



Georgetown Commercial Zone Height Limit Exception

Seattle Office of Planning and Community Development (OPCD)
Director's Report and Recommendation
January 2024

Proposed Zoning Text Amendment

This proposed legislation would allow a 10-foot height limit exception for development in one commercially zoned tract of land within the area commonly considered as the Georgetown neighborhood. Developments would be required to meet certain building performance criteria to access the height limit exception. All other standards controlling the bulk and scale of development and the allowable uses would be unchanged. The amendment is a text amendment only and no changes to zoning maps are required.

Geography and Current Zoning

The affected area is a contiguous 9.7 acres along 4th Avenue South between S. Fidalgo Street and S. Dawson Street that has been zoned commercial since the 1970s. (See map on the following page). The existing zone designation is the Commercial 1 zone with a 75-foot height limit (C1-75). The C1-75 zone allows a broad mix of commercial and residential uses. The 9.7 acre area is completely surrounded by land designated Manufacturing Industrial Center (MIC) on the City's future land use map and is in an industrial zone with an 85 foot height limit. Therefore, the height limit exception in the affected area would result in a height limit that would be the same as all the surrounding zones.

The existing built environment in the affected area is a variety of one and two story commercial buildings that include uses such as small restaurants or bars, offices, and automotive and building supply stores. There has been little or no major new construction in the area in decades. The affected area is adjacent to, but does not include the Seattle Design Center, which is a large multi-story marketplace for home furnishings and art. 4th Ave. S. runs through the center of the affected area and is a 4-lane arterial roadway and designated major truck street. Industrially zoned lands surrounding the affected area are occupied by a variety of light industrial uses and small-scale offices buildings. A residentially zoned portion of the Georgetown neighborhood is approximately 1,000 feet to the west of the affected area, and the mixed-use area along Airport Way S. that is often considered the heart of the Georgetown neighborhood is approximately ¾ mile from the affected area to the southwest.

Proposed Georgetown Height Limit Exception Area



Policy Intent

The intent of the proposed legislation is a response to a unique set of circumstances in the location. The Georgetown Community Development Authority (GCDA) was formed in 2019 as a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization and operates affordable artist and artisan work spaces. GCDA is seeking to develop a mixed-use development that if fully built would include approximately 900 homes along with community resources, and cultural institutions on multiple blocks on land it owns in a portion of the 9.7 acre Commercial 1 zoned area. Numerous other properties in the 9.7 acre area are not owned by GCDA and could also be developed with a broad mix of commercial and residential uses, and take advantage of the proposed height limit exception.

The area generally considered to be Georgetown contains a high number of artist studios and arts organizations. Additionally, portions of the Manufacturing and Industrial Center (MIC) near Georgetown contain a variety of industrial, logistics and manufacturing businesses. As a result of these factors the affected area has a higher likelihood of demand for ground level arts and light industrial uses compared to many other commercially zoned areas of the city. Arts and industrial uses often need space with a high ceiling height of 16-20 feet to accommodate their activities.

The greatest number of wood-framed floors that can be constructed on top of a concrete base structure for commercial/light industrial/arts uses under the Seattle Building Code is six. With average floor to floor heights of 10'-11' for residential stories, it is unlikely that a builder could construct six floors of housing in a 75' zone while also providing the type of tall ground floor spaces necessary to accommodate the light industrial and arts spaces desired in and around the Georgetown community. A height limit exception allowing an increase to 85 feet would address this by allowing a builder to maximize the amount of housing that could be built in wood framed construction and accommodate ground floor ceiling heights of approximately 20 feet.

It is a high priority for the City to support increased housing production to meet strong demand and to increase the quantity of rent- and income-restricted affordable housing. The City's Mandatory Housing Affordability (MHA) requirements would apply to development. It is also a goal of the City to continue supporting a vibrant variety of arts and light industrial uses in the Georgetown neighborhood and in locations near the Manufacturing Industrial Center. The proposed legislation would encourage future developments in the area to maximally contribute towards both of these goals.

Comprehensive Plan Consistency

The Future Land Use Map (FLUM) designation for the affected area in the City's Comprehensive Plan is "Commercial/mixed use". Land Use Goal 9 for Commercial/Mixed Use areas is:

LU G9 Create and maintain successful commercial/mixed-use areas that provide a focus for the surrounding neighborhood and that encourage new businesses, provide stability and expansion opportunities for existing businesses, and promote neighborhood vitality, while also accommodating residential development in livable environments.

The type of development that would be enabled by the height limit exception would facilitate development consistent with LU G9.

