage, it should be considered that large passing vehicles would likely damage the tree canopy. If this is the case, placing the canopy trees on the building side of the sidewalk should be considered to prevent such damage.

The public sidewalk is continuous measures approximately 8 ft. wide (dimension estimated from provided plans). This dimension seems narrow for a major arterial street in a TOD district where significant pedestrian activity should be anticipated and planned for. A sidewalk width of 10 to 12 ft. minimum should be considered.

Recommendation: The public streetscape design should be coordinated with the anticipated future build-out roadway section. Sidewalk, parkway, and frontage zones should be determined for the entire block frontage so that they are consistent across multiple adjoining developments.

Private streetscape. The private setback consists of a planted area that separates the public sidewalk from the proposed ground-floor units. The planted areas slopes up from the public sidewalk to the unit frontages. While this sloped configuration is generally acceptable, it should be ensured that the sloped design is maintained through the execution of the project. Often sidewalk-adjacent planted areas become 24 to 36 in. high raised boxes to accommodate stormwater filtration. Such raised planters are unsightly and not pedestrian-friendly.



Example of raised stormwater planter (left) and recessed stormwater planter (right). Source: Google

Street wall. Building facades framing the public right of way form street walls. Street walls help create comfortable street spaces or outdoor rooms and enhance the pedestrian experience. The project's Washington Blvd-facing facade measures approximately 160 ft. east to west. On an overall frontage length of 272 ft. that is a little over half (59%) of the frontage length. While it cannot be expected that a single project establishes a complete pattern of street enclosure for the entire TOD area, lengthening the building's street frontage would help create a more pedestrian-friendly streetscape and set a positive precedent.

Recommendation: Establish minimum facade lengths for buildings fronting major streets to enhance the pedestrian environment.

Activation. The proposed ground-floor residential units provide less sidewalk activation than retail frontages. In many cases, mandating ground-floor retail uses has led to vacant storefronts, which are not desirable and counterproductive. Since the project already proposes ground-floor retail, the provision of some ground-floor retail fronting onto Washington Blvd should be explored with the applicant. In lieu of ground-floor retail, the activation potential of the ground-floor residential units can be increased by providing stoop units with individual unit entries from the sidewalk.



Active ground-floor frontage design on a major arterial on a recently completed project in Carson, CA. Source: Google

Curb cuts. The project proposes two curb cuts along the Washington Blvd frontage. Curb cuts disrupt the sidewalk and create areas of conflict between pedestrians and vehicles crossing the sidewalk. To promote walkability, it is recommended to limit the number and the width of curb cuts as much as possible. We recommend reviewing the necessity of the western curb cut. This curb cut appears to provide fire access and access to the electrical transformer. It will likely see very limited use while creating a significant disruption to the street frontage.

Should this curb cut need to be maintained, it is recommended to move the fence line forward so that it is in line with the building facade and explore the use of the lane area as a tenant amenity space.

We understand that the eastern curb cut is an existing ingress and egress point. Given its design that completely interrupts the sidewalk presents a significant potential conflict point with pedestrian traffic. To address this issue, the access point should be redesigned similar to a street intersection. To improve pedestrian safety, the curb radius should be reduced to a minimum and crosswalk markings be applied to delineate the pedestrian crossing area.

Recommendation: Limit the number and frequency of curb cuts along public streets. Provide design standards for vehicular ingress and egress points that include criteria for width, curb radii, and ensure sidewalk continuity wherever possible.



Existing curb cut (left). Source: Google

On-site circulation

Pedestrian circulation. The on-site pedestrian circulation consists of a single walk extending the length of the eastern building facade, turning west along the northern building façade, and terminating mid-façade. The sidewalk provides access from the public sidewalk at Washington Blvd to the main residential lobby at the northeastern corner of the building. The remainder of the sidewalk provides pedestrian access to the surface parking stalls at the back of the building.

