



Architectural Review Board

Staff Report (ID # 11861)

Report Type:	Action Items	Meeting Date: 12/17/2020
Summary Title:	ARB Annual Report to Council	
Title:	Architectural Review Board Annual Report to Council: Review of Letter	
From:	Jonathan Lait	

Recommendation

Staff recommends the Architectural Review Board (ARB) review and approve the draft 2020 Annual Report and direct staff to forward the report to City Council.

Background

As noted in Municipal Code Section 2.21.030, the ARB shall send a report, not less than once a year, to the Planning Commission and City Council for the purpose of communicating the concerns of the Board with respect to the City's plans, policies, ordinances and procedures as these affect the projects which the Board reviews.

The attached report has been revised to address comments made by Board members at the December 3, 2020 hearing.

Staff and Board members may provide additional photographs at the hearing.

Attachments:

- Attachment A: DRAFT 2020 ARB Annual Report to Council (DOCX)

To: City Council of the City of Palo Alto
 Planning and Transportation Commission of the City of Palo Alto
 From: Architectural Review Board of the City of Palo Alto
 Re: Annual Report from the ARB
 Date: December 17, 2020

Honorable members of the Palo Alto City Council and Planning and Transportation Commission:

The PAMC Section 2.21.030 directs the Architectural Review Board to report annually our “concerns... with respect to the city’s plans, policies, ordinances and procedures as these affect the projects which the board reviews.” Our reviews are site specific – we look at individual development proposals, not broad policies. At the same time, we are directed to look at each project in both its physical and regulatory context – how it will enhance its neighborhood (or not) and how it will implement the City’s policies, from the Comprehensive Plan to the various design guidelines the City uses. Because we look at many projects each year, and because many board members have years of experience in Palo Alto, patterns emerge and specific areas of concern have been identified. Our comments this year are centered on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the increasing importance of housing projects to the city.

A. Remote Design Review. Since March 2020 we have been conducting Architecture Review Board meetings by Zoom teleconference. Baring our initial technical stumbles, we feel that we have been able to successfully review projects and conduct business in this manner. A few concerns have arisen:

- Digital drawing sets are more difficult for some board members to review. On larger and more complex projects printed drawings have allowed us to more easily and fully comprehend the proposed work.
- Material samples are presented in an enclosed cabinet in front of city hall, preventing board members from having tactile access to samples as we deliberate. While a reasonable compromise, this limits our ability to fully review the proposed materials for a project.
- Public and board member participation in our project reviews has not declined. In fact, while some people have difficulty with the communication format (internet connectivity, microphone operability), others have commented that tele-conference enabled meetings have enabled their participation.

While remote meetings are a necessary temporary alternative, they are not an equivalent substitution to in person hearings. However, a hybrid model, with some meetings held remotely, could increase public participation.

B. San Antonio Corridor Design Standards. San Antonio Avenue is experiencing increasing development but our zoning regulations for the area are outdated.

- The existing one-story light industrial and commercial buildings will be substantially replaced in the coming decade. What are the best uses for this area? What size buildings are appropriate?
- How will the transportation infrastructure be upgraded?
- Other commercial areas in Palo Alto have benefited from specific design guidelines (El Camino, California, SoFA). What is our vision for this neighborhood?

The Architectural Review Board is familiar with development issues in this neighborhood and should be involved in the creation of new design guidelines.

C. City Council/Planning Commission communication. The Architecture Review Board has very little formal interaction with the City Council, the Planning Commission and the Historic Resources Board. Board members are forced to act on individual initiative to gain input from council members and other commissioners. Joint meetings with full boards are rarely productive; yet uncoordinated serial meetings leave commissioners unaware of feedback from colleagues on other boards. Applicants often feel that they are ‘running a gauntlet’ of approvals rather than facing a coordinated review.

- Request staff to provide summary reports from PTC, ARB and HRB meetings promptly following each meeting.

- Take direct feedback from the ARB on reviewed projects up for council approval. The ARB can appoint a member to represent the board directly to the council.
- Request staff to schedule joint preliminary discussions between the ARB, PTC and HRB chairs/vice-chairs on projects of common interest. These 'preliminary meetings' would not be to review specifics of a project; rather they would serve to coordinate the review process between boards and planning staff.

