

Planning Commission Supplemental Comments on South Creek Application

March 2023

The Planning Commission ("Commission") deliberated on the South Creek conditional rezoning application for approximately four hours over two consecutive meetings (not including the applicant's presentation). The Commission's discussion focused on six key criteria¹ for "complete community" development:

- Mix of housing unit sizes/configurations that address affordability goals
- Walkable proximity to several daily needs, such as housing, jobs, schools, recreation. Mixed use buildings encouraged
- Abundant greenway and transit connections
- Place-making and prioritization of the pedestrian realm
- Land use efficiency (measured as housing density per acre)
- Respect for topography and natural landscapes, including protected natural areas

While the Commission sees merit in the proposal, it has serious concerns in four areas:

1. Unacceptable South Columbia pedestrian crossing. Members believe strongly that an above- or below-grade crossing of South Columbia Street is imperative to the proper functioning of the greater South Creek/Southern Village area as a walkable mixed-use neighborhood. This recommendation echoes the Obey Creek Compass Committee's 2013 recommendation for a pedestrian bridge. The design details of the crossing need not be finalized at the time of initial rezoning, but there should be a clear plan to engineer, obtain NCDOT approval, and fund it – possibly through a cost-sharing arrangement between the Town and the developer.
2. Insufficient residential density. The proposal includes 688 residential units on 43 acres, or 16 units/acre. After backing out stream set-backs, the effective density seems to approach 30 units/acre, which would align with Rod Stevens' "low density" scenario assumption. Members feel strongly that the Town should make more efficient use of its dwindling supply of large, developable sites such as this. We recommend that the Council push for increased density through the following adjustments, which the developer expressed openness to:
 - a. Increase by one story the height of the condo buildings fronting South Columbia Street;
 - b. Increase the height of one of the mixed-use buildings toward the northern edge of the site; and
 - c. Convert some of the townhomes to stacked units.
3. Lack of Town Analysis to Support the Proposed 80 Acre Preserve. The proposal includes a non-binding suggestion to set aside approximately 80 acres adjacent to the project as a preserve. This aligns with the current (soon to be superseded) development agreement for this site.

¹ We generally drew or inferred the criteria from consultant Jennifer Keesmaat's December 7, 2022 presentation to the Council.

However, without understanding the development potential of that area, or how it would function in the context of Town-wide natural areas planning, the Commission cannot meaningfully evaluate this aspect of the proposal. The current design of this project may effectively cut off vehicular access to the 80 acres from South Columbia Street. While the Commission enthusiastically supports natural area preservation, the best use(s) of such an enormous tract should be decided systematically.

4. Lack of demonstrated commitment to transit-oriented development (“TOD”) principles. The South Creek site currently enjoys high-frequency bus service during peak commuting times and soon is expected to have a bus-rapid-transit (“BRT”) stop on its frontage, as well as a premier cycling route to UNC campus (approximately 2.5 miles away). Yet some aspects of the proposal do not seem to fully embrace TOD principles. We recommend that the Council push for:
 - a. Fewer and narrower internal roads, with special focus on the roads flanking the townhouses on all sides and the road running along Wilson Creek;
 - b. Full unbundling of the cost of condo parking; and
 - c. A decrease in the overall amount of townhouse parking, through some combination of converting 2-car garages to 1-car garages, reducing parallel parking adjacent to the townhouses, removing townhouse driveways, and/or adding stacked units without proportionately increasing the current parking.

The attached appendix includes a matrix with detailed information and analysis concerning the relationship between the proposal and the six complete community criteria listed above. It contains additional detail on the points above and other points not made in this summary.