

December 6, 2019

TO: Planning Commission Members

FROM: Andrea Campisi, Senior Planner, Building & Planning Department

SUBJECT: **TENTATIVE SKETCH PLAN – 333 E. City Avenue, Two Bala Plaza, Bala Cynwyd, LD# 3820, Ward 9**

Proposal

The applicant, Janet Giuliani, on behalf of Bala Plaza, Inc., seeks Tentative Sketch Plan approval for the following:

- Construction of two new, mixed-use buildings;
 - Building R3-A is 123 feet tall and contains 135 residential units and 32,905 sq. ft. of retail/restaurant space;
 - Building R3-B is 83 feet tall and contains 55 residential units and 32,905 sq. ft. of retail/restaurant space;
- The addition of 1,591 parking spaces.
- The installation of three stormwater management systems.

The existing buildings and parking deck on the site are proposed to remain and vehicular access into the site is not altered.

The improvements are being brought forward as part of a phased redevelopment that includes One and Three Bala Plaza as a larger master plan. The construction of the improvements for this site and the One and Three Bala Plaza site are to be completed in phases through 2038. The applicant stated that the development of Two Bala Plaza will be the fifth phase, to be completed following all four phases of the improvements shown on the One & Three Bala Plaza plans.

The proposal is illustrated on the attached six sheet plan set dated October 22, 2018, last revised November 15, 2019 prepared by Momenee, Inc. Also submitted was a concept plan prepared by Momenee, Inc., dated October 22, 2018, last revised November 15, 2019.

Application History

The application was submitted in October 2018, prior to the adoption of City Avenue Ordinance amendment (4152) which in large part limited the development potential for multifamily projects in the City Avenue District while providing additional design flexibility for commercial development. The project is subject to the pre-December 2018 zoning requirements which can be found here: <https://app.sharebase.com/#/folder/2395/share/166-rQq7U4Cvd6QWXDRLD8T9uMk7fTc>



333 East City Avenue, Bala Cynwyd

Property Description

The 408,255 sq. ft. (9.4 acre) property is located along East City Avenue, Decker Boulevard (private street), and St. Asaphs Road in Bala Cynwyd. The property extends across Decker Boulevard and includes land fronting along the southerly side of St. Asaphs Road to the intersection of St. Asaphs Road and Monument Road. The property is zoned City Avenue District, Regional Center Area (RCA). The property is currently improved with two existing buildings including a ten-story office building containing 290,011 sq. ft. and a three-story retail building containing 100,788 sq. ft. Both buildings sit atop an underground parking garage that contains 391 spaces. The property is accessed by a driveway off Decker Boulevard and three driveways off of St. Asaphs Road. The property is accessed by sidewalk along East City Avenue.

Bala Plaza

Bala Plaza is a four-building office complex that was constructed between 1967 and 1982. One Bala Plaza (231 St. Asaphs Road) is a Class B building while Two Bala Plaza (333 W. City Avenue) and Three Bala Plaza (251 St. Asaphs Road) are Class A buildings. The total rentable area for the complex is 1,126,329 square feet.

Regional and Township Comprehensive Plan Compliance

The City Avenue District area of Lower Merion Township is identified as a Regional Mixed Use Center in the Future Land Use Plan of the Montgomery County Comprehensive Plan, [Montco2040: A Shared Vision](#). Regional Mixed-Use Centers are intensely developed suburban cores with significant retail, office, and residential land uses. The proposed development is generally consistent with the goal to “encourage development and transformative investment where infrastructure already exists.”

The [Land Use Element of the 2016 Lower Merion Township Comprehensive Plan](#) identifies the City Avenue District area as a Regional Center which is the primary growth area within the Township. The proposed development is generally consistent with the goal of the Regional Center “to transform the predominant auto oriented, office-based environment into a more functionally diverse live/work/shop environment.”

