



## PLANNING & COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT DEPARTMENT

### STAFF REPORT

**DATE:** DECEMBER 22, 2020

**TO:** DESIGN COMMISSION

**FROM:** DAVID M. REYES, DIRECTOR OF PLANNING & COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT DEPARTMENT

**SUBJECT:** APPLICATION FOR CONCEPT DESIGN REVIEW  
NEW CONSTRUCTION OF A 19-UNIT, FOUR-STORY, MULTI-FAMILY RESIDENTIAL DEVELOPMENT WITH TWO LEVELS OF SUBTERRANEAN PARKING  
150 SOUTH OAK KNOLL AVENUE

---

#### **RECOMMENDATION:**

It is recommended that the Design Commission:

#### **Environmental Determination**

1. Find that the proposed project is consistent with the General Plan designation, with the General Plan goals and policies for the site, and with the applicable zoning designation and regulations; and that the project site has no value as habitat for endangered or threatened species, and can be served by utilities and public services;
2. Find that approval of the project will not result in any significant effects relating to traffic, noise, air quality, water quality or cultural resources; and
3. Conclude, therefore, that the project is categorically exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act under Section 15332, (Class 32) "in-fill development projects" and that there are no features that distinguish this project from others in the exempt class; therefore, there are no unusual circumstances.

#### **Findings for Compliance with the Tree Protection Ordinance**

1. Acknowledge that a tree inventory for the project site shows that no protected trees are proposed to be removed as part of the proposed project.

### **Findings for Concept Design Approval**

1. Find that the project, upon implementation of the conditions of approval, will comply with the purposes of design review, the design-related goals and policies of the Land Use Element of the General Plan and the Design Guidelines in the Central District Specific Plan; and
2. Based on these findings, approve the application for Concept Design Review subject to the following conditions to be further reviewed during Final Design Review:

### **Conditions**

1. Combine or simplify the configuration of walkways that connect the sidewalk to the main building entry and to the residential units fronting the street. In addition, provide additional landscaping and permanent amenities that can potentially activate the front garden spaces.
2. Modify the trellis designs on the fourth floor level and roof so that they are well integrated to overall development. In addition, explore alternative trellis designs that can provide protection from the elements so that the terraces can be used year-round.
3. The plans submitted for Final Design Review shall include product specifications and clearly depict all of the proposed permanent amenities within the roof terraces, courtyard, and communal balconies.
4. Refine the configuration, materials, colors, and finishes of the courtyard planters and walkway walls to enhance their connection with the street level and to express the high-quality design of the building.
5. The east and south building elevations shall receive the same level of roof height variation and dimensionality as depicted on the north and west elevations in order to maintain a harmonious design on all sides of the building.
6. Submit revised landscape plans for Final Design Review, clearly indicating the locations of planting species, a legend, general dimensions of landscaped and hardscape areas, and photographs of the proposed landscape species.
7. The applicant shall include an illustrated written response to each condition of approval associated with Concept Design Review. Brief written responses without accompanying diagrams are not acceptable.
8. The project features and actions indicated on the plans demonstrating consistency with the City of Pasadena Climate Action Plan shall be clearly incorporated into and shown on the plans submitted for Final Design Review.
9. The project shall comply with the conditions provided by the Departments of Public Works (dated June 26, 2020) and Transportation (dated April 17, 2020), included in this report as Attachments B and C, to the satisfaction of said departments. The plans submitted for Final Design Review shall also be re-routed to City Departments and revised conditions, if any, shall be incorporated into the conditions of approval for Final Design Review.

