



Friends of Los Altos, Inc. (FOLA)

A non-profit, non-partisan, volunteer-run organization

We Don't Need the Grand Canyon in Los Altos!

One of the most spectacular parts of the United States is Grand Canyon National Park in Arizona. The Grand Canyon formed over many millennia by the Colorado River. The canyon is a natural formation distinguished by layered bands of red rock, revealing millions of years of geological history in cross-section. Vast in scale, the canyon averages 10 miles across and over a mile deep along its 277-mile length. Much of the area is a national park, with Colorado River white-water rapids and sweeping vistas.

On a more local scale, we are concerned that the developments along First Street are creating our very own grand canyon, and there are two projects coming up for review – **95 First Street will be reviewed by the Planning Commission on February 3rd** and **355 First Street will be at the City Council for final approval on February 8th** that may mimic the real Grand Canyon in looks if they're actually built. If after reaching the balance of this article you are concerned, please write those entities and/or speak during public comment when they come up for discussion. Contact info is included at the end of this article.

To many in Los Altos, the west side of First Street along where Safeway is located already verges on a canyon. Tall buildings with limited setbacks from the street create a venue that is at times overwhelming with deep shadows and building induced wind tunnels. We are the first to acknowledge that many of the current members of the FOLA board were involved in approving those early buildings abutting Foothill Expressway. Narrow lot sizes certainly contributed to the problem but were exacerbated by the final building designs. A City Council group formed after the construction of those buildings, the Downtown Building Committee, looked into what could be done so that the street did not become even more of a canyon as additional buildings were constructed. The City Council wisely reduced the building height to 30 feet for commercial construction and 35 for all-residential construction, with the hope of preventing a canyon on the remaining undeveloped parcels across from Safeway as well as on the other end of First (the Draeger's end, toward San Antonio Road).

While we are concerned about First Street projects, the underlying cause needs to be discussed and solved. Los Altos is unique among most communities in California as we have residential and commercial projects reviewed by resident-based, volunteer commissions. In the case of residential construction, it is the Design Review Commission; commercial projects are reviewed by the Planning Commission. These commissions are supposed to provide resident input, both by the composition of the commissions as well as through public comment during those commission meetings. Unfortunately, the current makeup of the Planning Commission has three of the seven members who are commercial developers or architects who do commercial development. While not the majority, these three tend to dominate discussions and influence the direction of Planning

Commission decisions. While we appreciate different viewpoints, including those from the development community, which help create better designs, the commission should better represent residents, not developers.

And as described later in this article, the Planning Commission in their review of 355 First Street voted unanimously to send the project to City Council for review and approval in spite of voicing numerous serious concerns about the project and the design. We think that action was irresponsible, given the range of concerns Commissioners identified in the project. And none of those big issues got fixed by the applicant before the final submittal to the City Council. This is the problem and the City Council needs to fix this situation.

Secondly, the City Council, and specifically the “Three Musketeers” (we encourage you read our last article about The Three Musketeers to understand the reference to our current City Council) need to be more willing to say “no” to development that does not reflect our design review guidelines, or in the case of projects now coming before the City as of January, the objective standards. We temper our perspective on this as State mandated changes to density bonus laws means that buildings are often 10-15 feet taller than the zoning, which is 30 feet for commercial/mixed use and 35 feet for all-residential projects along First Street. It is also tempered by the fact that we must now, by State mandate, use objective standard design rules instead of our original process which was a combination of guidelines and subjective criteria. Unfortunately, the objective standards have not been tested to ensure the resulting projects are what we want. This was due to a Planning Commission recommendation not to do so and our City Council’s majority (the three musketeers again) unwillingness to ignore the Planning Commission and do the right thing.

So lets talk specifics. 95 First Street is a project that is going before the Planning Commission as a study session on Thursday February 3rd. It is a 68,000 square foot building that is 3-1/2 stories of offices and has 10 living units on the 4th floor. The building is over 62 feet tall, excluding the tower which is even taller. The zoning allows for 30 feet and the developer is asking for a waiver because (this is really hard to believe) two of the 10 units are below market rate. The building is supposed to provide 173 parking spots for the offices and another 17 for the residential units--- that would be a total of 190 parking spaces. In total the proposal is for 72--no that isn’t a typo, 72 parking spots---less than half of what our City building code requires. The building is totally out of character for the neighborhood and overwhelmingly large for the site. Creating walkable streets where the buildings do not overwhelm pedestrians (aka human scale) is one of the goals of the City. But the first floor is 17 feet high, has oversized windows, and 14-foot-tall floors above plus a multistory entranceway, all of which are completely out of scale with pedestrians and other surrounding buildings. Frankly, it is so overwhelmingly out of scale and proportion for our City that staff should never have allowed to go to the Planning Commission. Our hope is that sufficient Planning Commission and resident input will encourage the applicant to start over and propose a building that at least tries to integrate into the neighborhood. But given the Planning Commission’s current track record we are not optimistic.

