

Little Mountain Community Advisory Group's Comments on Draft Planning Policy

Introduction

In this document, the Little Mountain Community Advisory Group (CAG) puts forward our collective feedback on the Planning Principles being brought forward to guide rezoning for the Little Mountain site. The CAG is a diverse group of community stakeholders that has engaged for well over 2 years in research and deliberation, informed by input from city planners, consulting design professionals, the developer and the community at large. In this document, we present points on which CAG members collectively agree.

Overall, the CAG is in favour of developing the Little Mountain site in ways that will provide benefits to the local community and to Vancouver as a city.

While the CAG has worked in good faith to focus on planning principles, it must be noted that deep concerns have been expressed about how the early stages of development unfolded, including the disposition of the land, displacement of the tenants, and length of time the site has remained vacant (5 years).

We emphasize that planning principles cannot be developed in ways that are just “internally focused” on Little Mountain as a “large-site” opportunity. It is crucial to consider this development in the context of the large number of significant projects taking place simultaneously in the Riley Park/South Cambie area.

While the CAG supports Vancouver’s goals in relation to sustainability, affordability, and livability, this project cannot be expected to take on undue responsibility for achieving those goals. This project needs to be considered as one of many initiatives that, together, achieve Vancouver’s vision.

Similarly, potential impacts and challenges (for example, traffic, parking, access to transit, and community amenities) must be considered in light of how they will be significantly amplified given stresses created by adjacent developments.

Planning for this development needs to be based, not on financial pressures, but on appropriate urban design principles that reflect a long-term vision of Vancouver that respects and enhances the existing neighbourhood character and assets.

Our recommendations, presented below, reflect principles we believe will accommodate all stakeholder needs. Our position should not be interpreted as a starting point from which a “compromise” should be constructed.

Context and Implications

Little Mountain is located within the heart of an existing community, and is bounded by the Main Street corridor, Queen Elizabeth (QE) Park, and surrounding single-family neighbourhoods. The scope, scale, and quality of any development on the Little Mountain site needs to integrate well into this distinct, existing community as a unique neighbourhood within the City of Vancouver.

Establishing a fit with the Little Mountain site’s “place in the city” requires planning for appropriately scaled building forms and massing, and for ground-plane oriented lifestyles, that transition to and complement those of the existing community.

QE Park is this area’s central, dominant, “iconic” physical feature. Views to and from QE Park, and other public view corridors, are of high value to city residents and Vancouver’s visitors. This needs to be considered when setting limits on heights and massing.

The Little Mountain site is located in an area already severely stressed by expanding development and activity. Community and city wide facilities such as the destination pool, ice rink, and Hillcrest Centre have indicated they are at or near capacity. The scope and scale of development must take these existing stresses into consideration.

The Little Mountain site is not within easy walking distance of the Canada Line or a major employment area and therefore is not a strategic site for locating a very high-density development.

The Little Mountain site is adjacent to destination recreational areas (QE Park, Hillcrest Centre), and is bordered by two greenway/ bikeways. The challenges associated with reconciling multiple uses must be considered when planning population density at Little Mountain. Strategies for ensuring safe co-mingling of pedestrians, bicycles and cars are essential.

Site Plan

The CAG supports the site plan as developed through the consultation process, including the central street, a village centre at Main Street and other public spaces, protection of greenways/ bikeways, retention of the heritage trees, and pedestrian permeability.

Public spaces (e.g., the village centre), shared open spaces (e.g., community gardens), and water features need to be useable, animated, and sustainable. Building heights and ground coverage need to be planned to ensure sufficient sunlight is available to support valued activities at ground level.

The CAG supports further study of the site edge conditions, including transitions in scale, height and overall massing to the existing single-family residential neighbourhoods.

The CAG supports the principle of protecting the greenways and bikeways, achieved through channeling traffic flow along arterials and implementing traffic calming and control measures. This includes the plan for a single access/exit at 36th/ Main Street and a single access/exit at 33rd Avenue/ James Street.

The CAG supports the principle of an additional vehicular access/exit at 35th Avenue if the "Adjacent Area" (Northeast Quadrant) is rezoned.

Traffic impacts should be carefully monitored over time, with potential for additional entry/exit locations being considered if necessary.

Density

With carefully planned design that performs well to address potential impacts to the surrounding community, a minimum of 20% below-market housing on the site, and achievement of priority amenities, the CAG could support densities of up to a maximum of 2.2 to 2.3 gross FSR¹.