## **BACKGROUND:**

### **Project Overview**

- General Plan Designation: Medium Mixed Use (0 – 2.25 FAR) & 0-87 dwelling units per acre.
- Zoning: CD-4 (Central District Specific Plan, Pasadena Playhouse Sub-district)
- Design Guidelines: The applicable design guidelines are the design-related goals and policies in the Land Use Element of the General Plan and the Design Guidelines in the Central District Specific Plan.
- Site: The subject site measures approximately 9,900 square feet and is comprised of a rectangular-shaped interior lot located on the easterly block face of South Oak Knoll Avenue, between East Green and Cordova Streets. The project site is currently developed with a surface parking lot with a perimeter concrete block wall, which is proposed to be demolished. There are no existing structures or trees within the property, however, two street trees fronting the site are proposed to be retained.
- Surroundings: Surrounding properties include single-story commercial and religious buildings, multi-family residential buildings ranging between one and four stories in height throughout the block between East Green Street and Cordova Street, and two 5-story multi-family residential buildings adjoin the rear property line of the subject site.
- Project Description: The proposal is for the construction of a four-story multi-family residential development with 19 dwelling units, and 25 subterranean parking spaces located at 150 South Oak Knoll Avenue.
- Site Design: The proposed four-story project consists of a single building mass with a footprint that would occupy the majority of the site except for the setback areas (required by Code) at the front, rear, and sides of the property, a vehicular driveway at the south edge of the property, and an open garden space at the northeast corner of the site, fronting the street. The building's primary facade would be oriented to the west, facing Oak Knoll Avenue; and vehicular access is proposed along the same frontage, at the southwest corner of the property. Pedestrian access would also be available from the street-facing elevation.
- Architectural Style: Contemporary style
- Developer: Balian Investments, LLC
- Architects: Onyx Architects
- Landscape Architect: Armstrong & Walker Landscape Architecture

**ANALYSIS:**

**Design Commission Comments from Preliminary Consultation**

On November 13, 2018, the Design Commission reviewed an application for Preliminary Consultation for this project. The Commission’s comments from that meeting, with excerpts from the design team’s responses, and staff’s comments, are detailed in the chart below. The design team’s full responses are incorporated into the set of plans in Attachment A.

<b>Commissioner Comments, November 13, 2018</b>	<b>Excerpt from Design Team Response</b>	<b>Staff Comments</b>
<p>1. The overall massing of the building needs further articulation. Consider accentuating the courtyard by making it more visible from street. For example, the lobby/hallway space can be widened to be more prominent along the street edge and serve as a portal like-element in order to frame the view into the courtyard when walking from the main entrance toward the interior of the building. Consider switching the covered communal space with a dwelling unit at one of the floor levels above. As proposed, units “A1” have no relationship to the courtyard space. The interior layout of the units should be redesigned or mirrored and incorporate openings or balconies so that they engage the courtyard space.</p>	<p>“The courtyard has been moved to the northwest corner of the site to keep a visual connection to the street with a play on solid and void massing, and is now open to the sky. A 4th level terrace further accentuates the void elements within the massing of the building by gradually stepping the solid and void volumes back...”</p>	<p>The revised building mass incorporates projecting and recessed sub-volumes and balconies that provide much greater dimensionality to the facades than the initial project design, which consisted of minimal offsets in the wall planes. Fewer exterior materials are also carefully applied in a variety of colors which enhance the overall articulation of the facades.</p> <p>The project also proposes to relocate the courtyard to the northwest corner of the site lining the sidewalk across a large portion of the building’s frontage and effectively engages with the street level. In addition, the communal space has been switched with a dwelling unit on the fourth floor and balconies are proposed adjacent to the elevator on multiple levels as additional common spaces to accommodate the dwelling units that do not have direct views or physical connections to the front courtyard.</p> <p>The comment from Preliminary Consultation has been satisfactorily addressed.</p>
<p>2. Re-examine how the first-floor level engages with the street. Consider incorporating a half-stop to the elevator to provide ADA accessibility from</p>	<p>“The proposed massing has been revised. The main entry of the building is now defined by an end stair that bisects the building to define the public from private</p>	<p>The layout and programming of the first-floor level has been redesigned to better engage with the street. In addition to the main entry, two residential units are configured with their own private entrances fronting</p>

