

Citizen Comment

To: City Clerk, Historic & Cultural Preservation Committee,
Planning Commission, City Council and Mayor

Re: Hotel Weaver Whatever-Its-New-Name proposed project, Petaluma Boulevard & B Street

From: Katherine Gregor, Petaluma resident

Date: June 6, 2023

I am not in love with the conceptual renderings or proposed height of this project. But Petaluma can and must do better than to simply defeat any proposed new use for this highly visible and derelict empty lot.

I am not a NIMBY. I believe that we as community members have a duty to honor Petaluma's special character by clearly communicating and advocating for what we DO want – especially for the redevelopment of an important site in our historic downtown – rather than fighting each proposed project on a one-off basis.

So, I'm fairly new around here. May I ask: Why doesn't this city have a Design Commission? Or a City Architect? Why doesn't it require early design review of all Downtown projects by Planning Commission, and perhaps a panel of local architects and urban planners, at least? Where are the adopted design standards that would allow a developer to follow clear community standards and propose a project that most folks will readily embrace? Those are the standard tools for a city. Putting them in place for Petaluma now would be a prudent City investment, as it would prevent expensive and protracted fights that serve no one.

As is inevitable, some folks have expressed dismay with the scale, height, stark modernity, parking paucity, and/or "not from here" character of the proposed project and its conceptual design rendering. I've heard some solid concerns and there's an obvious near-term solution. City Council can require that the owner/developer/architect engage a regional practitioner highly skilled in community design charrettes. Then hold one – and update the proposal based on the vision of this community.

A true multi-day community design charrette process provides a framework for the developer and architect to listen to the community, engage in co-design (within realistic fiscal constraints), and arrive at a final design that reflects the community's character and desires. This is a proven process and it works. A list of respected community design charrette practitioners in this area can be readily obtained from the California chapter of the Congress for the New Urbanism (CNU) or AIA. If the developer won't hire one, the City should.

The exterior shown is just a concept. The development team includes a respected architecture firm that can and should give this community a better design solution. Direct them to assign the project to their very top designers. I'd bet someone there knows how to provide true architectural excellence – if they receive very clear community-driven design standards and requirements.

Here are my informing views on such projects, born of many years reporting on neighborhood vs. developer fights for a community newspaper, and steeped in decades of self-education via reading, looking and CNU:

- A good new redevelopment is always better than an empty lot, or empty derelict building.
- Redevelopment of a central, walkable, bikeable, transit-accessible property in a downtown location is always a desirable community goal.
- Cities should work *with* community-oriented redevelopers to make re-use welcome and achievable.
- Concerned and engaged citizens need to work *with* developers and become educated about the financial realities of redeveloping a site within realistic constraints. (Unless they just love empty lots.)

- New development should be allowed at about double the height of the surrounding context of buildings. If the rest of the block(s) are 1 to 2 stories, then allow up to 4 stories, max, by right. You can get PLENTY of density that way. Towers have no place in a low-scale downtown.
- Towns do not need to leapfrog up to 6 to 12 stories, in the name of climate readiness. They do need new 4-story infill in walkable locations (e.g. wood -frame attainable housing over ground-floor retail).
- A new work of architecture can and should be of contemporary design, while respecting and fitting into its context (e.g. surrounding historical buildings) through sensitive design, scale, materials, and detailing.
- What affects us most as people is sidewalk-level design. Cities need adopted design standard requirements. Focus on the look-and-feel of facades at street level. Many cities and organizations have standards that are time-tested models: They cover human scale, clear storefront windows, landscaping or planters, sidewalk cafes or benches, shade/rain structures, sensitive proportions and detailing.
- The community design standard for new buildings should require them to use excellent materials and to embody the best architecture of today. Disneyland recreations – that is, cheaply built fake historical facades – always look tacky.
- Cities can and should have buildings in diverse architectural styles that reflect their eras. The goal is not for a city to look frozen in time. Walking around Paris, we delight in seeing diverse modern and historic buildings mashed-up together in one urban fabric. New buildings should not mimic the past. The goal is to embody the best of today, in a timeless way. Spend money on design talent and excellence.
- Don't make the perfect the enemy of the good
- As has often been said, the standard for a building should be that it is both timeless and an expression of design excellence – a building so wonderful that people will fight to save it in 50, 100, 200 years.

In closing, it is always elevating to revisit the wisdom of Christopher Alexander:

There is one timeless way of building. It is a thousand years old, and the same today as it has ever been. The great traditional buildings of the past, the villages and tents and temples in which man feels at home, have always been made by people who were very close to the center of this way. It is not possible to make great buildings, or great towns, beautiful places, places where you feel yourself, places where you feel alive, except by following this way. And, as you will see, this way will lead anyone who looks for it to buildings which are themselves as ancient in their form, as the trees and hills, and as our faces are.

– Christopher Alexander, *The Timeless Way of Building*