

Should ground-floor retail in South Waterfront be mandatory or recommended?

By Lee Perlman
The Southwest Portland Post

Two City review bodies last month came to different conclusions, and issued different recommendations, regarding new code provisions for the South Waterfront.

The South Waterfront Code and Design Guideline Update Project is a package of amendments to a special set of recommendations adopted for this area. Most of the changes are minor; only two generated discussion before the Portland Design and Planning Commissions, and only one generated opposition.

In an attempt to keep out "big box" retail, the regulations forbid retail buildings larger than 60,000 square feet. Both groups agreed to exempt hotels from the restriction. The other change would require current and future developers to provide ground floor retail space at certain specified locations.

The guidelines call for "energizing" the area, and especially the Willamette Greenway, by having "active uses" in the ground floor, and in City usage this usually translates into retail. Under the area's CX zoning, such uses are allowed by right anywhere.

However, Planner Troy Doss told both commissions, not much has been

built. "If you take out the Old Spaghetti Factory (restaurant), there's about 100,000 square feet of retail in this district, and about 70 percent of that is vacant," said Doss.

There is particular fear that the path along the Greenway will be seen as private space, even though it is public.

As a result, a code amendment makes ground floor retail use *mandatory* at certain locations, including some developed and occupied buildings.

These are the length of Southwest Gibbs Street, much of Gaines, and the feet of Southwest Gibbs, Curry, Gaines and Lowell streets. These are highly unusual requirements.

Several South Waterfront residents, while expressing support for the provision in principle, argued against applying it along the Greenway for aesthetic and strategic reasons. Fred Gans, while saying there were "obvious advantages" to more retail, said that the Greenway was "a relaxed and natural setting" that needs to be preserved. "We're not interested in replicating the Pearl or Pasadena," he said.

Atwater resident Betsy Russell said that "concentrating retail in a certain area in general is a good thing." "However," she added, "I strongly disagree with putting it along the Greenway. This is a unique opportunity for a district that can juxtapose intense develop-

ment with the quiet of the river. Retail would be a profound and unwelcome change."

According to Russell, it would constitute "a moral breach of agreement" with residents sold on the area's natural setting. She also questioned whether retail would work.

Russell moved from Riverplace, whose retail frontage has been "plagued by failure. The isolation makes it difficult to attract customers, so there's a high turnover." Likewise, the Greenway is "not likely to be an area of high traffic." And there is a coffee shop a block away.

Another resident, Susan Valenta, said that while local-serving retail would be okay, she feared boutiques that would draw crowds from outside.

The Design Commission sympathized with residents, but stood firmly behind the recommendations. Commission member Tim Eddy said that in reviewing South Waterfront Projects, "In each case we asked for and encouraged activity on the waterfront, and it's remained the missing ingredient. There's the potential for this to become an effectively privatized area. Now I feel we're on the right track."

Commission member Andrew Jansky said that after the second South Waterfront project, "I was convinced of the need for something like this. It's a really

complex issue – it involves a public easement across private property – but we've got a multi-million dollar investment here for the people of Portland. I don't want to see an expanse of land with no services, and signs that say, 'Private property. Keep off.'"

Commission member Ben Kaiser said, "We want this area to be as accessible to as many people as possible, and it wouldn't attract as many people as it would if it had a kayak or coffee shop. Retail is the biggest attractor, and there's a severe dearth of retail along the river."

The commission voted unanimously in favor of the staff recommendations. The Planning Commission had a different take on the situation.

Commission member Jill Sherman, cited the conditions Russell described and said, "If there's anything worse than not having active storefronts it's having empty storefronts." She agreed with the idea of "activating" the area, but said, "The argument that retail is the only way to get there bothers me."

Commission member Irma Valdez didn't agree. "We didn't begin with an organic neighborhood here; it was created by developers," she said. "People had a vision for this area. If you're going to create it, you have to take some risks. This is public versus private use of the

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