Commissioner Comments, November 13, 2018	Excerpt from Design Team Response	Staff Comments
<p>the street to the ground-floor level to avoid the need of a ramp and allow for a more fluid building frontage. The design of the front yard can potentially be resolved with landscaping elements. In addition, the arrangement of common spaces (lobby, open stairs, open courtyard, and covered courtyard), each have different and unique qualities that can provide a nice sequence of circulation through the building if the height of the first-floor plate is increased. Increasing the floor height can also enhance the amount of potential uses and activities the covered courtyard space may accommodate.</p>	<p>spaces. The elevator has been moved inward to be more centralized within the building and individual units. The location of the elevator is largely driven by the layout of the basement parking and drive aisles...”</p>	<p>the street and walkways that pass through the front courtyard and connect to the sidewalk, effectively engaging with the street.</p> <p>The height of the ground level’s finished floor is reduced to be approximately two feet above the sidewalk level and pathways to the main entrance are reconfigured to provide ADA accessibility without the need of an elevator with a half-stop. However, the proposed pathways to the main entry and front dwelling units continue to cover a substantial portion of the front yard, leaving a small amount of area available for landscaping elements or amenities that can create opportunities for interaction between residents and pedestrian traffic.</p> <p>Staff recommends a condition of approval to simplify/reduce the amount of walkways and hardscape from the sidewalk to the main entry. The design solution should also introduce additional landscaping and/or amenities such as planter walls with engaged seating to ensure that the courtyard space is actively used by residents and does not exist as a pass-through space; and to create a more fluid building frontage.</p> <p>Upon implementation of the recommended condition of approval, the comment from Preliminary Consultation will be satisfactorily addressed.</p>
<p>3. As proposed, the project design does not merit consideration of height averaging due to its massing composition, which is predominantly a rectangular volume with the exception of projecting architectural features at the edge of</p>	<p>Same response as noted in comment no.1 above.</p>	<p>The overall height of the revised building design is lower than the initial project design. Early submitted concept design review documents included a rooftop trellis (southwest corner) that did not comply with the maximum allowable height requirement of the Zoning Code.</p>

Commissioner Comments, November 13, 2018	Excerpt from Design Team Response	Staff Comments
<p>the building fronting the street. Further study and refine the plate heights of each floor level so that the design complies with the height requirements of the Zoning Code.</p>		<p>The applicant has informed staff that the trellis will be omitted and therefore this comment from Preliminary Consultation has been satisfactorily addressed.</p>
<p>4. The roof terrace design appears to be another stacked unit and is not clearly differentiated. Consider architectural treatments to the front elevation to refine the roof terrace design. For example, the front façade area expressed as the rooftop can be reduced in height by removing the framing elements that extend from the lower floor levels and railings may be incorporated at the building edge. Shading elements may also be incorporated to the structure so that the space becomes useable all-year round and all-day.</p>	<p>“Two roof terraces have been proposed for the development. One at a lower floor (4th floor) at the northwest corner of the building and an upper roof terrace at the roof level. An open stair has been proposed to connect the two communal spaces together and maintain a visual and physical connection between the two gathering spaces without the need to re-enter the building to access the opposing floor level / terrace. Built in roof trellises have been provided for portions of both decks to maintain a sense of shelter and shade.”</p>	<p>As noted previously, the design has been significantly revised to improve the roof terrace design and communal spaces throughout the site. The roof terrace design includes variation in the metal guardrails and solid walls along the perimeter to allow views from below. On the primary elevation, the communal terraces on the fourth floor level and the roof are clearly expressed as void elements flanking the glazed stairwell in the center of the elevation. The use of metal guardrails terminating the top edges of the solid front façade walls defines the void terrace spaces at the corners of the building.</p> <p>Staff believes that with implementation of the previous recommended condition to incorporate shading elements into the design so that the space becomes useable all-year round, the comment from Preliminary Consultation will be satisfactorily addressed.</p>
<p>5. The use and consistency of materiality is significantly different throughout all sides of the building and should be examined further. Continue to study the fenestration and their relation from floor plans to elevations. The interior spaces should be further expressed on the façade design.</p>	<p>“A more refined material composition has been proposed for the project, with use of stucco in field and accent colors, as well as cement fiber siding wall treatments for a play on color and material. Furthermore, the introduction of aluminum panel treatments at balcony and canopy lines includes a third material to add modern touch. A storefront at the main entry and stair tower</p>	<p>The revised building design includes an exterior materials palette with fewer materials and a more refined application, which results in a more interesting and cohesive appearance on all sides of the structure. The current design consists primarily of stucco walls in a variation of colors. Fiber cement siding is also used as an accent to articulate the building sub-volumes on all sides of the structure. Metal cladding and railings are carefully applied to define open spaces such as private/communal balconies and</p>

