



November 21, 2018

Mr. Zachary Dahl, AICP  
Planning Services Manager  
Community Development Department  
City of Los Altos  
One North San Antonio Road  
Los Altos, CA 94022

**RE: 425 FIRST STREET**

Dear Zach:

I reviewed the drawings and evaluated the site context. My comments and suggestions are as follows:

### SITE CONTEXT

The site is located in the CD/R3 Downtown/Multiple Family District in an area characterized by older one and two-story commercial buildings. New development along First Street has started to occur in recent years. A newer three-story over podium garage multifamily development is located nearby across First Street from the site and a 10-unit mixed use development over below-grade parking nearby on First Street is under review. Photos of the site and immediate context are shown on the following page.





*Buildings to the Immediate Left*



*THE SITE*



*Multifamily Development across First Street*



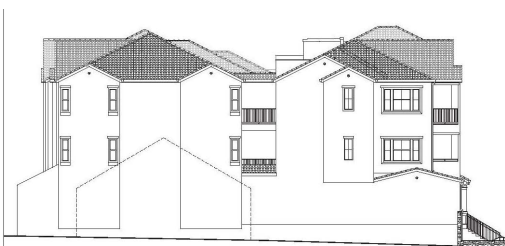
*Buildings across Lyell Street*



*Buildings across First Street*



*Parking Lot Immediately behind the Site*



FIRST STREET



*Proposed Project in Context with Similar Use across First Street*

## DESIGN REVIEW FRAMEWORK

The following applicable Zoning Code Sections, plans and guidelines apply to this review:

- Downtown Design Guidelines
- Commercial/Multi-Family Design Findings (Zoning Code Section 14.78.060)
- CD/R3 District Design Controls (Section 14.52.110)

The proposed project appears to meet the required findings of the Commercial/Multi-Family Design Findings and the CD/R3 District Design Controls which are less specific than the Downtown Design Guidelines. It also appears to be sensitive to the goals, objectives and guidelines of the Downtown Design Guidelines.

The Downtown Design Guidelines include the identification of defining Village Character Elements and specific guidelines for the Downtown Core District, Mixed Commercial District, and First Street District. The First Street District design guidelines include some guidelines unique to the First Street District, but also contains the following introductory text.

### *FIRST STREET DISTRICT*

***Owners of properties and businesses in this district should review the guidelines for the Downtown Core District. While projects in this district may be somewhat larger and less retail-oriented than those in the downtown core, they are still very much a part of the downtown village, and the village character and scale emphasis underlying those guidelines will be expected of new buildings and changes to existing properties in this district.***

### *INTENT*

- A. Promote the implementation of the Los Altos Downtown Design Plan.*
- B. Support and enhance the downtown Los Altos village atmosphere.*
- D. Respect the scale and character of the area immediately surrounding the existing downtown pedestrian district.*

Specific relevant design guidelines include the following:

### *5.2 ARCHITECTURE*

*Building uses and sizes will vary more in the First Street District than elsewhere in the downtown. The goal of these guidelines is to accommodate this wide diversity of size and use while maintaining a village scale and character that is complementary to the downtown core.*

#### *5.2.1 Design to a village scale and character*

- a) Avoid large box-like structures.*
- b) Break larger buildings into smaller scale elements.*
- c) Provide special design articulation and detail for building facades located adjacent to street frontages.*
- d) Keep focal point elements small in scale.*
- e) Utilize materials that are common in the downtown core.*
- f) Avoid designs that appear to seek to be prominently seen from Foothill Expressway and/or San Antonio Road in favor of designs that focus on First Street, and are a part of the village environment.*
- g) Provide substantial small scale details.*
- h) Integrate landscaping into building facades in a manner similar to the Downtown Core District.*

The following narrative text and guidelines on the next two pages from the Downtown Design Guidelines would seem to be relevant to this proposed project:

*DOWNTOWN VILLAGE CHARACTER*

*Today, it is a closely knit series of subdistricts with slightly differing use emphases and design characteristics, held together by an overall village scale and character. That unique scale and character has been nurtured over the years, and has become even more of a community asset as many other downtowns in the Bay Area have grown ever larger and lost much of their earlier charm.*

*ARCHITECTURAL STYLE*

*These guidelines are not intended to establish or dictate a specific style beyond the desire to maintain Downtown Los Altos' small town character and attention to human scale and detail. In general, diverse and traditional architectural styles that have stood the test of time are preferred.*

*Designs merely repeated from other cities or without thought to the special qualities of Los Altos are strongly discouraged, and unlikely to be accepted.*

*The following design guidelines are intended to reinforce that existing framework, scale and character.*

**3.2.1 Continue the pattern and scale established by existing buildings**

*a) Maintain and reinforce the underlying downtown 25-foot module along all street frontages. Some techniques for this emphasis include the following:*

- Changing roof parapet height and/or shape.*
- Utilizing different building heights, architectural styles, and forms.*
- Utilizing different awning forms and/or materials ... matching the predominant building module.*
- Changing storefront type and details.*
- Defining storefronts with projecting piers and emphasizing tenants' unique store personalities.*
- Reinforcing the module with second floor projections and details.*

*b) Break larger buildings up into smaller components.*

- Divide longer facades into individual smaller segments with individual design forms and architectural styles.*

*d) Utilize awnings and canopies at windows and entries.*

*e) Provide cornices and building tops consistent with the architectural style.*

- Avoid unfinished wall tops in favor of projecting cornice features or roof overhangs.*

*h) Utilize natural materials. Wood, stone, and brick can provide warmth at storefronts, and enhance the feeling of village scale and character.*

- Wood doors and window frames are strongly encouraged.*

*i) Enhance the pedestrian experience with interesting architectural details.*

- Individual trim elements should be scaled to be or resemble proportions that could be handled and installed by hand. Elements on any portion of the structure should not be inflated in size to respond strictly to building scale, but should also have a relationship with human scale.*

*j) Provide special storefront and facade lighting.*

### **3.2.4 Design second floor facades to complement the streetscape and Village Character**

a) Provide second floor entries that are equal in quality and detail to storefront entries. Some techniques to accomplish this emphasis include:

- Special awning or roof element.
- Wrought iron gate.
- Decorative tile stair treads and risers.
- Special lights.

b) Relate second floor uses to the pedestrian environment on the street level.

Some methods of achieving this include the following:

- Second floor overhangs
- Bay windows
- Decks
- Balconies
- Planters.

c) Utilize operable windows in traditional styles.

### **3.2.7 Design larger structures to be sensitive to the unique scale and character of Downtown Los Altos**

b) Avoid architectural styles and monumental building elements that do not relate to the small human scale of Downtown Los Altos.

c) Provide special design treatment for visible sidewalls of structures that are taller than their immediate neighbors.

- Sidewall windows are encouraged where codes allow and adequate fire protection can be provided.
- Employ design techniques to relate the visible sidewalls to front facades. Some common techniques include the following:
  - \* Repeating front facade finished materials, decorative details and mouldings.
  - \* Carrying front facade cornices and wall top projections around all sides of the upper floor.
  - \* Providing varied parapet heights to avoid a box-like appearance.
  - \* Utilizing gable and hip roofs to vary the height and appearance of side walls.
  - \* Treating side walls with inset panels.
  - \* Integrating interesting architectural details.
  - \* Stepping back the front facade of upper floors to vary the side wall profile.

## ISSUES AND CONCERNS

The project is well designed with a recognizable traditional architectural style and an abundance of details authentic to the architectural style. The facades are articulated with both horizontal and vertical off-sets to break up the mass of the building and relate to the smaller scale adjacent buildings as called for in the Downtown Design Guidelines - see rendering below.



The step down on First Street at the interior property line is particularly well done to provide a transition to the adjacent smaller commercial buildings - see illustration below.



