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Project review groups OK expansion of La Jolla arts orgs



Aerial rendering of the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego's planned La Jolla expansion, as seen from Prospect Street. *Selldorf Architects*

Construction for Conrad Prebys Performing Arts Center (aka The Conrad) will begin spring 2016 with grand opening January 2018

BY ASHLEY MACKIN

Projects pivotal to the growth of two major cultural institutions in La Jolla advanced in the community review process this month, after presentations before the La Jolla Community Planning Association (LJCPA) and its Planned District Ordinance (PDO) subcommittee, which both meet at La Jolla Rec Center.

On Aug. 6, Paul Benton of Alcorn & Benton Architects gave a presentation on the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego's (MCASD) plans to expand its Prospect Street campus by 53,469 square feet, including a new garage, main entryway, bookstore, gallery, and storage space. The project also involves converting MCASD's Sherwood Auditorium to gallery space.

La Jolla Music Society's planned performing arts complex on Fay Avenue will replace the 500-seat Sherwood with an acoustically superior hall for concerts, performances and other community events.

LJCPA recommended the city approve permits for the MCASD project, as well as four deviations from La Jolla's Planned District Ordinance (PDO), or blueprint for design. The deviations requested were to accommodate stairs on the south side of the property and at Coast Boulevard, as well as some interior height, a wheelchair lift and an encroachment for an 80-foot-long entryway trellis.

Last month, the PDO and Development Permit Review (DPR) committees recommended approval of the project, though the PDO committee stopped short of approving the deviation for a stairway connecting Prospect Street and a new basement garage (to be used mainly as an emergency exit, Benton said). The PDO was concerned the stairway — adjacent the In Eden apartment complex — could potentially attract homeless individuals and be difficult to maintain.

"The museum recognizes this would be a new maintenance responsibility, but is eager to be responsive to the community about this," Benton told La Jolla Light following the meeting.

The LJCPA approved the project by a vote of 11-1-1, with trustee Janie Emerson in opposition. Read more at bit.ly/MCASDatDPR



Ray Porfilio of Epstein Joslin Architects fields questions about La Jolla Music Society's new performing arts center during the Aug. 10 meeting of La Jolla's Planned District Ordinance committee. — *Pat Sherman*

Music to their ears

Last month La Jolla's Traffic & Transportation advisory board voted unanimously to approve parking plans for La Jolla Music Society's (LJMS) new performing arts center, The Conrad.

The 46-year-old arts organization received an additional feather in its cap Aug. 10 when the PDO unanimous approved the growth plan.

However, LJMS president and artistic director Christopher Beach and a project architect first spent time allaying some lingering concerns about increased parking from the new music center and drainage issues on the property, which contains a 15-foot-wide water easement.

Construction on LJMS's 500-seat concert hall and 150-seat cabaret room that comprise Conrad Prebys Performing Arts Center (aka The Conrad), at 7600 Fay Ave., will begin next spring for a January 2018 grand opening — well in advance of MCASD's conversion of Sherwood Auditorium to gallery space.

Ray Porfilio, a principal with Epstein Joslin Architects, provided details about how The Conrad's architecture, building materials, color scheme and landscaping are designed to complement and enhance the Village aesthetic, while meeting requirements of the La Jolla Community Plan.

These include using transitions in bulk and scale to create visual interest and a sense of enclosure for pedestrians; larger structures that reduce actual or apparent bulk with the use of building articulation; landscaping that adds texture to blank walls, softening edges and providing a sense of pedestrian scale; and the use of open spaces such as The Conrad's planned, interior courtyard.



La Jolla Music Society and Epstein Joslin Architects discuss exterior colors and materials for the society's forthcoming performing arts center and offices on Fay Avenue, The Conrad, which will include an entryway tile mosaic and accent colors along Bishops Lane to provide visual appeal for neighbors. — *Pat Sherman*

Parking worries linger

However, it was the LJMS's parking plan that still troubled residents Bob Whitney, Ed Comartin and Frances O'Neill Zimmerman.

Although The Conrad would provide only seven on-site parking spaces at the rear of the property, LJMS purchased 67 spaces in the Bank of America parking structure across Fay Avenue (at Kline Street), and has commitments for its patrons to use hundreds of spaces in other Village parking structures within a 600-foot radius, including The Bishop's School and Merrill Lynch garage (view a map of The Conrad's available parking at theconrad.org by clicking on "faqs" and scrolling down to click on "Where will people attending events at The Conrad find parking?").

Asked why LJMS didn't design an on-site, subterranean parking garage, Porfilio and Beach explained that the storm drain easement on the property would severely limit the number of such underground spaces, making the proposal unfeasible. "We looked at that," Beach said, noting that several on-street spaces would be used for valet parking during performances.

Comartin maintained the PDO document requires business owners to provide parking for their patrons on-site, though the city said LJMS's purchase of spaces in the nearby Bank of America building satisfies that requirement.

Comartin added he's watched people back out of the bank's parking entrance and turn around some mornings, because the lot is full. Removing 67 spaces for the society's use would increase the shortage, he said.

"I know you're crossing all the t's and dotting all the i's," Comartin said, "but the result is you're not adding any parking, and that's the concern under the PDO (document)."

However, PDO committee member Deborah Marengo, of Marengo Morton Architects, said her staff parks in the bank building, and there's never been a day when they were turned away. Athena Harmon with Harmon Realty, which manages the structure, said the only time the structure is full is one hour Wednesday mornings, when the La Jolla Real Estate Brokers' Association holds its meetings. "That's it — the rest of the time there are plenty of spaces," she said. "Those spaces are underutilized."



Rev. Eleanor Ellsworth of St. James By-the-Sea Episcopal Church speaks in favor of La Jolla Music Society's proposed concert hall and office complex on Fay Avenue.

— Pat Sherman

Good for business

Harmon said several large buildings constructed in the Village during the 1980s and '90s had little or no parking, relying instead on off-site parking agreements similar to what LJMS is proposing.

"That's all we're doing here; this is the same idea," Harmon said, adding, "La Jolla needs this ... high-end cultural addition to our community. It's going to help building owners along Fay Avenue bring up (property) values and get high-level tenants to lease their properties. ... Prospect Street and the (westernmost) block of Girard have been the highest-end lease rates and highest quality tenants all these years. This is going to level out the values in the Village of La Jolla."

Porfilio added, "To my mind you don't want the parking on-site for a building like this, because you want them to walk in the Village. Those are the people who are going to stop and use local restaurants or meet people to have a drink across the street."

In regard to drainage for The Conrad, situated in the lowest portion of the block, Porfilio said his firm is mimicking existing drainage patterns, while increasing drainage with such elements as permeable courtyard pavers.

He said the floor-area ratio of the project — the size of a structure relative to its lot — is 1.15, though the city allows for a 1.3 FAR.

Marengo made a motion (seconded by PDO member Zimmerman) that the project conforms to the PDO, with the exception of naming and directional signage, which LJMS will return and present to the PDO when finalized.

The Conrad also received praise during the DPR's Aug. 11 meeting, though LJMS was asked to return to the Aug. 18 DPR meeting with: a copy of the traffic management plan; daytime hours when The Conrad's interior courtyard will be open to the public; the scope of community events the center will be available for and the terms under which LJMS will make the space available; and details of plans to partner with local restaurants and businesses before and after performances at the center.