Commissioner Comments, November 13, 2018	Excerpt from Design Team Response	Staff Comments
	helps to identify the public spaces of the structure from the individual units.”	<p>open terraces on the elevations. The revised elevations also depict a refined fenestration pattern consisting of window groupings having similar proportions and subtle variation, carefully located to create a balance of solid-to-void proportions on each elevation.</p> <p>The comment from Preliminary Consultation has been satisfactorily addressed.</p>
<p>6. The proposed massing reads as two separate buildings. The front of the building looks more refined and the rear portion appears more institutional. Reconsider the overall treatment of the building to provide a more cohesive design. Given the opportunity to keep the elevator where it is to provide ADA accessibility, its location may be used as a tool to further resolve the design of the front façade.</p>	<p>Same response as noted in comment no.2 above.</p>	<p>The use of fewer materials in a variety of colors creates a more dynamic, yet harmonious appearance on all sides of the building. The modulation of building volumes is clearly defined by the changes in stucco color tones and the use of fiber cement siding. Metal railings and cladding on the fasciae of the balcony decks are applied consistently on all sides of the building, which also unify the overall design.</p> <p>The elevator has been relocated to a more centralized area within the middle of the building and would be easily accessible to all of the residential units. This change allows additional residential units to have street frontage along the primary elevation on multiple floor levels to effectively engage the street.</p> <p>The comment from Preliminary Consultation has been satisfactorily addressed.</p>

### Programming and Circulation

The proposed four-story project consists of a roughly rectangular-shaped building mass occupying the majority of the site. The building would be situated above two levels of subterranean parking, which includes mechanical/electrical rooms, bicycle and trash storage areas. The ground floor of the building has five residential units configured around a double-loaded hallway that extends (east-west) from the front of the building toward the rear. A primary courtyard is proposed at the northwest corner of the site, fronting Oak Knoll Avenue. The north

and south side yards would have an exterior walkway across the entire length of the site and a vehicular driveway ramp, respectively, and would be treated with landscaping elements throughout the sides and rear of the building. The second- through fourth-floor plans depict a configuration that is almost identical to the first-floor level. The floor plans include units stacked directly above the ground-floor dwellings and interior double-loaded hallways, with the exception of minor variations in balcony configurations depicted on the ground floor level and a communal open terrace on the fourth floor level having the same footprint of the residential unit directly below it. The roof plan depicts a terrace feature proposed to occupy the majority of the front portion of the building.

A two-way driveway, which accommodates vehicular access/egress from Oak Knoll Avenue, is located at the southwest corner of the property. Pedestrian access to the interior of the site would be available from the main garden fronting Oak Knoll Avenue. Within the site, the units are accessed directly from the parking garage and double-loaded corridors via a centrally located elevator and stairwells at the front and northeast portion of the building that connects to upper floor levels. Overall, the plans depict well-organized floor plans that provide adequate circulation from all points of the building and a substantial amount of common space to encourage resident interaction on multiple floor levels. However, the plans do not specify the type of amenities proposed within the common areas. Therefore, staff recommends a condition of approval requiring further specification of the amenities proposed for the open terraces, main courtyard, and other common spaces within the site.

### **Orientation**

The proposed development is sited on an interior lot with its primary elevation appropriately oriented west, facing South Oak Knoll Avenue. The primary building elevation includes a tall stair tower with curtain walls centered on the façade with the main entry door at the base, flanked by two solid building volumes with punched window openings consisting of stacked residential units facing the street, and open terraces above the dwelling units. The overall orientation of the project is appropriate, with the more significant architectural features and pedestrian access engaging with the adjacent street.

### **Height, Massing and Modulation**

The overall building mass is composed of a four-story, cubic volume approximately 48 feet tall. The building design consists of a flat roof with varying heights and two stair tower elements located at the front and rear portions of the building, which extend approximately four feet above the roofline. The overall building height and mass respond sensitively to the surrounding context by attempting to provide a gradual transition in building heights between adjoining five-story developments on the east and three-story developments on the north and south of the project site. In addition, the fourth-level open terrace is located on the front portion of the building to partially reduce the height of the primary façade, which would maintain a level of compatibility in building heights along the block face. As noted in the table above, the revised building height is lower than the initial proposal and appears to respond sensitively to the surrounding context.

The elevation drawings depict simple modulation of the building mass, which allows for the stair towers and projecting sub-volumes to create recessed and projecting balconies, substantial roof height variation, and subtle wall plane variation, which are more apparent on the north and west

elevations. Although the proposed height and modulation of the building mass is appropriate, additional refinement is needed to ensure the project is more compatible with the surrounding context.

