

Sept. 13, 2024

Sustainable Planning and Community Development
1 Centennial Square
Victoria, BC V8W 1P6

Re: 235 Russell Street, Victoria – Rezoning and Development Permit Application

Letter to the Mayor and Council,

Background

The subject property received a Development Permit in late 2021. That Development Permit was for a 4-storey commercial building. We have since pivoted to a 6-storey, mixed-use concept that contemplates residential apartments over a single level of commercial space. That is, a reduction in commercial space in favour of residential apartments. Following is information pertaining to this new concept.

Affordability

When initially contemplating the inclusion of a residential component, we investigated a CMHC program (Rental Construction Financing Initiative) targeting the construction of affordable rental buildings. You may recall a letter from us in March of this year inquiring as to the City's appetite to support that program. Briefly, that program provides low cost financing in return for constructing rental buildings with an affordable component. Unfortunately, for several reasons, it became clear that qualifying for that program was going to be virtually impossible. Nonetheless, incorporating an affordable component into our building is still something we would like to pursue. Below in bold italics is the affordability criteria presented by CMHC for the above-referenced program.

Affordability: You must meet and maintain one of the following affordability requirements for at least 10 years:

1: At least 20% of units must have rents below 30% of the median total income of all families for the area.

2: The proposal has been approved under another affordable housing program or initiative from any level of government, such as capital grants, municipal concessions or expedited planning processing.

While it will not provide access to the low-cost financing offered by CMHC, we propose that an affordable component similar to above (e.g., 10% of units to have rents below 30% of median income) can be achieved if offset by some municipal concessions (e.g., waiver of CAC's and/or DCC's, no frontage improvements beyond our property line, expedited process, etc.).

Description of Proposal

The proposal for 235 Russell Street is to develop the property with a mixed-use (light industrial and residential) building under a new zone. By maintaining a diversity of employment lands and uses and incorporating housing, the proposal meets the goals and objectives of Victoria's Official Community Plan (OCP). The proposal is consistent with the Built Form described in the OCP and is consistent with the General Employment designation which envisions commercial and/or residential spaces over parking. Further, the proposal is generally compliant with the DPA 13 Design Guidelines.

The proposal is for four levels of apartments over a single level of commercial space which is over parking and service areas (including a loading area for the commercial space) at grade. The parking is behind the service areas and, thus, screened from the street. The loading area for the commercial space is beyond the parking area and thus, also screened from the street.

Project Benefits and Amenities

Project benefits for this development will include an increase in light industrial space within the City of Victoria. Not only will jobs be created in the short-term during planning and construction, but the facility will generate considerable long-term employment. In addition to job creation, much-needed housing will be added to the rental stock. A total of 32 homes, made up of 4 x studios, 12 x 1-bedroom and 16 x 2-bedroom apartments will be constructed. Given the increase in property value associated with the transformation from an empty lot to a functioning mixed-use building, a considerable monetary benefit to the City will also occur in the form of increased property taxes. The exposed concrete at grade at the front of the building will provide canvases for street art to further animate the street. The building proposed for 235 Russell is a welcome addition to the area.

Neighbourhood

235 Russell Street is located mid-block on the east side of Russell Street, south of the E&N railway. Adjacent to the north, south and west are industrial properties zoned as either M1 or M2 industrial. The adjacent properties are currently used for industrial purposes. Immediately across the street and south along Russell street are a mix of housing types including multi-family, single-family and social housing. The proposed development is in keeping with the immediate context.

Design and Development Permit Guidelines

235 Russell Street is within Development Permit Area 13 - Core Songhees and is within the western boundary of the neighbourhood where it transitions to the eastern boundary of Esquimalt. There is also a transition of uses in this zone with a predominantly commercial and industrial zone melding with low and medium density residential.

The primary objectives identified for this area in the Neighbourhood Plan and the Development Permit Area guidelines include the revitalization of sites to increase the vibrancy and

strengthen the commercial viability while achieving a high level of architectural design that is reflective of the local context and industrial roots.