The Council-approved (November 1, 2005) RPSC Community Vision Directions for the Little Mountain development advised including no buildings over 4 stories, which could provide building density of about 1.45 FSR. Through the consultation process, the CAG and the public have moved to recognize the need for additional density to achieve project and City goals.

From an urban design perspective, massing appropriate to this context would fit with the character of the Main street corridor and the surrounding communities, with a design and density similar to Quilchena Park (1.4 FSR) or Arbutus Walk (1.9 FSR).

However, if the full 20% of social housing and priority amenities are provided, and urban design principles are effectively applied, the CAG could support a density of 2.2 to 2.3 FSR. Given the character of the neighbourhood and its place in the city, this level of density is between Arbutus Walk and the Olympic Village.

Heights and Massing

The CAG does not support the building heights proposed by the developer for the Little Mountain site. At issue is not just the height of a single building, but also the number and scale of high buildings proposed for the site.

¹ FSR is a measure of density and refers to "Floor Space Ratio". For information on FSR, see <http://vancouver.ca/commsvcs/planning/littlemountain/public/11july/LM%20July%202011%20What%20is%20FSR.pdf>

The CAG proposes that the majority of buildings on the site be 4 to 6 storeys (40 to 60 feet), and that no building be greater than 10 storeys (100 feet).

The CAG does not support a single building of 14 storeys as a dramatic feature for the development. In terms of height, QE Park and the Bloedel Conservatory dome are, and should remain, the iconic landmarks for the area. There is ample latitude for architectural distinction, including a focal point, if desired, without exceeding 100 feet in height.

Heights of buildings must not interfere with important sight lines, from QE Park toward the Northeast, East, and Southeast. "Walls" of imposing buildings should not unreasonably block views towards QE Park or the North Shore Mountains from public spaces in surrounding neighbourhoods.

Heights and locations of buildings need to be planned to avoid shadowing of surrounding public amenities such as QE Park, existing neighbouring properties, and the public and open spaces within the site.

The site edge conditions to the existing single family neighbourhoods along 33rd and 37th Avenues need to transition gradually and sensitively in scale, height and overall massing. The CAG does not support sudden transitions to higher building forms, as these create 'walls' of imposing buildings.

If the Northeast quadrant rezoning is approved, the CAG supports studying the possibility of redistributing massing (adding floors) to the building forms adjacent to that quadrant in order to reduce building heights on other parts of the site.

In order to reduce the overall heights of buildings, the CAG supports distributing more of the building massing onto areas now occupied by large open spaces, the water feature, and even some of the site perimeter (to the extent that other principles are met, such as creating gradual transitions to neighbourhoods and preserving mature trees). Important functions can be maintained while reducing size of those site plan elements.

Social, Affordable, and Family Housing²

The CAG agrees with prioritizing social, affordable, and family housing on the Little Mountain site, and giving first priority to returning former Little Mountain tenants.

The CAG strongly supports that at least 20% of the dwelling units be allocated to social housing. The development must include at least the 224 replacement units and 10 aboriginal units, funded by BC Housing.

First right of refusal must be given to former tenants to return to the Little Mountain site (either to social or affordable housing, as appropriate). Ensuring their expedited return must be part of the planning and rezoning process.

The CAG agrees that social housing units should be distributed throughout the site. At least 20% of dwellings in each of the first and second phases of construction should be replacement social housing units.

The CAG strongly encourages a development model that will create a full, mixed community (singles, couples, young families, median-income earners, seniors, individuals with disabilities), including 35% of total dwelling units for families with children.

The CAG strongly recommends exploring options for achieving rental and housing affordability other than through increased density (such as co-operatives, not-for-profit or government operated; co-housing; or flexible use spaces that can be added to units to accommodate growing/ intergenerational families).

² We use "social housing" in this document to refer to the goal of 20% of housing supported by government to serve low or modest income households. We use the term "affordable housing" more broadly to reference housing options that enable median-income Vancouver households to invest 30% or less of income in rent or mortgage, considering the full housing continuum (see <http://vancouver.ca/commsvcs/planning/westend/pdf/housing.pdf>).

Community Amenities

The CAG supports the amenities outlined in the Little Mountain Policy statement which are: a Little Mountain Neighbourhood House; a 69-space Childcare Facility; Transportation and Safety Improvements; and QE Park Improvements.

The Neighbourhood House serving the full community, and the Childcare Facility should be located around a sunny community square fronting Main Street. Grounded by the 'three sisters' tree grouping, these programs, together with community gardens, playgrounds, arts, and ground-level residential doors on the street, have the potential to activate the square and the project.