While this sidewalk provides basic building access, the pedestrian circulation does not create a larger logical system of pedestrian connections for the district. In this context, it should be noted that the residential lobby is located at the rear of the property and away from the primary street frontage. Relocating this entrance should be explored (see below). Furthermore, connections between the pedestrian circulation and ground-floor open spaces would be desirable.

Recommendation: Require primary building entrances to be located at public streets. Encourage connected sidewalk systems on large sites and between adjoining developments. Integrate ground-floor open spaces with the pedestrian circulation.

Vehicular circulation. Vehicles enter from Washington Blvd and use a shared access lane to approach the parking structure entrance. The vehicular access is lined by surface parking on either side and function as a parking aisle. This configuration is efficient but creates potential conflicts and queueing issues as cars park in surface stalls. A more direct access to the parking structure that is not encumbered by surface parking is encouraged. A direct access to the parking garage from Washington Blvd could be contemplated.

Parking areas. The parking areas are extensively paved and provide only very limited landscaping. The selected trees provide limited shade which can exasperate the urban heat island effect.

Fire access. Fire access is provided via two entry points off Washington Blvd. There is a fire lane at the western end of the project that is short enough not to require a turn-around. The fire lane at the eastern side of the project spans the length of the site, turns west behind the building, and then turns south into a building courtyard. The site area allocated to fire vehicle circulation is significant and shapes the site design by requiring extensive access, clear areas, and paved areas. A thorough review of the fire access strategy is recommended to understand if site areas could be unencumbered to make better use of the areas.

Open spaces

The project's at-grade open space areas are distributed on the four sides of the project. They are generally narrow and appear to be driven by required setbacks and access requirements. Much of the at-grade open space doubles as a fire lane or accommodate utilities, e.g., electrical transformers and concrete pads. The private streetscape and pedestrian circulation areas have already been discussed above.

The amenity areas at the perimeter of the building abut adjacent commercial properties and single-family homes. The perimeter is screened with a screen wall, which in turn are screened with evergreen hedges.

Game lawn and dog run area. Access to the largest of these areas, the western amenity area, is provided via a ground-floor breezeway. The access point is far from the main lobby and elevator cores. There is no at-grade access from the pedestrian circulation. It is not convenient for most of the residents. Within this space there are two activity areas. The northern area is called out as a dog run, the southern as a game lawn with lounge seating.

In the landscape plans (L-1) the dark green areas indicate synthetic lawn. The materiality of the light green areas is not identified. All trees are palm trees.

Recommendation: Require minimum areas for permeable or unpaved areas in at-grade open spaces.

Green setback areas. Setback areas are located to the south and west and are very narrow. Given their limited dimension, adjacency to ground-floor units, and the absence of a pedestrian path, they appear not to be intended to be inhabited. The areas are indicated in light green, but the intended plant material is not identified (L-1). A portion of these setback areas accommodates an electrical transformer.

Recommendation: Require clarification of intended plantings, dimensions, and irrigation for proposed landscape areas.

Emergency vehicle access and dog run. A T-shaped area is located at the north of the property. It consists of setback areas a building courtyard. The dimensions are very limited as is access. The smallest courtyard measures only 22'-4" across with the building rising 64'-7" high on either side. This limits daylight into the open space and limits its use to a passageway.

The geometry larger portion of this open space is driven by the fire access and turn requirements. Since fire trucks require paved areas with high load capacities, the dark green areas indicated on the landscape plan (L-1) are again synthetic grass. The proposed use as a dog run is limited. Combined with the limited access through building corridors this open space seems to be inconvenient for most residents.

Landscape materials. The project proposes extensive use of synthetic lawn. While this is a low-maintenance water-efficient solution, it does not reduce urban heat the way live plant materials do. It also significantly reduces or prevents percolation of rainwater.

The landscape does not call out a plant material for areas shaded in light green. While these may be turf, the areas are often narrow and have limited lighting. This complicates irrigation and success of plant materials.

