



AIA Southwest Washington

June 14, 2011

Ms Doreen Gavin, P.E.  
AHBL, Inc  
2215 North 30th Street  
Suite 300  
Tacoma, WA 98403-3350

Dear Doreen:

**Re: Comments on City of Tacoma Pacific Avenue Streetscape Project**

From: AIA Southwest Washington Committee on Community Advocacy

The AIA Southwest Washington Committee on Community Advocacy supports efforts to improve the livability and future potential of our communities, with the goal of providing thoughtful input on policy and planning issues within our Chapter area. We appreciate being invited to provide input on the Pacific Avenue Streetscape project, and have reviewed the preliminary conceptual design alternatives presented by AHBL and the City of Tacoma at the Pacific Avenue Streetscape Project Open House held on May 9, 2011. Our comments below are intended to help elevate the potential for success in all decision-making related to changes and improvements for this portion of Pacific Avenue.

## **I. PROJECT DEFINITION**

### **A. GOALS, OBJECTIVES AND CRITERIA**

1. While the concepts for street redevelopment are graphically well-presented and understandable, we have not seen the project objectives, goals, design criteria, or development principles from which these concepts were derived. We find it odd that detailed concepts can be generated when such criteria and goals are not articulated and used as a means to measure and evaluate the strengths or weaknesses of specific design approaches.
2. In order to invite thoughtful input from stakeholders, we believe the City should provide a **clearly expressed project definition**, stating the identified problem(s), articulating **project objectives**, defining initial project goals, and stating the principles and design criteria to be used in guiding the development of design concepts and potential solutions. Such information was not provided at the public open house. We were also surprised that stakeholder comments collected during the previous study efforts (lead by Olsen-Kundig) were not summarized and cataloged for presentation to the community along with the alternative concepts.
3. We believe that the City and the design team should craft a statement about the **functions and vision of Pacific Avenue** (at least as adopted in previous City planning documents), the current state of infrastructure systems (IE stormwater, transportation); and the commercial/retail strategies for downtown as developed by the merchants and commercial stakeholders.

### **B. Previous Stakeholder Comments**

1. Several of our members attended a public meeting conducted by the City's previous consultant where a handout provided numerous stakeholder comments about redevelopment of Pacific Avenue.



Additionally, the handout provided a list of the City Council's "Guiding Principles", prepared in response to previously developed Pacific Avenue concepts. We would have expected that this information would form a preliminary basis for project definition, and that the initial design concepts would be developed and presented in conjunction with this information.

### **C. City of Tacoma Comprehensive Plan / Downtown Element**

1. The City's Comprehensive Plan, Downtown Element, articulates a vision for the quality of downtown and the urban environment and promotes many appropriate principles of an active street environment and useful strategies that contribute to the urban quality of Pacific Avenue. Among the recommendations in the downtown element, we note the following with regard to Pacific Avenue:
  - a. Promotes a pedestrian-oriented, retail-focused street, not a cycling street.
  - b. Promotes corner bulb-outs, mid-block crossings, and on-street parking
  - c. Promotes public transportation as a priority

## **II. APPARENT PROJECT DEFINITION**

Absent a specific project definition, goals, objectives, principles or criteria, we offer observations based on our interpretation of the project.

### **A. Stormwater Management**

1. It is our understanding that the need to improve storm water management and water quality was the initial purpose of the project, and the source of a primary portion of the federal funding secured for the project. It is difficult for the public (including AIA) to comment on storm water management issues without at least rudimentary background information regarding existing conditions, problems to be addressed, possible strategies, and the anticipated results of various strategies. Such information was not provided at the open house.
2. A conclusion seems to have been made by the design team that rain gardens are the preferred strategy for managing stormwater volumes and water quality along Pacific Avenue, as substantial amounts of the right-of-way are shown with rain gardens. Although rain gardens provide an effective means to manage storm water, and are desirable and appropriate in many applications, we do not believe Pacific Avenue is an appropriate place for this as a primary storm water management strategy. We believe that Pacific Avenue must retain and build upon its urban character, avoiding the suburban, residential, and shopping mall approaches to landscaping. Limited use of rain gardens and other landscaping may be beneficial and appropriate in specific areas along Pacific Avenue that are devoted to people gathering spaces.
3. If rain gardens can effectively contribute to the overall strategy for storm water management, perhaps finding alternatives to incorporate rain gardens on the east-west streets in areas where wider pedestrian spaces might occur, and even taking advantage of the natural topography. An interesting concept could be to gather storm water and route south to Hood Street where a primary, above ground rain garden park could be developed as a public amenity, in conjunction with the planned trail on the Prairie Line.