Our proposal meets all of these objectives. The building has well-proportioned and articulated façades facing Russell Street and east towards downtown. In keeping with the industrial heritage of the neighbourhood, metal cladding is used on the north and south elevations and industrial elements have been incorporated into the street facing portion of the podium. Above the commercial podium, outdoor spaces are provided for each apartment. Given the size of the site and lack of opportunity for landscaping, planters have been introduced onto the residential balconies to provide some green softening above the industrial podium. The street level is enlivened by the glassy entrances, metalwork of the parking entrance and it will be well lit at night by soffit lighting. The exposed concrete surfaces at the street will be used for street art.

Initial consultation with CALUC was followed by a formal CALUC meeting open to the public. Based on comments received from the CALUC meetings and a pre-application preliminary feedback meeting with staff, some revisions have been undertaken. Included in these are the addition of planters to each of the 16 east-facing balconies, the inclusion of laundry facilities to each of the homes, confirmation of compliance to the bicycle bylaw and the increase of natural light to many of the bedrooms. We have been unable to accommodate a couple of the new (as compared to the previously approved application) staff requests. Although not required for the previously-approved building, staff have now indicated the desire for a 1.7m road dedication. Not only is this problematic given the size of the lot, but it seems odd that it is being required for this new residential proposal, but was not required for the previously-approved industrial building. Further confusing the request is that the adjacent heritage property is built to zero lot line, thus making contiguous road dedication impossible. Further, we understand, that adjacent to the heritage building is a recently approved development at 225 Russell for which road dedication was not required. Road dedication on this dead-end portion of Russell Street that cannot be contiguous without removing the adjacent heritage building and was not previously required at this site nor the recently approved development at 225 Russell seems to make little sense. Road dedication at the subject site is problematic and would seem unnecessary and of little value. Similarly, three on site trees are now requested which were not previously required. Unfortunately, given the size of the lot and that the design at the lower levels of the proposed building is similar to that of the previously-approved building means there is no room for trees to be planted on site. Alternatively, we have added 32 planters to the building decks.

Transportation

235 Russell Street is located just off the arterial of Esquimalt Road and less than one block to the north are protected bike lanes. The project meets the current Zoning Bylaw Schedule C – Off-Street Parking requirements for bicycles. Bicycle facilities such as showers and lockers will be provided for workers. Bicycle parking will be located within a safe and secure facility onsite and be easily accessible. It should be noted that the short-term bicycle parking is located within

the secure premises. We understand that city staff generally prefer short-term bicycle parking be unsecured, outside the premises. Not only is this impossible physically, but also problematic functionally. The zone's front yard setback requirement encourages limited space in front of the building. There is no space for bike racks in front of the building. Functionally, we believe bicyclists will be more comfortable having bicycles within the secure premises. The bicycle parking will encourage the use of the existing and future network of greenways.

As per the previous Development Permit a traditional loading space is not required or feasible. The loading space is unnecessary. Any deliveries to-and-from the facility will be via the secure elevator lobby within the parking level. Deliveries will be infrequent and small and handled by standard vehicles. In the extremely unlikely event of a sizeable delivery needing a larger space, the property adjacent to the north has three loading docks. One of these docks is at the south end of that property (i.e., adjacent to the subject property) and is accessed from Russell street, directly north of the subject property access. That is, however unlikely, a delivery via an oversized vehicle could be received by the adjacent property.

Heritage

There are no existing buildings on the site. It is a paved and fenced empty lot.

Green Building Features

235 Russell will be constructed of high-quality and durable building materials to ensure it will be a long-lasting building capable of adaptive re-use. The building will be designed to the requirements of the Step-Code and will utilize high standards of thermal performance, coupled with low power consumption equipment for space heating and cooling loads, water heating, and electrical fixtures throughout. Plumbing fixtures will all be low-flow consumption models.

Infrastructure

Current Infrastructure is capable of supporting the proposed use. Frontage improvements (curb, gutter, and sidewalk) will be completed as required by the City of Victoria.

Thank you for the opportunity to present this design proposal for your review and consideration of rezoning and Development Permit approval.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Dan Robbins", enclosed within a thin blue rectangular border.

Dan Robbins