The south and east elevations lack some consistency with the other elevations. Specifically, the south elevation presents a roofline with very minimal height variation in comparison to the north and west facades. The east elevation also has much less dimensionality than the other sides of the building. Staff recommends a condition of approval to enhance the dimensionality of the east elevation by creating a more substantial wall plane variation and incorporating projecting/recessed balconies on the southerly edge of the facade, and greater roof height variation on the south and east elevations of the building to achieve a harmonious comprehensive design. Staff believes that with implementation of the recommended condition of approval the modulation will be more appropriate and responsive to the design guidelines and previous comments from the Commission.

### **Architectural Style and Detailing**

The chosen architectural style for this project is Contemporary and the architectural details consistently and appropriately reinforce the Contemporary style. The design incorporates elements and materials consisting of simple rectilinear geometries, flat roofs, articulated massing including portions with full-height walls with stucco control joints (reveals), a prominent entrance/stairwell with curtain walls, stacked punched window openings, balconies and terraces. The proposed new building has massing, articulation, windows and balconies that are arranged in a clear pattern on all sides.

However, the elevations show two aluminum trellises (the trellis located at the southwest corner will be omitted from the building design) are proposed within the open terraces that are not well integrated to the building design, and it is unclear whether they are proposed to be attached or detached from the building walls. There are opportunities to better integrate the trellises to the building so that they can provide protection from the elements and be used all-year round. Staff recommends a condition of approval to explore alternative designs, which may include but are not limited to, creating smaller canopies distributed throughout the terraces or incorporating overhangs to the stair towers or other building walls.

The elevations specify exterior materials that include sand-finish stucco with reveals, fiber cement siding, aluminum window systems, metal hand railings and balcony decks. The choice of exterior materials and methods of application is appropriate for the proposed design.

### **Compatibility**

The proposed new building is compatible with its immediate surroundings in terms of height, massing, setbacks and architectural design. The lower portion of the building is located at the westerly portion of the site and the taller and larger portion of the building is situated on the easterly portion of the property, which sensitively responds to the scale and height of the adjacent developments. As noted previously, staff has recommended a series of conditions of approval to further ensure consistency with the proposed contemporary architectural style.

## **Conceptual Landscape Design**

The conceptual landscape plans depict planters distributed within the main courtyard located on the northwest of the site and minimal landscaping lining the north, south, and rear edges of the site. Additional landscaping is proposed in planter boxes that would be distributed throughout the open terraces at the fourth floor and the roof. The plans also depict a total of 31 trees for the entire site: eight trees would be planted on the ground level, five on the fourth-level terrace, and 18 trees would be planted on the roof terrace. The plans list a large number of proposed planting species, however, they do not clearly illustrate the quantity and locations, or whether the designs would consist of planter beds, planter walls with engaged seating, or other landscape or hardscape elements. As part of the Final Design Review submittal, staff recommends several conditions of approval which would require product specifications and enlarged detail drawings of permanent amenities to ensure that the main courtyard and communal spaces are appropriately landscape and usable for the residents.

The conceptual landscape plans also depict a substantial amount of hardscape along the primary building frontage due to the configuration of walkways connecting the front dwellings and main building entry to the sidewalk, which results in minimal landscaping features throughout the main courtyard. Staff recommends a condition of approval to combine or simplify the walkways that connect the sidewalk to the main entry door and to the residential units and provide additional landscaping with permanent amenities to enhance the main courtyard experience.

The elevations also depict exposed concrete masonry unit (cmu) walls proposed for the front courtyard planters and walkways. However, it is staff's opinion that cmu does not reflect a high-quality aesthetic and alternative material, colors, and/or finishes for these walls shall be explored. The materials and finishes are evaluated in greater detail at Final Design Review. Therefore, staff recommends a condition of approval requiring the design team to refine the configuration, materials, colors, and finishes of the courtyard planters and walkway walls to express the high-quality design of the building.

## **COMMENTS FROM OTHER DEPARTMENTS:**

Staff routed the project for comment to several City Departments including the Public Works, Transportation, Fire, and Housing Departments, as well as the Building, Current Planning and Cultural Affairs Divisions of the Planning & Community Development Department. The Building and Current Planning Divisions and Fire Department provided standard comments related to Building and Fire Code compliance, and the Cultural Affairs Division confirmed the project is exempt from the Public Art requirements. The recommended conditions from the Housing Department, Department of Public Works and Department of Transportation are included as Attachments B, C, and D, respectively.