## **B. Streetscape Design**

1. Each design system proposed for Pacific Avenue must respond appropriately to established goals and principles. We agree with the Council's principle that "less is more".
2. **Circulation & Visual Access:** The street must support and attract commercial activity by presenting as few barriers to the flow of people and vehicles as possible, offering both motorists and pedestrians optimum visual access to retail choices.
3. **Sidewalks:** The sidewalk zone should be organized to encourage pedestrian flow, while not creating unnecessary width. Outside seating areas along the main walking segments need not be overly large to be useful and successful. The walking zone also need not be overly generous. Several width and design options should be explored to achieve an optimum width, integrating trees and accessories while preserving right-of-way options for vehicles, parallel parking, transit, and potentially bike lanes. Develop a simple sidewalk grid pattern through scoring and pavers with tones appropriate to an urban street.
4. **Urban Environment:** Over-emphasis on elements such as rain gardens and bicycles risks creating an environment something less than the urban, grand avenue that this stretch of Pacific Avenue should be.
5. **Street Trees:** Tree species, placement, and maintenance should be carefully considered. Because this stretch of Pacific Avenue presents multiple segments and conditions, strategies for trees should support and not dominate the avenue with a forced pattern. Trees should enhance the urban pedestrian experience while not disrupting visual access to retail frontage, and allow for "eyes-on-the-street" from upper floors. Maintenance and replacement must be a priority consideration. Perhaps consider street trees in the curb parallel parking zone to pull the trees away from the buildings and separate the tree line from the historic street light zone.
6. **Historic Street Lights:** Maintain the historic street lights for the length of the street.

## **C. Transportation/Mobility**

1. **Existing Studies/Linkages:** We believe that effective input from the community regarding transportation considerations on Pacific Avenue would be best served by providing summarized information from existing studies such as the Mobility Master Plan, Tacoma Dome Transit Station Trail Linkage Study, and the Comprehensive Plan Downtown Element.
2. **Vehicle Movement:** We understand that a recent traffic analysis has indicated excess capacity between 7<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> streets. This is not surprising; this section of Pacific Avenue currently provides for the unencumbered movement of vehicles north and south at relatively slow speeds, with flexibility in the use of the center lanes for deliveries and street events such as parades. Design alternatives should be explored that maintain the current lane system. Consider eliminating the center turn lane by having "all walk" intersections.
3. **Bicycles:** We are advocates for connected bicycle routes throughout the city, and believe that the growing interest in bicycling will continue. However, as north-south options exist for movement of bicycles, particularly with the bicycle boulevard planned for Fawcett Avenue, bicycles should be safely accommodated but de-emphasized on Pacific Avenue. Pacific Avenue would seem to be an ideal street, with proper graphics, for bikes and cars to share the inside lane.



4. **Public Transit:** Bus service should be emphasized and accommodated along Pacific Avenue, with regular shuttle services from UWT, Brewery District, and other areas. Proper space for these needs can be provided as a result of optimizing the sidewalk zone and vehicle lanes as noted elsewhere.

#### CONCLUSION

AIASWW is wholly in support of efforts to enhance Pacific Avenue. However, we are concerned that the urban and commercial nature of this particular stretch of Pacific Avenue will be diminished as attempts to incorporate the strategies of the “Complete Streets” approach are pursued too ambitiously. Further, we believe the City and the design team should develop and present to the community of stakeholders, a clearly articulated project definition, stated objectives, principles and criteria to guide concept development and evaluation, and connect these efforts to the other existing studies and adopted planning elements. As outlined in the City Council’s “Guiding Principles” less is more, therefore, keeping the solution simple and flexible may be the most beneficial in the long term (and possibly cost less).

We look forward to continued opportunities to engage with the City and the design team as the project progresses.

AIA Southwest Washington Committee on Community Advocacy

Randy Cook, AIA, LEED AP  
Committee Chair

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