June 4, 2015

Members, Zoning Adjustments Board

City of Berkeley

Regarding: Center Street Garage Rebuild

Dear ZAB Members:

I am writing in regard to your consideration of City approvals for the Center Street Garage rebuilding project on your June 11th agenda.

With the possible exception of photovoltaics on the roof, the project proposed is essentially an unimaginative 20th century design for a parking garage. It could and should be so much more.

There is the constant refrain that Berkeley should have a "green" downtown. This should extend to parking structures as well. This should be a 21st century garage, not just a more seismically safe replacement structure.

How can that be accomplished? I've listed below some of the features that should be an essential part of this garage, including storm-water retention and reuse.

The structure also provides Downtown with a rare opportunity—perhaps its only opportunity—to provide a substantial amount of new public open space in the Downtown core. *Downtown could be provided with a substantial public rooftop park on this parking structure, larger than several existing Berkeley city parks.*

The rooftop space could be easily configured to accommodate uses such as tennis and basketball courts, and community gardens, that are not in the SOSIP streetscape plan for Downtown and cannot be feasibly accommodated at street level in the Downtown.

Here are some specific issues / components that the City should take into account in the planning of this parking structure.

(A) Charging facilities for electric cars:

It is clear that electric vehicles are a growing part of the market and may well eventually become the default private motor vehicle. The project plans specify "electric vehicle charging stations" but the garage should be designed with not only functional charging stations for immediate use but also with the infrastructure for the conversion of <u>every</u> parking space to an electric charging station in the long term.

(B) Stormwater storage (not simply 'management' of runoff):

The project simply proposes to filter storm water through a tiny "parklet" on Center Street, and through small zones between the structure and adjacent buildings, and then dump it into the existing storm water system. This is, again, a 20th century solution.

Instead, in this time of sustained drought and forecasts of lower rainfall in the long term, the project should collect storm water from its nearly one acre of rooftop, filter it, and store it on site for reuse in the Downtown. Appropriate storage reservoirs could be built below the parking levels. Tens of thousands of gallons could be stored and reused this way each year.

The stored water could be regularly tapped for dry season irrigation of street plantings Downtown (think of the BID trucks that currently water the hanging flower pots). Ultimately it might be connected to Civic Center park (half a block west) to help irrigate that landscape. It could also be used for Downtown street cleaning in cases where water is necessary.

Stored water below the parking structure could also serve as an emergency reserve for fire fighting when a major earthquake temporarily puts the EBMUD supply out of commission.

(C) Public Art Space:

The ground level of the structure should have a substantial space for changing displays of art, replacing the "Addison Street Windows" currently operated by the City. But the proposed art space component described in the project plans given to the Design Review Committee is noted as simply "a replacement for *some* of the City's public art that currently occupies that side of the existing structure." *(emphasis added). Why are we building an entirely new garage that will have substantially less public art display space—on the "Arts District" block, no less—than is currently provided?*

Specifically, the plans show a tiny "art gallery" space about the size of a bedroom off Addison, and no art display space on Center Street (a location which is right across from Berkeley City College and would make a fine venue for student art displays.) The Addison space seems to have street frontage no more than 12-15 feet long. Compare that to the existing Addison windows space that extends for most of the building façade. Has the Civic Arts Commission been consulted about opportunities for more adequate art display in the new facility?

(D) Photovoltaics:

Some are sketchily shown in the project designs presented to the Design Review Committee, but I could not find a more detailed description of what is proposed. Panels could be placed above recreation space atop the structure, and/or could be on the south / Center Street façade *(instead of the metal screen currently proposed to cover that vast space).*

A Rooftop Public Park:

The parking structure will be 128 feet wide, and 258 feet deep. That provides a "rooftop" surface area of 33,000 square feet, equivalent to three quarters of an acre, larger than a number of existing City of Berkeley parks.

A lightweight structure added above the uppermost parking deck could support recreation courts and other open space facilities. (I am *not* suggesting reducing the parking count).

The increased height of the garage would raise this level to above, or near, the height of adjacent buildings, providing it with fine solar access and views to the west and north.