Montgomery County Planning Commission (MCPC)_Review

The County review letter is attached. Staff notes that the zoning concerns raised in the MCPC letter have been addressed. The MCPC generally supports the applicant’s proposal, but noted the following design issues:

- Building and Public Gathering Space Design: Consider reorienting the buildings to create a central public gathering space. Future plans should include detailed designs to show compliance with the public gathering space requirements.
- Connection to Other Proposed Development: Improve the signalized intersection of St. Asaph’s Road and Decker Boulevard with high-visibility continental-style crosswalks and pedestrian push-button signals to improve pedestrian connections between the two sites.
- Pedestrian Circulation: Plans should include marked crosswalks where the pedestrian walkways cross driveways or streets. The applicant should also explore internal pedestrian connections between their site and adjacent office properties.
- Landscape Design: A detailed landscape plan should be provided with street trees along all existing and proposed street frontages.
- Truck Circulation: Future versions of the plans should include a truck turning template demonstrating that large vehicles, including ambulances and fire trucks, can safely access the site.

The County recommendations have been either addressed on the attached plan or have been incorporated into the issues below as well as the recommended conditions of approval.

Purpose of Tentative Sketch Plan

The purpose of a Tentative Sketch Plan is to determine appropriate locations for buildings, driveways and parking lots and how such improvements can least impact a site's natural features. It has become practice in the Township to use the Tentative Sketch Plan phase to flesh out other issues and give applicants a program to address at the Preliminary Plan phase.

Environmental Advisory Council (EAC)

The EAC reviewed the application at their October 22, 2019 meeting and indicated that the proposed infill development appears appropriate. The EAC also indicated that they will review the plan for stormwater management, public gathering space, etc. with the Preliminary Land Development Plan application.

City Avenue Official Map

The City Avenue Official Map as it pertains to this property is depicted here. The site is shown to have a public gathering space at the northeastern corner of the site near the intersection of Decker Boulevard and St. Asaphs Road and a linear public gathering space through the center of the site. The site is also shown bounded by a multipurpose path on three sides and is bisected by a proposed road.



Zoning

The following table details the bulk, area and setback requirements for the existing and proposed conditions. Please note that these numbers are based on the 12/12/2018 City Avenue District requirements.

CAD-RCA Zoning District		Existing	Proposed
Minimum Net Lot Area (sq. ft.)	N/A	408,255 sq. ft. 9.4 acres	408,255 sq. ft. 9.4 acres
Lot Width (Min.)	600'	>600'	Varies*
Building Area (Max.)	60% Mixed-Use	59.5% **	59.5% **
Build to Line	20' Minimum- 70' Maximum	50'	20'-60'
Side Yard & Aggregate Side Yard (Min.)	25' & N/A	>30'	30'
Rear Yard (Min.)	10'	n/a	n/a
Impervious Surface (Max.)	70%	82.6% ***	82.3% ***
Maximum Building Height	28' minimum 200' maximum	90'	90' - 123'
Floor Area Ratio (FAR) ****	0.70 – 1.75	.96	1.74
Car Share Parking	1 space per 50,000 sq. ft. = 1 space	0	not provided*****
Bicycle Parking	1 sp./2 dwelling units Max. 20/ bldg. 1 sp./20 PS Commercial use	N/A	118
Parking	1,508	921	1,591

*Compliance with Zoning Section 155-217.C.5.b is not required pursuant to Zoning Code Section 155-217.C.5.d.

**The portions of the existing parking structure that are not beneath an existing building are included in the building area calculation but are not required to per ZHB Appeal #2090.

***Existing nonconformity permitted to remain.

****Includes eligible density bonuses in the Zoning Code 155-217.E.

*****Condition of approval included requiring car share spaces.

Issues

1. Official Map

As noted above, the City Avenue District Official Map shows a public gathering space on the northeastern corner of this site at the intersection of Decker Boulevard and St. Asaphs Road. The applicant shows the public gathering space and it meets the size requirement in the Zoning Code. The Preliminary Plan should show more details on how this area will be used by the public and how it meets the remaining standards in Zoning Code Section 155-217.F.

The plan also shows an aggregated public gathering space between the existing and proposed buildings that extends down the southern property line. Staff questions the value of the area down the southern property line as it is relatively narrow and recommends the applicant explain how the entire aggregated space is intended to be used by the public.