D. Architectural Awards Program. We have postponed the Architectural Awards program until 2021 due to ongoing pandemic.

E. Objective Design Standards. In response to recently enacted state legislation, Palo Alto is being forced to adopt objective design review standards for housing projects, effectively eliminating architectural review on residential and mixed-use projects. The Architectural Review Board is working closely with the planning department to develop and refine prescriptive standards for these projects in an effort to ensure high quality design without subjective review.

Due to time constraints we have been unable to make a comprehensive outreach effort to local stakeholders, the professional community, and the public at large. We have thus received no community input on the proposed objective standards.

While some of our new standards will be effective, many others attempt to address issues that are inherently subjective and simply cannot be reduced to a series of specific requirements. Ultimately, these prescriptive standards will prove a poor replacement for our review process and design quality will decrease.

When reflecting back on the entitlement process for Palo Alto projects many applicants agree that architectural review improved their buildings. The typical complaints are often related to the length of time required to garner approvals from the various permitting departments (planning, building, utilities, public works, etc.) rather than a dissatisfaction with the changes required to meet our standards.

Our challenge is to maintain high design standards while streamlining our review process. The recently enacted Housing Incentive Program (HIP) is a step in this direction. Improved coordination between reviewing departments, including increased staff support, will allow faster and more efficient project reviews. Early ARB involvement in a project review, perhaps by a rotating sub-committee, could also prove beneficial.

F. Architectural review is important. Our review and oversight of the following projects has made a real and significant difference.

- 788 San Antonio Road (*new mixed-use building*) 102 housing units
- 565 Hamilton (*new mixed-use building*) 19 housing units
- 3705 El Camino Real-Wilton Court (*new residential bldg*) 59 housing units
- 2755 El Camino Real (*new residential building*) 57 housing units
- 744 San Antonio Road-*Marriot Hotel* 297 rooms
- California Avenue Commercial District parking garage 636 parking spaces

Show image of initial design and approved design/constructed project



788 San Antonio - Initial Proposal



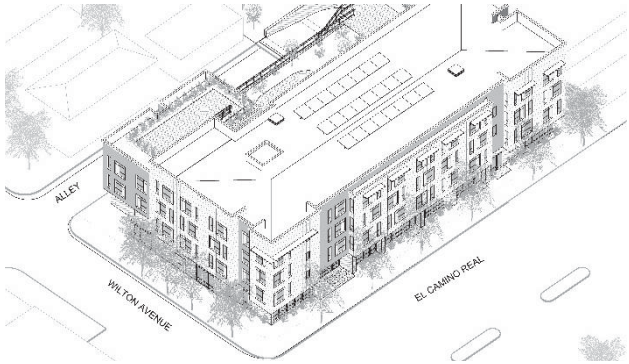
788 San Antonio - Final Design



565 Hamilton - Initial Proposal



565 Hamilton - Final Design



3705 El Camino Real - Initial Proposal



3705 El Camino Real - Final Design



2755 El Camino Real - Initial Proposal



2755 El Camino Real - Initial Proposal

Provide image from initial design.

744 San Antonio Road - Initial Proposal



744 San Antonio Road - Initial Proposal



California Ave. Garage - Initial Proposal



California Ave. Garage - Initial Proposal

ALTERNATE LIST OF HOUSING PROJECTS (if we want to show only housing projects)

2020 ARB review

- 3585 El Camino Real (*new mixed-use building*) 3 housing units
- 788 San Antonio Avenue (*new mixed-use building*) 102 housing units

2019 ARB review

- 702 Clara Drive (*new residential building*) 3 housing units
- 2342 Yale Street (*new residential building*) 3 housing units
- 565 Hamilton (*new mixed-use building*) 19 housing units
- 567 Homer Avenue (*new residential building*) 3 housing units
- 190 Channing Avenue (*new mixed-use building*) 4 housing units

2018 ARB review

- 2321 Wellesley Street (*new residential building*) 2 housing units
- 4115 El Camino Real (*new mixed-use building*) 7 housing units
- 3705 El Camino Real-Wilton Court (*new residential bldg*) 59 housing units
- 2609 Alma Street (*new residential building*) 4 housing units
- 356 Hawthorne Avenue (*new residential building*) 3 housing units
- 2755 El Camino Real (*new residential building*) 57 housing units
- 3265 El Camino Real (*new mixed-use building*) 3 housing units