Downtown will need more active use park and open space in coming years, as new residents are added. One building, 2211 Harold Way, in the approval pipeline could add, by itself, 500 or

more new residents to Downtown. All those new residents will come with the expectation of having some place to *actively* recreate outdoors, not simply rooftop decks or street side cafes where they can sit.

Here are some possible recreation and open space components that cannot be accommodated elsewhere in Downtown in existing or proposed public open space and are not in the SOSIP plan, but could be easily be accommodated on a 30,000 + square foot rooftop:

1. **Tennis court(s):**

A doubles tennis court is 78 feet long by 36 feet wide, with additional space required outside the court. 60 by 110 would probably be sufficient. An adjacent area, half the size of a full court, might be provided with a backstop for tennis practice. **Total, about 10,000 square feet.**

2. **Basketball court(s):**

A typical high school basketball court (full court) is 84 feet long and 50 feet wide. Allowing a generous 15 feet all on all sides for off-court area, would make it about 100 x 65. A second half-court might be provided for practice and single users while pick-up games utilize the full court. **Total, about 10,000 square feet.**

3. **Mini-Dog Park:**

Residents of many densely developed urban areas now favor small dogs that can live comfortably in small apartments and condominiums. Dog park development also favors reserving some space for small dogs so larger breeds won't dominate the entire off-leash park area. Berkeley has a dog park for mixed sizes at the Ohlone Greenway. The Center Street structure could accommodate a small-dogs-only recreation space on the roof. A space 100 x 50 (5,000 square feet) should be more than enough to provide off-leash areas for small dogs, and associated facilities (watering station, benches for humans, etc.). **Total, 5,000 square feet.**

4. **Community Garden Space:**

Downtown and other nearby residents could be allocated individual garden plots—raised planters—in a community garden on the rooftop. Consider, for planning purposes, 50 individual plots, each 50 square feet (about 10 x 5) plus needed circulation space between plots and some common areas, tool storage, etc. **Total, 5,000 square feet.**

5. **Mini-park:**

A portion of the roof adjacent to the community garden beds could be set aside as a flexible landscaped mini-park for small gatherings and socializing. This could be situated where there are currently views to the west, either down Center Street or from the western wall of the site over lower adjacent properties. **Total, 5,000 square feet.**

All components:

- Mini-park: 5,000 square feet or less.
- Small dog park: 5,000 square feet or less.
- Basketball court(s): one full, one half court: 10,000 square feet, or less.
- Tennis court, and adjacent practice wall: 10,000 square feet, or less.

Subtotal for all active park facilities: 30,000 square feet maximum.

Elevator housing, stairwells, and other utility structures projecting above roof level, and a single vehicle ramp to provide City maintenance vehicle access and emergency access could use the remaining square footage.

Photovoltaic installations could be raised above much of this area, including the dog park, and basketball courts, so they would not require much in the way of dedicated roof area of their own.

Ball courts could have high fencing and might be "roofed" with netting or photovoltaic panels to prevent balls from flying off the structure.

The garage itself will be open until midnight and will be staffed, according to the project proposal, by up to 14 employees. It would seem a simple matter to either expand the garage staff duties to monitoring the park, or have a separate component of park staffing, perhaps by the Downtown Berkeley Association "ambassadors".

For safely and to limit nighttime noise, the rooftop recreation and park areas could be closed to use and easily secured after dark.

The structure will have elevators that would provide ADA access to the park, and ample staircases to provide emergency exiting. All of the proposed park uses above would not have unmanageably large amounts of users at any single time. It would be likely that a few dozen users might be on the park / roof at most times.

I urge you to consider all of these issues, especially the park opportunity, in your review of the project.

Sincerely,

Steven Finacom

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IMAGINE A FUTURE DOWNTOWN PARK HERE:

The current City owned Center Street Garage, as seen looking north across Center Street. The proposed garage will have a similar expanse and configuration, although the northern stair tower will be at right rear, instead of left rear.

Imagine half of this space covered with active recreation courts, and half with a "mini-dog park" and community garden planter beds. Since the proposed parking garage will be substantially taller than this existing structure, it will also have better views to north and west that could be enjoyed by rooftop park users.

