

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

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 only plans have limitations-on larger and more complex projects printed drawings have allowed us to more easily and fully comprehend the proposed work.
- Material samples-due to virus related logistical limitations, we have been unable to fully review the proposed materials for projects, forcing us to delay or have less confidence in our approval recommendations is there anything Staff or Council can do to help this during the pandemic?
- Public participation-while we have not experienced a decline in public participation, some people have difficulty with the communication format.

While remote meetings are a necessary temporary alternative, they are not an equivalent substitution to in person hearings. Do we want to explore a hybrid model in the future? So more working people could participate?

**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Standards.** San Antonio Avenue is experiencing increasing development but our zoning regulations for the area are outdated.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?

Do you want to include a conclusion sentence? What would the ARB like the Council to do with this info? Council has already direct staff to come back with some ideas and budgets for a Corridor Plan, how would the ARB like to be involved?

**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.

- Appoint a city council member as liaison to the ARB. (The HRB had a Council rep in the past, if you want to research how this may/may not work)

- 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. 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 agencies rather than a dissatisfaction with the changes required to meet our standards. Why not focus instead on streamlining our review process by improving coordination between reviewing agencies/bodies and increasing staff support to allow faster and more efficient project reviews rather than accepting a reduced quality of design in our built environment? These buildings will affect many Palo Altans and will outlast most of us; we owe it to future generations to build lasting quality.

**E. Architectural review is important.** A number of new buildings are taking shape in our community. Compare the end product to the initially proposed projects-architecture review makes a real and significant difference!

- Marriot Hotel on San Antonio Avenue
- California Avenue Commercial District parking garage
- 4115 El Camino Real – demo complete as of Feb
- 3705 El Camino Real (Wilton Court) – likely early construction phase
- 3265 El Camino Real
- 3225 El Camino Real (former Footlocker) – under construction as of Feb
- 2585 El Camino Real (former Olive Garden) – close to complete
- 2342 Yale Street
- 3406 Hillview Avenue – well under construction as of Feb
- 355 University Avenue (Design Within Reach/Masonic Temple) – complete

*Need to verify if buildings are mostly complete. Need to provide before and as built images.*

**Commented [GJ1]:** The HIP process is the start of this and is our local alternative to the state density bonus law. This process could be made “by-right” vs. requiring ARB recommendation and Director approval (FAR increase would be automatic for housing/mixed-use projects). In what other ways could we improve upon this?

Staff will also be discussing “by-right” streamlining as part of the larger Objective Standards/Streamlining project that PTC/Council will review

**Commented [GJ2]:** Assuming you mean PTC and Council or “Departments” if you mean internal staff. “Agencies” would be CalTrans, VTA, etc.

**Commented [GJ3]:** Need sufficient Planning staff, but also need time/support from other development review departments to streamline review.

**Commented [GJ4]:** Could ARB confirm completeness and take photos? Staff can find the before and approved plan sets, as needed.