

South Creek Design Review and Comments

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Summary of Applicant Meetings and the Review Process

- Several meetings have been held with the applicant over the course of project development. Outlined below are comments that pertain to the 02-17-23 site plan submittal, and residential building elevations (dated 07-01-22) and commercial building elevations (dated 07-08-22).

Design Review and Comments

Building Placement and Orientation (how well the buildings relate to the street and public realm)

1. Generally, the buildings are well positioned to define street edges and public places. Buildings are aligned parallel to the streets which helps outline a clear public and private realm.
2. For the townhouses, there is a clear sense of front and back definition, with fronts facing public streets and backs abutting interior alleys. The townhouses on the western edge of the site, along 15/501, feature a single-loaded street. This is an “addressing street” which means that it plays an important role in defining the public side of the townhouses, helping to establish the public realm, and clearly identifying the front of the unit. The street also provides the place where deliveries take place and where guests would understand where to park and access the homes. Single-loaded streets of this type are fairly unique, and can contribute to the character of a neighborhood, especially if they are narrower in width and have a well landscaped edge. It is suggested that this street have a generous tree canopy on its western edge, such as a double row of shade trees. Further tree planting is encouraged in the 15/501 R.O.W. as well. The width of these streets should be, or appear to be, as narrow as possible, while still accommodating firefighting methods. As an example, for the west side of the street, perhaps the curb and gutter could be eliminated, replaced by a grass bioswale. In addition, a certain width of the pavement could consist of permeable pavers. This could serve to make the street appear less wide while creating a transition from the more urban east edge to a softer landscape character along the western edge. This strategy could also address impervious surface concerns.
3. There is another single-loaded street located at the eastern edge of the site (Road F). This street plays a role in establishing a sense of a public realm and is of particular importance in how the natural area (which could be of such a quality as to attract people from outside the neighborhood) relates to both the neighborhood and to the Chapel Hill community. Having a public road along a park edge that anyone from Chapel Hill can drive along (and park) makes it seem like a community amenity that all can access. This is in contrast to a public amenity that backs up to private residences, which can seem to privatize a public space and create the perception that it is the “backyard” of the residences. Without this road I believe that would indeed be the result, and make the South Creek neighborhood seem more insular.
4. The buildings are well placed in terms of stepping down with the topography. Transitions between levels is enhanced by landscape elements such as terraced steps, architectural retaining walls, and gathering spaces with views located along the tops of the terraces.

Connectivity (internal and external, relationships to existing or planned networks and surrounding features)

5. Generally, there is good pedestrian connectivity within the site, with sidewalks along both sides of streets. East/West pedestrian connections occur primarily at stepped terraces that follow the topography and lead to the natural area on the east side of the site. Clear connection of public walkways to any trails established in the natural area should be ensured.

6. An important pedestrian connection is the expanse of sidewalk along both sides of “Road B”, which is the main entrance street, across from Market Street and the entrance to Southern Village. As currently depicted, there are narrow sidewalks directly adjacent to the curb, with a lawn extending to the building edge, occurring on both sides of Road B. Along both sides of the street, consider replacing this with a more urban sidewalk condition, with a tree lawn and street trees along the curb (the current design lacks trees in this entire frontage) and a pavement surface that extends to the building edge containing planters, additional landscape planting beds, outdoor seating, retail displays, and other pedestrian-friendly features.
7. Pedestrian connection across 15/501: Given how much traffic flows along this stretch of 15/501, how this intersection is designed for pedestrian connections between Southern Village and South Creek will be a significant consideration. Overhead or underground facilities could be considered, although utilization of these can be problematic outside of very urban conditions and unless designed to be part of a seamless pedestrian flow. At-grade Intersection improvements and streetscape strategies could be considered but would have to be significant to counter the reality of the traffic conditions.

Outdoor/Public Spaces (location, size, character)

8. Public spaces are located in various places throughout the site. The most “public” is the commercial street frontage along Street B which terminates in a terrace-top plaza space adjacent to a retail building, which would make for a good destination restaurant. The terrace and view help create a focal point at the neighborhood entrance and could serve to draw visitors into the site.
9. Other public spaces, more neighborhood oriented, occur as flat or terraced platforms along East/West pedestrian connections occurring at breaks between buildings. Each of these should be designed to encourage gathering and be useable and welcoming to people of a range of ages, including children.

Streetscape Activation (character and coordination/relationship to surrounding areas)

10. Residential: The townhouse buildings are well articulated in terms of pedestrian-friendly architecture details such as porches and balconies. For both the “Long” and “Short” condominium buildings, portions of the facades are problematic in terms of human scale in places where the topography drops, and portions of the parking garages are exposed. Currently, elevations indicate some kind of louver, which is repeated (sometimes along long expanses) especially along the rear elevations. This could make for an uninviting pedestrian frontage and consideration for a more refined screening and articulation strategy should be considered. In addition, topographic drops create conditions where an expanse of retaining wall or blank building surfaces are exposed. Further articulation should be considered to enliven the base of the buildings and to break down the scale of large unadorned expanses of solid material.
11. Commercial: Comment has already been provided (see comment six above) regarding the streetscape of the pedestrian frontages along Road B. The building elevations indicate a warehouse character, with large expanses of glass between masonry piers. The general openness of this type of architecture can be positive for the pedestrian realm, if there are ample and inviting storefront entrances, awnings or canopies, attractive signage, and interesting lighting. The interior space just inside the ground floor windows should exhibit either activity or displays that make for an interesting pedestrian experience. The windows themselves should not be darkly tinted, utilizing other solar control strategies to enhance transparency and views into the commercial spaces.
12. Consider a commercial streetscape along this frontage with decorative lighting, and other streetscape elements. Consider extending this palette down to the plaza space at the terminus of Road B.