The design also benefits from a well defined top floor with balconies, special window and door treatments and setbacks from the floor below which will reduce building's bulk and the appearance of a fully three-story structure

Within the framework of the city's design standards, findings and guidelines, I am able to only identify limited potential issues, as follows:

1. The two-foot setback on Lyell Street may not be consistent with Downtown Design Guideline 5.1.7.

### ***5.1.7 Integrate ground floor residential uses with the streetscape***

- a) Set structures back a minimum of 10 feet from the street property line.  
Stairs and entry porches may encroach into this setback up to the property line.*

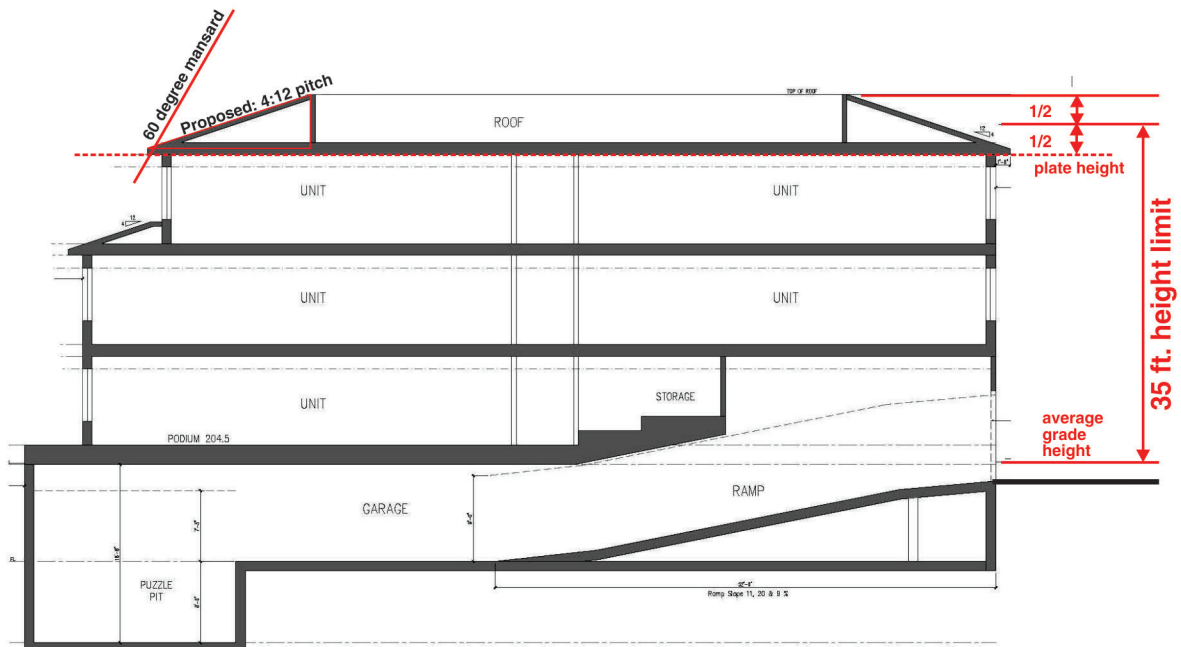
When the design guidelines were developed, primary attention was given to the urban design characteristics of the major streets and pedestrian routes in the downtown area. Less focus was placed on secondary streets. Staff and the Planning Commission will need to assess whether a greater setback on Lyell Street is warranted.

- The maximum building height measurement assumed by the applicant may not be totally consistent with chapter 14.66.230 of the Zoning Ordinance.