The tree selection and plan favors palm trees. The *Washingtonia filifera* is proposed throughout parking areas where expansive paved areas increase the urban heat island effect. The *Washingtonia filifera* is a tall tree with a limited canopy and will not provide significant amounts of shade.

Recommendation: Consider medium to large canopy trees to provide shade in on-site open areas.

DESIGN REVIEW: BUILDING DESIGN

Building typology

The project proposes a 'wrap' building typology in which primarily residential uses line a central parking structure. This typology is different from 'podium' buildings in which residential uses are located above a one to two-story concrete parking podium. Both typologies extensively utilize wood-frame construction for the residential portions of the project and achieve significant densities.

Of the two, the 'wrap' building is simpler from a construction standpoint, lower cost, and can accommodate more parking. The 'wrap' building is also less flexible and requires a larger footprint that's driven by the dimensions of the wrapped parking structure.

The 'podium' building is slightly more complex and expensive. It achieves higher residential densities. It also allows for smaller building footprints and accommodates more design flexibility when it comes to height and massing.

The choice of the 'wrap' building type significantly drives the building and site design.

Massing and height

The building height is six stories. It steps down to five stories adjacent to the single-family homes and rises to seven stories at the enclosed rooftop amenity spaces.

The aerial view photomontages (A.06) show that despite the stepback to five stories, there is a significant height difference between the existing single-family homes and the proposed project. Height transitions to existing single-family homes are commonly a community concern. Many jurisdictions employ transitional height limits at properties abutting single-family districts.

Recommendation: Since this project will likely be precedent-setting for future TOD developments in the area, an exploration of the height adjacency is recommended.

Façade articulation

The façade design has a significant amount of articulation through materials, color, and plane changes.

Ground floor design

Retail design. The ground floor can provide significant activation of public site areas. The retail frontage is located at the east building frontage. The façade design shows significant solid wall areas, which is not conducive to retail activation. More transparency would be desirable.

The shallow store depth of approximately 25 ft. will likely accommodate a limited number of tenants that occupy shallow but longer storefront segments. While the height of the retail space is not clear, the height appears constraining. A clear height of 12 ft. or more would be recommended.

The site's gradual slope will prove challenges for at-grade retail entrances if all retail spaces share a single slab height. Even small grade changes could require stairs or ramps. To avoid these, it is recommended to explore stepping the ground floor slab to accommodate entrances.

The outdoor dining area is enclosed with solid walls. A more open enclosure design or eliminating the enclosure would create a more inviting ground floor experience.

Recommendation: Require minimum height, depth, and façade glazing percentage standards for active ground floor frontages.

Residential lobby. The residential lobby is located at the northeastern corner of the building. As noted above, this is effectively the back of the building. As a result, all building circulation and resulting activity is oriented away from the public street. Relocating the residential lobby to the Washington Blvd frontage would bring desirable sidewalk activation.

Washington Blvd. entrance. The ground floor plan (A.14) identifies a building entrance at the corner of Washington Blvd and the fire lane. This entrance is recessed and below a deep building overhang. Given the overall building layout and the absence of a elevator in this area it would be anticipated that this entrance would see very little use. In our experience, the space created by the recessed corner will not feel safe or welcoming. Filling in the streetwall to create a continuous frontage would be advisable.

Parking garage design. The parking garage is entirely screened from view. This is very positive and we suggest considering design standards for lining and screening public views of parking garages to be required throughout the TOD district.

Utilities. The treatment of utility POCs is not described in the project proposal. In general, utility connections including water mains, backflow preventers, gas meters, standpipes, and similar items should be located out of sight or screened with enclosures or landscape materials sufficient in height to obscure them from view. In particular, utility connections for retail spaces should be located away from public walks, seating areas, and entries.

The project design indicates two electrical transformers. Consideration should be given to how these are treated visually. The one located at the north of the project appears to be prominently visible from the pedestrian walk. Finding an alternate location for this equipment is recommended.