## **ENVIRONMENTAL ANALYSIS:**

Staff engaged Michael Baker International, an environmental consulting firm, to evaluate the potential environmental impacts of the project and determine whether it would meet the required findings for a Categorical Exemption under the CEQA Class 32, "infill development projects" exemption. A project may qualify for a Class 32 Categorical Exemption if the following are applicable: (a) the project is consistent with the applicable general plan designation and all applicable general plan policies as well as with applicable zoning designation and regulations;

(b) the proposed development occurs within city limits on a project site of no more than five acres substantially surrounded by urban uses; (c) the project site has no value, as habitat for endangered, rare or threatened species; (d) approval of the project would not result in any significant effects relating to traffic, noise, air quality, or water quality; (e) the site can be adequately served by all required utilities and public services. Based on the technical studies prepared by Michael Baker International (Attachments E and F), the project would not have the potential to result in significant impacts related to air quality, traffic, noise, water quality or cultural resources. The project is also proposed on a previously disturbed site less than five acres in size in an urbanized area and is consistent the General Plan land use designation and zoning designation. Therefore, staff recommends that the Commission determine that the project is Categorically Exempt from CEQA, pursuant to CEQA Guidelines Section 15332.

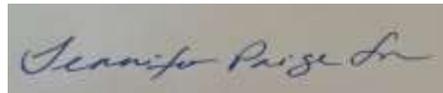
The project is also subject to the City of Pasadena's Climate Action Plan, which is a qualified greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions reduction plan developed in accordance with California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) Guidelines Section 15183.5. The project is required to demonstrate that the anticipated Green House Gas (GHG) emissions generated by this project will be below the accepted thresholds established for the City. The City has developed a tool, the Climate Action Plan Consistency Checklist, which applicants can use to demonstrate consistency with Pasadena's Climate Action Plan (CAP). Projects that meet the requirements of this Checklist will be deemed consistent with Pasadena's CAP and will be found to have a less than significant contribution to cumulative GHG (i.e., the project's incremental contribution to cumulative GHG effects is not cumulatively considerable), pursuant to CEQA Guidelines Sections 15064(h)(3), 15130(d), and 15183(b). Projects that do not meet the requirements in this Checklist will be deemed inconsistent with Pasadena's CAP and must prepare a project-specific analysis of GHG emissions, including quantification of existing and projected GHG emissions and incorporation of the measures in this Checklist to the extent feasible.

The CAP Checklist provides three options for applicants to use to demonstrate compliance. The applicant has selected Option A, Sustainable Development Actions. The applicant has indicated, on the provided plans, specific features or actions that will be incorporated into the project that demonstrate that the project contributes its fair share to the City's cumulative GHG reduction goals and the project is therefore deemed consistent with the CAP. To ensure that the project continues to incorporate these features, staff recommends a condition of approval requiring that the features be clearly incorporated into and shown on the plans submitted for Final Design Review.

**CONCLUSION:**

The project design has satisfactorily addressed the comments provided during Preliminary Consultation and is consistent with the applicable design guidelines in the Central District specific plan. Staff recommends approval of the application for Concept Design Review for the project with conditions to improve the quality and detailing of proposed design.

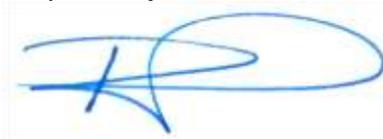
Respectfully Submitted,



---

David M. Reyes  
Director of Planning and  
Community Development

Prepared by:



---

Rodrigo Pelayo  
Associate Planner

Reviewed by:



---

Leon E. White  
Principal Planner

Attachments:

- A. Applicant Submittal, Including Preliminary Consultation Responses, Current Plans & Elevations
- B. Recommended conditions from the Housing Department
- C. Recommended conditions from the Department of Public Works
- D. Recommended conditions from the Department of Transportation
- E. Air Quality Technical Report ( Electronic Attachment available at <https://ww5.cityofpasadena.net/commissions/design-commission/> )
- F. Noise Technical Report (Electronic Attachment available at <https://ww5.cityofpasadena.net/commissions/design-commission/> )
- G. CAP Consistency Checklist