**14.66.230 - Height limitations—Measurement.**

*The vertical dimension shall be measured from the average elevation of the finished lot grade at the front, rear, or side of the building, whichever has the greater height, to the highest point of the roof deck of the top story in the case of a flat roof or a mansard roof; and to the average height between the plate and ridge of a gable, hip, or gambrel roof. A mansard roof is defined as any roof element with a slope of sixty (60) degrees or greater.*

The question is whether to treat the pitched roof as parapet walls or mansard roofs and measure to the top of the roof deck, or to treat it as a sloping roof and measure to the mid-point of the slope. The applicant has assumed the latter interpretation, and measured to the midpoint of the sloped roof - see illustration below.

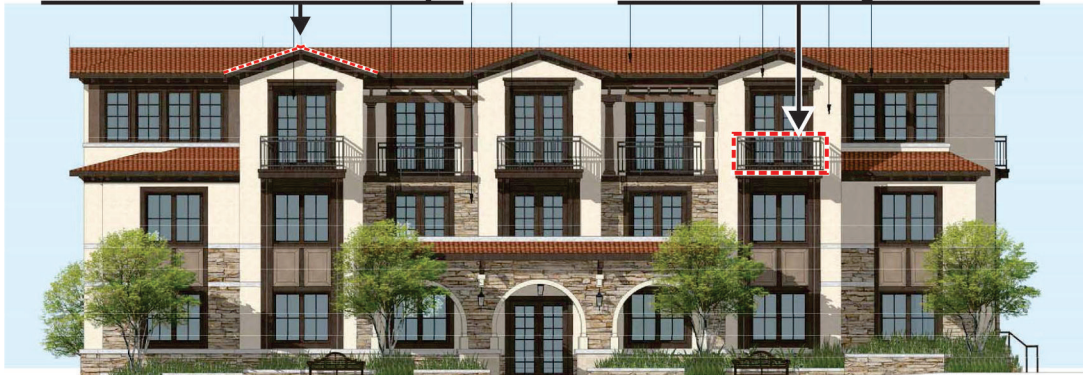


The proposed building height would be acceptable under either interpretation. However, there may be good reason to consider the roof deck at the maximum building height datum. That will be discussed further in the recommendations, but the primary reason relates to Concern #3 below.

- The roof pitches of 4:12 are shallow for this architectural style, and less than the more typical 6:12 pitch, as utilized on the similar multifamily project immediately across First Street.

**Roof pitches are shallow for this traditional architectural style**

**Metal railing is plain compared to the other building details**



4. Wood balcony railings are more common for this architectural style, but metal railings are also common and acceptable. The only concern here is that perhaps an opportunity is being missed to provide a richer design to the railings which is also common for the architectural style - examples are shown in the recommendations.
5. The exit stair on Lyell Street will be rather prominent. Some refinements might be considered to enhance the architectural style and pedestrian experience.



**Some small refinement might be considered here**

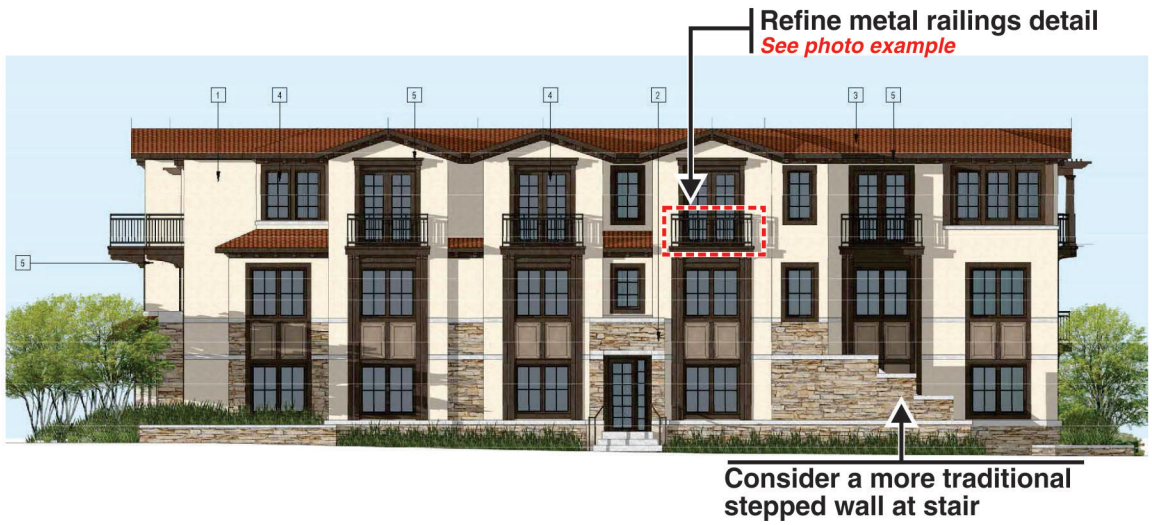
6. The visual exposure of the rear alley elevation will be as great as the street elevations. Currently the garage and stair exit doors on the rear elevation are much more utilitarian in appearance than the rest of the facade.