May 21, 2015

City of Berkeley Design Review Committee

Re: **Center Street Parking Garage Design**

Dear Design Review Committee members:

I am writing to comment on the design and plans for the proposed re-build of the City garage on Center Street. I cannot attend your meeting tonight; otherwise I would have delivered these comments in person.

Overall, this should be a 21st century parking garage, not a generic enlargement of the same design and functional approach as a 20th century structure. There are several issues and components I urge you to consider.

Storm water: the project simply proposes to filter runoff from the site. With long-term, permanent, reduction in Bay Area rainfall a real prospect, this large surface area should collect water for municipal uses Downtown. Holding reservoirs should be included in the structure. They could be tapped during dry seasons for Downtown irrigation, street washing, or even emergency fire uses when an earthquake damages the EBMUD water system. The University recently completed a building—the Law School addition—on the Berkeley campus where storm water is collected from the rooftops, held in a large buried tank, and recycled to irrigate project plantings. Why can't the City do the same?

Rooftop Open Space: The overall site has more than 36,000 square feet of land area. This is about 8/10s of an acre; big enough for a reasonable public open space atop the building—not just a sterile parking deck that would basically replicate the 1950s garage character.

Thousands of new residents projected for Downtown will need additional useable public open space in the Downtown core. Not every open space need in densely built urban areas can be served by streetscape plantings and café tables along the sidewalk.

The Center Street Garage rooftop / site represents the City's only real opportunity for creating some types of new useable public open space in the Downtown core.

There are several public open space activities that could be accomplished / accommodated on the Center Street garage roof. These are the sorts of uses that the SOSIP plan does not propose to accommodate at street level. They include:

- active recreation (**basketball court, volleyball court** and/or **tennis court**. Handball or tennis backstops).
- **mini dog park** (for dogs under a certain size / weight. These have become popular in other urban parts of the country where apartment or condo dwelling residents tend to have small dogs. And the only dog park within walking distance of Downtown housing, at Ohlone Park, is already too heavily used).
- **community garden space** (planting beds that could be allocated to neighborhood residents on a seasonal basis).

With the possible exception of community garden space, none of these uses would create large additional structural loads. A relatively lightweight deck above the top parking structure level could accommodate them.

A public open space on top of the building could be open only during daylight hours, and staffed by the Downtown "ambassadors" or City staff. The proposed elevator and stairway system for the garage could be easily extended one more vertical level, providing full accessibly and fire / emergency exiting from the rooftop "park". If necessary, the number of users at any one time could be restricted to prevent large gatherings and safety hazards.

Façade treatment: The Center Street and Addison Street facades are extremely large and bland. There is no reason that these facades can't be broken up into smaller massings and detailing with external veneers to lessen the visual impact of this huge structure.

The Addison Street façade would be particularly appropriate for a vertical sculpture—perhaps even a light sculpture—to visually anchor the west end of the Downtown Arts District. The possibility of art on the facades is mentioned in the staff report; the DRC should speak strongly on this. Photovoltaics could also be part of the Center Street façade.

Views: The exterior staircase on Center Street appears to cantilever over the sidewalk. The City should confirm that this would not impact the view of the Berkeley Hills up Center Street from street level in the Civic Center to the west. It probably won't, but this needs to be evaluated before the design is finalized.

Impact of 2007 Air Rights Agreement on Buildable Space: The eighth level (roof) elevation on the plans is shown at 243 feet, and the ground level elevation appears to be about 170 feet. This equals a building at least 73 feet tall along Center, with additional, higher, structures including PVC panels, above the floor of the eighth level. The Zoning analysis in the City's staff report indicates the building would "exceed a maximum height limit of 60 feet up to a maximum of 75 feet."

In 2007 the City of Berkeley unwisely sold at a severely discounted rate (only about 20% of the appraised value) air rights above a portion of the garage site to the developer of the adjacent "Arpeggio Building" (2055 Center). These rights pertain in an area 20 x 89 adjacent to the west façade of 2055 Center, <u>above 67 feet</u>.

I did not see any mention of the air rights agreement in the City's staff report or project plans. It would appear from the plans that the City's design might violate the air rights agreement if the eighth level is indeed at 173 feet or higher. It would be wise for the City to review the agreement and revise the design if necessary before too much additional money is spent on garage design fees.

Sincerely,

Steven Finacom

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