

Review begins for OMSI's new 34-acre community

By: Alex Jensen in Architecture and Engineering, News August 19, 2022 12:30 pm



Plans for Oregon Museum of Science and Industry's 10-city-block development went before the Portland Design Commission for the first time on Thursday. (Renderings courtesy of ZGF Architects/OMSI)

Oregon Museum of Science and Industry's vision for its future one-of-a-kind neighborhood took its first street review process on Thursday at the Portland Design Commission.

At full buildout, the 34-acre master plan area expects to be home to about 3.4 million square feet of mixed institutional, commercial, retail and residential development – including up to 1,200 units of housing, where 20 percent plan to be for low-income families.

The site spans over 10 city blocks from Clay Street to Caruthers Street in the city's lower east side. It includes Portland Community College's CLIMB center, a center for continuing learning for individuals, management business, and Portland Opera's Hampton Center. Both are members of the master plan's development team. Edlen & Co. is advising.

Commissioners remarked that plans are evolving in a positive path for the district since its previous Design Requests in 2017 and 2019, but like most new Central City master plans further details still need to be finalized. For example, the tract lengths.

Building Façade Lengths

If approved, the master plan would create eight new developable blocks "tracts" with total heights of 250 feet, bonuses, and podium heights of 50 feet. The tract closest to the river would have a max height of 75 feet to the organic nature of the site caused by the Union Pacific Railway tracks to the east and the Willamette River to the west, the building sites are larger than most Portland city blocks – varying in length from 230 feet to 750 feet and uniquely shaped.

Commissioner Jessica Molinar said some of the tracts have a potential of creating a "visual wall" between east and central eastside and the river.

ZGF's Nolan Lienhart, director of planning and urban design, said rather than designating where the visual wall needed to be they wanted to say, "here's the limit" and then further define the criteria from there. In the case of the PCC-owned tract on the north end of the site that has a 750-foot length, each building's facade would be limited up to 250-feet in length.

Commissioner Don Vallaster said while a fair amount of developmental flexibility is needed because they are “weird, shaped blocks,” there does need to be more of a limit on the building’s lengths. Currently, the PCC is only one that has one.

All three existing institutional partners — OMSI, PCC and Portland Opera — plan to continue and expand their current programs within the plan area. The Portland Opera is planning a new landmark building to exist on the Tract 1 site as a performing arts center.



Adjustments

The development team is seeking five adjustments to the building line standards for the site that dictate the length of the buildings needs to be pulled to the sidewalk’s edge. They are requesting that this requirement be relaxed for most of the tracts from the 75 percent standard in the central eastside to 50 percent or 0 percent and have landscaped edge instead for some.

“Because these tracts have irregular shapes and are larger than the standard city blocks,” ZGF Architects’ Kate Brooks said, “we wanted to provide more flexibility along the tract edges.”

Ben Nielsen, senior city planner, said his first inclination was that maybe these adjustment requests were too much, but agreed that it would make sense since these tracts are generally larger.

The team is also requesting three adjustments to the parking and loading access standards primarily to accommodate the different street segments the new master plan would connect to.

New Street Structure

Currently, the only roads within the site are Water Avenue, which goes past the PCC building and straight through the OMSI parking lot, and Loop Road that circles a parking lot. To accommodate future freight and commuter traffic, the master plan would add a new street that runs the length of the site and parallel to the tracks.

A new street — New Water Avenue — would be the new main arterial in and out of the area and would take the place of the Major City Bikeway designation that currently exists for the current Water Avenue.

The existing Water Avenue would remain, but it would be renamed to “Old Water Avenue” and be more of a quiet, slower neighborhood street.

A Return

As of Thursday’s hearing, the Portland Bureau of Transportation had not yet completed the traffic impact study for the new district due to a filing error by the applicant. As such, a continuation hearing was scheduled for the project and tentatively set for October.

Commissioners said they hope the project team will return with more details, including an outlined phasing plan and approach for the open space and how wayfinding will look within the master plan area.

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