We are equally concerned, because a similar situation occurred with a proposed building at 355 First Street, which is coming to the City Council for final approval on Tuesday February 8th. The building is nominally 45 feet tall, but becomes 64 feet when you include the roof deck, staircase and elevator shaft. It is a massive, 50 unit building that has a central “courtyard” that is more akin to a light shaft than a place where anyone would want to go. It has roof overhangs which

exaggerate an already oversized building. One of our key design criteria is to minimize mass and bulk; the proposed design is an abject failure in meeting that criterion. The roof deck and tall elevator shaft to accommodate it further add to the building height.

Part of the reason for this massively tall building is that each floor has 10-foot-tall ceilings. A typical older residential home in Los Altos will have eight-foot ceilings and newer homes may have nine foot or occasionally, in certain rooms, ten-foot ceilings. While we appreciate taller ceilings, the additional 2 feet added to each floor creates a building that could be reduced by almost 5-8 feet. Blame the Planning Commission and City Council for failing to change our rules about ceiling height. This was an issue that was first identified more than 4 years ago when a project on El Camino initially proposed the same thing. How long does it take the City Council to correct something that adds more height to developments along First Street and will create a “grand canyon” effect?

Granted, while some of these things are subjective and some aspects of a design are State-mandated requirements, some of this should be simply common sense on the part of our Planning Commission and our City Council. And it means following the downtown design review guidelines and recommendations of the Downtown Building Committee. While four of the five members of the Planning Commission in attendance expressed concern about the mass and bulk of the building, all five voted to recommend it to Council with “massing strategies to reduce bulk and bring it more in line and appropriate for downtown”. Those changes, if any, are NOT apparent in the final project documents before City Council for its approval at the upcoming meeting. This project was filed under SB330, which limits the number of meetings to a total of 5. Given the continuing lack of progress in addressing the fundamental design concern, the Planning Commission should have considered simply denying the project.

Given all of the above, there seems to be an emerging pattern of behavior by the Planning Commission and City Council that we find troubling. A couple of weeks ago the Council approved another project, 440 First Street. Despite both the Council and the applicant being made aware of design changes that were recommended by an outside design expert hired by the City, the applicant did not make those changes. And despite the refusal by the applicant to make changes, the Planning Commission and City Council approved the project. The building design was poor, more consistent with the bad architecture of its immediate neighbor 396 First Street (a building which many consider among the worst designed of the newer buildings in town) than 448 First, which is a much better and more integrated design. Apparently, developers have learned that by simply stonewalling changes from the Planning Commission and perhaps even City Council, they can get what they want. But what they want is often not what is in the best interest of the community. If the Planning Commission and City Council aren't part of figuring out a solution, then they are part of the problem. And right now both are clearly part of the problem.

While the Grand Canyon is and has been in Arizona for eons, we would prefer it to stay there, not be magically transported to Los Altos. For that to happen the “Three Musketeers” on our City Council need to hear from you, the residents. A study session for 355 First Street is before the City Council for approval on Tuesday February 8th, with the meeting starting at 7 pm.

February 3rd Planning Commission study session for 95 First Street: Members of the Public may call (650) 242-4929 to participate in the conference call (Meeting ID: 149 569 7530 or via the web at <https://tinyurl.com/ypv8es3v>).

Agenda and link to attachments: https://los-altos.granicus.com/GeneratedAgendaViewer.php?view_id=7&event_id=651

**February 8th City Council meeting for 355 First Street:
<https://webinar.ringcentral.com/j/1471559988> Telephone: 1-650-242-4929 Meeting ID:
1471559988**

Agenda and link to attachments: <https://mccmeetings.blob.core.usgovcloudapi.net/losaltosca-pubu/MEET-Agenda-6e14a8ff91054fa080ca5ea996c24a51.pdf>

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