The Official Map also shows a public multipurpose path along City Avenue, St. Asaphs Road and Decker Boulevard. While the applicant provides the required path, the verge along City Avenue must be increased to six feet wide. In addition, the path is also shown extending across a portion of the property and dead ending into the rear of 40 Monument Road, over an area of steep slopes. The applicant should explain whether the path can be installed in this area.

2. Zoning Code Compliance

Under the Regional Center Area zoning of the City Avenue District, this site is classified as a multiple use development which is defined as:

*A multiple-use development for purposes of this district shall be defined as an integrated, complementary development of two or more buildings on one or more lots, provided that the lots are adjacent to and abut one another. The multiple-use development can be phased, and shall include residential and nonresidential uses as listed under Subsection **B(1)** and **(2)**. No single use shall occupy more than 80% of the total gross floor area of the buildings on the subject lot(s).*

The plan includes a mix of residential, office, retail and restaurant uses as follows and therefore complies with this definition:

	Square Footage/Percentage of Building Area	Total
Residential	243,373 sq. ft./34.2% (190 units)	711,434 sq. ft. 100%
Office	221,565 sq. ft./40%	
Retail	158,050 sq. ft./22.2%	
Restaurant	20,000 sq. ft./2.8%	

Staff has the following Zoning comments:

Primary Pedestrian Access Points:

155-217.C.2.c: The primary pedestrian access point to buildings shall be located on one or more primary front facades, rather than on the rear or side of the building unless approved by the Board of Commissioners, by conditional use. Secondary access points may be located along other facades. In

addition to the conditional use standards in § 155-141.2, the following standards shall apply if the primary pedestrian access point is not located along the primary front façade.

Based on the information provided to date, staff is unable to determine whether the plan complies with this provision. This provision requires each of the new buildings to have a pedestrian access facing City Avenue and St. Asaphs Road, respectively. If the applicant chooses to deviate from this requirement, they will need to seek conditional use during the Preliminary Plan stage.

Building setback

155-217.C.2.e: Any portion of a new building above three stories or 45 feet above grade shall be set back from the build-to line a minimum of 10 feet.

The massing diagrams submitted do not show the required set back for either of the proposed buildings. Staff has included a condition of approval requiring the set back.

3. Street Trees along City Avenue

The plan shows existing trees along City Avenue to remain even though they will likely have to be removed to facilitate the installation of the multipurpose path. In addition, a subsurface stormwater management system is shown along City Avenue. Staff recommends the applicant find an alternate location for the stormwater system so that trees can be planted along City Avenue to replace the tree canopy coverage that will be lost.

4. Welton Becket Building

The Saks Fifth Avenue building was built in 1968 as the second phase of the uncompleted Decker Square development. It was designed by mid-century modern California-based architects Welton Becket and Arthur Froelich. Becket rose to prominence as designer of many notable buildings of the era. The work of his office includes the Capitol Records Building in Los Angeles, the Santa Monica Civic Auditorium, the Beverly Hilton Hotel, and the Contemporary Resort at Walt Disney World. Froelich is remembered for his design of the Hanna Barbera Studio building, various race tracks around the world, and other notable modern public buildings. The exterior of the building appears to have retained a great deal of its original integrity and staff recommends the applicant consider filing an application to the Historical Commission to determine if it is eligible for listing on the Historic Resource Inventory.

5. Bus Shelter

Since a goal of the City Avenue District is to discourage dependence on cars by promoting alternate modes of transportation and since there is a SEPTA bus stop along the City Avenue frontage of the site, staff recommends the applicant provide a bus shelter to increase the comfort of bus passengers.

6. Sustainability

Staff would like the applicant to consider incorporating as many sustainable elements into the proposal as possible including but not limited to green building technology such as green roofs and solar panels, green stormwater infrastructure such as porous paving, use of native plants that provide food for wildlife and attempting to reduce impervious surface as much as possible.

7. Relief

The application requires relief from the following Code section:

Natural Features Code Section 101-5.C.2.b, to disturb slopes exceeding 25% to install portions of walkways and the proposed stormwater facilities in slopes exceeding twenty-five (25%) percent.

8. Action

The Planning Commission must take the following action for this application:

- Provide a recommendation on the requested relief from Natural Features Code Section 101-5.C.2.b
- Provide a recommendation on the Tentative Sketch Plan.