The CAG does not support increasing density beyond 2.3 FSR in order to achieve these or additional amenities. If density at 2.2 - 2.3 FSR does not provide sufficient funding to provide the amenities outlined in the Little Mountain Policy Statement, the CAG advises that the QE Park Improvements are of lowest priority, as they may be achieved over time through other means.

History and Memory

The CAG urges the City to include in its principles direction for the Little Mountain planning process to acknowledge and communicate the history of the Little Mountain site and overall community in meaningful ways.

Representing the site's physical history (i.e., the former off-grid buildings, trees, and pathways) through the site plan is a valuable way to acknowledge the neighbourhood's history. Preserving the existing trees is a visible way to achieve this that could contribute to a person's experience of place. In contrast, the road angle is a plan-based tool that, at the level of human experience, is less convincing in evoking the community's history.

As planning progresses, it is essential to define additional strategies for visibly and tangibly communicating the community's social and cultural history for future generations, beyond preserving some aspects of the physical environment such as the trees.

The CAG supports further consideration on how the public art component of the project might be used to meaningfully represent the community's history for future generations.

Sustainability

The CAG supports a vision of sustainability that includes both the built environment (buildings and landscape) and social sustainability.

The CAG supports applying the City's principles for sustainability in ways that take best advantage of opportunities associated with the Little Mountain site.

Particularly important for the Little Mountain site, given its low-lying location in relation to QE Park, will be managing rain/storm water in ways that ensure effective drainage and allow for collection/ re-use.

The CAG supports the protection of bikeways/greenways, and strongly supports design and policy that encourage use of alternative forms of transportation (e.g., car share programs; ample and safe bicycle storage; advocacy or cost sharing to improve transit).

Traffic, Parking and Safety

The CAG is very concerned about the potential traffic, safety and parking impacts to the surrounding community associated with the scope, scale and density of the Little Mountain site.

With traffic channeled to the arterials (Main Street and 33rd Avenue), measures to ensure traffic is slowed down through traffic calming and control are absolutely essential.

Ensuring that increased traffic flow and off-site parking are not channeled into the surrounding neighbourhood streets and lanes is crucial.

Efforts to control traffic flow must be considered, not only after the project is completed, but also through all phases of redevelopment.

It is essential to establish strong, clear and safe connections for pedestrians, strollers, and cyclists, including for persons with disabilities, across the arterials to the nearby community amenities, schools and parks.

Additional vehicular access/exit from 35th Avenue should be considered if all or part of the "Adjacent Area" (Northeast Quadrant) is rezoned.

Transit options along Main St and 33rd Avenue are already heavily strained. Planning an appropriate level of density for Little Mountain must take into account that the site is not located within easy walking distance of the Canada Line. Negotiations with Translink will be essential to ensure adequate surface transit for an increasing population.

Concluding Remarks and Process Recommendations

This document summarizes feedback from the CAG developed out of an extensive planning process. In this, we provide our collective feedback on the City's planning principles. We have represented points on which we collectively agree.

But in this document we have not represented important ideas about ways in which some of these goals might be achieved, comments more appropriate to the next steps of planning, during rezoning. Thus In closing, we offer four process recommendations:

1. The CAG strongly recommends that flaws in the planning process for the LM site not be repeated in the future, and that "lessons learned" here be taken forward to inform future planning processes.

2. The CAG supports planning for universal design and how to meaningfully include persons with disabilities during rezoning and design processes.

Given the history of the Little Mountain site and community, which has traditionally accommodated a diverse community, attention to accessibility and inclusion for individuals with disabilities is particularly important.

The CAG supports applying current "best practices" in universal design for accessibility, both in the design of residential dwellings and when planning for associated amenities (e.g., the Neighbourhood House, child-care facility, transportation and park improvements).

3. The CAG advises that principles adopted for the Little Mountain site be taken up and considered seriously during the rezoning process and subsequent design.

It is especially important to ensure that these principles are applied and reviewed during formative stages of the design process, not just in a final review of a worked out proposal.

4. The CAG requests the opportunity to be involved in the process through the rezoning stage.

It is essential to maintain a community voice during the rezoning phase, which will be pivotal in determining how planning principles are applied to the Little Mountain site as design and development continues.

A CAG that includes community members with diverse perspectives and substantial local knowledge about a full range of issues, achieved through the extensive consultation process undertaken to date, will provide an important complement to feedback generated through an Open House process.

The CAG feels strongly that it is particularly relevant to ensure an informed community perspective (informed by area residents, archivists, historians, artists) is included throughout the re-zoning process, and that this group would explore the local community history and its representation through the making of meaningful public art.