**Doors seem under developed compared to rest of building**



RECOMMENDATIONS



1. Consider a more traditional stepped wall at the Lyell Street stair. Although this is an exit stair, consideration might also be given to adding tile risers to enhance the visual experience of the pedestrian environment - see examples below.



2. Consider adding more detail appropriate to the architectural style to the metal balcony railings - see examples below.

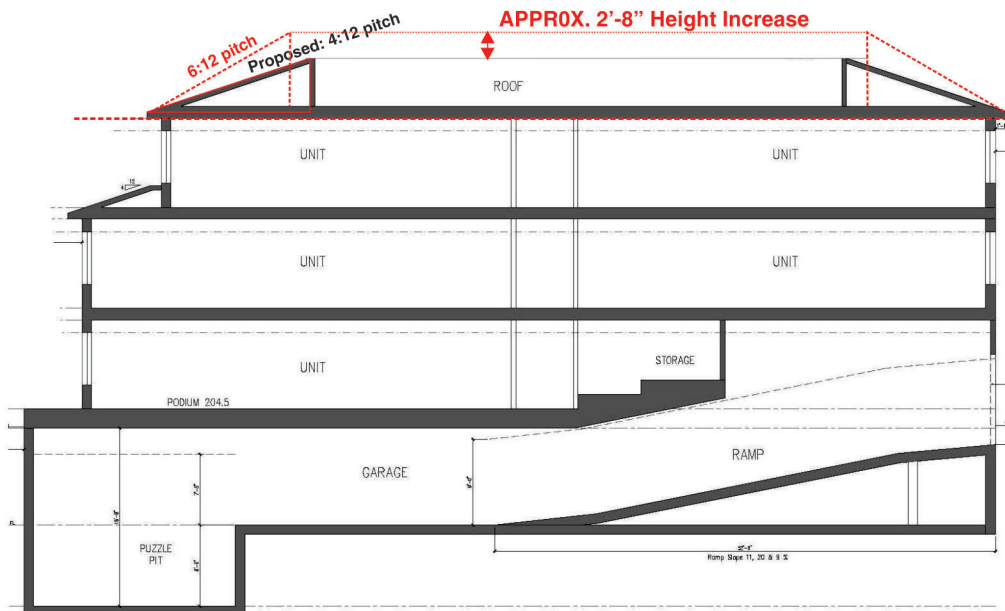


3. Recess the garage and exit stair doors on the rear facade, and match materials and colors to the window panels above.



**Recess doors and match materials and colors to window panels above**

4. Consider increasing the roof pitches to 6:12. This would be possible if the maximum allowable height limit datum was determined to be the flat roof/eave height. The diagrams below show the difference in height and appearance of 6:12 pitches relative to the currently proposed 4:12. It would raise the roof ridge height by approximately 2'-8". This could also be accomplished with the applicant's currently assume height limit datum, but only if the floor to ceiling heights were reduced from the currently proposed 9'-4" to approximately 8'-3".



Zach, please let me know if you need anything further.

Sincerely,

CANNON DESIGN GROUP

Larry L. Cannon