

18th & Sherman developers seek view-plane variance



■ Two models of project presented; Planning Board will consider the matter March 19

BY VANESSA MARTIN

Under a proposal from Sherman Properties, the surface parking lots on the north side of 18th Ave. between Sherman & Grant and along the majority of the east side of Sherman between 18th & 19th would become a 250,000 sf mixed-used residential development.

The first floor of the development currently titled "1800 Sherman" would house 50,000 sf of retail and convenience stores, the next three floors would have 270 residential and public parking spaces (there would be another 35 parking spaces behind the building), and the rest would house for-sale residential units with balconies (the exact number of units has not been finalized).

The developers' architects, the Cahen Architectural Group, have designed two versions of 1800 Sherman: one which conforms to the site's current R-4-X zoning and the City Park "view-plane" or "mountain-plane" ordinance, and another that would require a variance from the city exempting it from the view-plane's height restrictions.

At the Feb. 12 Uptown Urban Design Forum meeting architect Craig Cahen and project manager Andrea Wahlen of Sherman Properties presented the two variations of their plans.

The conforming design shows a 12- or 13-story building that would cast the adjacent \$29 million, 14-story Portofino condominium building to its north in a shadow at times. The Portofino was completed in late 2003.

The second design shows the first floor retail and the three floors of parking wrapping around the entire site and a 16-floor tower for the condominiums rising only at the corner of 18th & Sherman. Cahen said this way the Portofino would not be cast in a shadow, but the design would violate the view-plane ordinance by 92'.

The view-plane limit at the site is 161' and the proposed tower's total height would be 252'.

"We feel very strongly that the taller, slimmer profile is the best design response given the surrounding buildings, urban fabric and surrounding neighbors," Cahen told LIFE via email.

"We also feel," he continued, "that we have more than adequately demonstrated that the requested height will not block any mountain vista views anywhere between City Park and the building. We will block a view of the taller buildings to our west, and quite frankly, we know our building will be considerably more attractive than those."

First passed in 1950, the view-plane ordinance protects mountain views from a number of places, including City Park, Cheesman Park and the Capitol Building.

The City Park view-plane starts on the third step on the west side of the Denver Museum of Nature & Science at 2001 Colorado Blvd. on the east side of City Park. Facing west from that point it and can be thought of as a cone widening as it approaches downtown, with Lincoln as its widest western edge.

In the past 58 years the Denver Planning Board has only granted about 11 variances to the view-plane ordinance, the last in 2003 just across 18th from the current project.

Many of the people who were at the Feb. 12 meeting had been involved with supporting the 2003 request for a view-plane variance because they felt there was a public benefit to granting it.

For a year a half before developers Wes Becker of Chenoa Inc. and Martin Wohnlich of Continental Oil Field Services requested the variance in 2003 for a proposed mixed-use high-rise at 1750 Sherman, they had worked with neighborhood groups for an acceptable agreement.

PHOTO BY JEFF HERSCH

THE PORTOFINO HIGH-RISE, here seen looking northeast from 18th & Sherman, would be masked by either version of the '1800 Sherman' project, but more so by the one which doesn't violate the view-plane.



Becker and Wohnlich also own the historic El Jebel Temple at 1770 Sherman and had already started preserving the 1906 structure (now called the 1770 Sherman Events Center). As part of their Planned Unit Development (PUD) application for their proposed 50-story, 650-foot high-rise at 1750 Sherman, to be built on a vacant parking lot just south of El Jebel, they had pledged to restore the temple for use as a community center, a project that was then estimated to cost as much as \$7 million. The seven-story El Jebel houses a 500-seat theatre, an 11,000 sf grand ballroom, offices and a full kitchen.

In their 2003 agreement with the city, the developers agreed to complete an historic assessment of El Jebel and interior and exterior renovations of the structure. Additionally, a variety of permits for the new tower were tied directly

to the completion of different levels of rehabilitation work on the temple.

The agreement also included the donation of both interior and exterior preservation easements for El Jebel to Historic Denver, Inc. The temple is already a designated Historic Landmark, but such a designation didn't guarantee the preservation of the building's interior.

If no tower is built, as has been the case thus far, the historic easements for the temple will be in effect for 50 years, regardless of the property's owner or prospective developer.

In addition to working with the neighbors, Becker & Wohnlich had also presented evidence that their project met all six conditions for a view-plane variance: the proposed use and structure is a permitted use under the zoning laws; literal enforcement of the view-plane ordinance would

preclude reasonable development of the property; the proposed development doesn't defeat the purposes of the ordinance; the variance is the minimum needed to secure a reasonable return in service, use or income; the development will not result in substantial injury to neighboring properties or public lands; and the financial hardship of the applicant is not the only reason for granting a variance.

In explaining the current request for a variance for the proposed project at 1800 Sherman, Cahen said the building would already be in the shadow of the Anaconda Building, 555 17th, and a taller new structure would provide them with a bigger return on their investment.



*COURTESY OF THE CAHEN ARCHITECTURAL GROUP
THIS PURELY CONCEPTUAL RENDERING illustrates the primary differences between a version of the project that doesn't violate the view-plane, right, and one that would. The Portofino is seen in gray.*

Wahlen said they would commit to building the required workforce affordable housing units instead of paying cash in lieu of including such units in the project, as is allowed in the 2002 Inclusionary Housing Ordinance.

"Our team understands the importance of providing lower cost housing as part of this development," Cahen told LIFE Feb. 21. "We are weighing the options of finding the best manner with which to provide these units and as of today, no decision has been made."

Wahlen stated that it would cost approximately \$100 million to construct either variation of the project and they are committed to building it. She said that if the project is approved by the Planning Board on March 19, they plan to start construction in spring 2009.

The Uptown Urban Design Forum is made up of representatives of registered neighborhood organizations, medical institutions and the city. Among the 20 people present at the Feb. 12 meeting were representatives from the Old San Rafael Neighborhood Association, the City Park West Neighborhood Association, HealthONE Presbyterian/St. Luke's Medical Center, Exempla Saint Joseph Hospital, Inter-Neighborhood Cooperation (INC), and District 8 City Councilwoman Carla Madison, among others.

When UUDF chairman Dr. Charles Brantigan asked for feedback on the proposed 1800 Sherman project, David Webster of INC said, "You're slowly nibbling away at the view-plane so there will no longer be a view-plane. It is the death of a thousand cuts."

"I think this is a very bad idea and we really hope to work with you and have many neighborhood groups included in the full discussions," Michael Henry, zoning & transportation committee chair for Capitol Hill United Neighborhoods (CHUN) said. "We worked for a year with (the developers) of El Jebel and this doesn't seem to have any public benefit or terms of enforcement. The Portofino didn't dare ask for a variance."

At the end of the discussion, the involved parties agreed to arrange a meeting between the developer and additional neighborhood groups affected by the view-plane ordinance before the scheduled March Planning Board review of the requested variance. As of deadline the meeting had been scheduled.

The March 19 Planning Board meeting will held in the 4th floor meeting room of the Webb Building, 201 W. Colfax, 3-5 pm. The public is welcome.

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