The Housing Element of the Comprehensive Plan includes a subsection about housing supply. Housing Goal G2 for housing supply is:

H G2 Help meet current and projected regional housing needs of all economic and demographic groups by increasing Seattle's housing supply.

And housing policy H 2.1 in that subsection is:

H 2.1 Allow and promote innovative and nontraditional housing design and construction types to accommodate residential growth.

The type of development that would be enabled by the height limit exception would be a specific step to increase housing supply in a manner consistent with the Housing Goal 2 and Policy 2.1.

The neighborhoods element of the Comprehensive Plan includes a section with goals and policies for Georgetown. The first goal pertains to a design district. Goal G1 is:

G-G1 A healthy Georgetown area economy that capitalizes on the presence of the regionally significant design and gift centers and the related wholesale, retail, design, and manufacturing trades to foster economic development and physical visibility of these industries.

The type of development that would be enabled by the height limit exception would be a specific step to support the inclusion of more spaces for design-related businesses consistent with Georgetown Goal G1.

Criteria to Access the Height Limit Exception

Under the proposed legislation, there are four criteria a development would need to meet to access the height limit exception. All of the criteria must be met for the 10' height exception to be granted.

- The applicant makes a commitment that the proposed development will meet the green building standard and shall demonstrate compliance with that commitment in accordance with Chapter 23.58D.
- The development includes at least five stories solely occupied by residential uses.
- At least 20 percent of the street frontage at street-level of the development shall be street-level uses from the list in subsection 23.47A.005.D.1.
- All dwelling units in the development have sound-insulating windows and air cooling and ventilation systems meeting the requirement in subsection 23.47A.009.J.

These criteria ensure that development would contribute towards the policy intent as a mixed-use area. The criteria ensure health and safety by applying a requirement for sound insulation and air cooling and ventilation systems in residential units as required for housing in the City's Urban Industrial zones and other areas rezoned from industrial. And an environmental standard is applied by requiring buildings seeking the height exception to be constructed to a high green building standard. As well, buildings using the height exception would be required to have a portion of the ground level occupied with active uses consistent with requirements of the Land Use Code for neighborhood commercial areas.

Other Factors Considered

Limited Scope / Adverse Impact. OPCD assesses the potential negative impacts from the proposal to be very small and the overall scope of the change to be limited. The proposal would not dilute the viability of industrial uses in the nearby Manufacturing Industrial Center (MIC), because the range of allowed uses in the affected area would not be changed, and the affected area does not itself include major industrial employment generators that could be displaced.

The proposal would have minimal potential height/bulk/scale impacts because the additional 10' of height under the exception would match the allowed zoning height of neighboring districts. Furthermore, the context of buildings and uses in surrounding areas would not be adversely impacted in terms of aesthetics or views by incrementally taller structures in the affected area.

The fact that the proposal is geographically limited to an isolated 9.7 acre area is also an important factor limiting the degree of potential impact. Although the change could make a meaningful positive impact in the localized area, it is not a large enough geography to alter the overall expected pattern of growth, uses and development that might occur in the area in the absence of the proposal.

OPCD conducted a State Environmental Policy Act (SEPA) review of the proposal during the summer of 2023. OPCD issued a SEPA Determination of Non-Significance and there was no appeal to the determination.

Contribution Towards Housing. As noted above OPCD factored the potential generation of housing when considering the proposal. GCDA reports that if fully built, the area could include as much as 900 units of housing. The City's MHA requirements would apply at the 5% level, meaning that about 45 units of rent- and income-restricted housing at the 60% of Area Median Income (AMI) affordability level, or the equivalent in-lieu payment towards affordable housing, would be associated with the full development. In addition, GCDA reports that it aspires to provide the remainder of all the housing units it would develop at affordable levels for households earning 80% AMI or below – an affordability level commonly referred to as “workforce housing”. GCDA may be receiving public funding or financing from public sources other than the City of Seattle which would ensure the provision of the workforce housing.

Community Support. This proposal was brought to OPCD's attention by representatives of the GCDA. OPCD met with and consulted leadership from the GCDA. It is our understanding that there is considerable support by Georgetown residents to enact the proposed change. Georgetown community members and groups, in varied formats, have communicated to OPCD in recent years a desire for the parts of the Georgetown neighborhood that are not in the Manufacturing and Industrial Center (MIC) to become a more complete neighborhood with a variety of residences, and vibrant locally serving businesses, and amenities.

Recommendation

In consideration of the factors discussed in this Director's Report and information in the completed State Environmental Policy Act (SEPA) review, OPCD recommends adoption of the proposed height limit exception.