

CAP

ENCOURAGING MIXED-USE ON LARGE RETAIL SITES PART OF THE PLANNING DEPARTMENT'S CITYWIDE ACTION PLAN FOR HOUSING



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ENCOURAGING MIXED-USE ON LARGE RETAIL SITES

The Citywide Action Plan (CAP) is exploring ways to strategically encourage new housing creation in appropriate areas—built contextually on the city's pedestrian-oriented neighborhood patterns, focussed near transit, and with attention to the public realm. One category of significant opportunity is the redevelopment of large retail sites, most notably grocery stores. San Francisco has 50 acres of land devoted to grocery stores, and 40 acres of land devoted to other large retail uses—generally shopping malls. A back-of-the-envelope calculation shows that with very modest inclusion of housing on these sites (say 50 units per acre, less than the 70 units/acre generally permitted on these sites currently) these sites together hold potential for upwards of 4,500 units of housing citywide.

TYPICAL SITE: UNDERUTILIZED AND OUT OF CONTEXT

Grocery stores commonly have large one-story commercial spaces ranging from 25,000 to 80,000 square feet located at the interior of lots that average 1.4 acres in size. Surface parking typically occupies the majority of the site and all major frontages. These sites rarely use more than one-fifth of the permitted buildout potential (average .57 Floor Area Ratio out of 2.5 permitted), and rarely include housing.

Shopping mall sites are larger and fewer, and represent large breaks in the urban fabric of surrounding neighborhoods creating street-less superblocks of large internally-oriented complexes.

Surprisingly, both types of large retail are typically located along the city's core transit streets and along established neighborhood commercial corridors that anchor residential districts.

Many of these large retail sites and buildings were initially developed 20 to 40 years ago. They are imminently reaching the ends of their useful lives—at the very least they need significant facelift and modernization, and in many cases complete rebuilding. As a result, major retailers are systematically considering the design and use of each site. San Francisco ought to expect a more urban, mixed-use model for their reuse.

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

Seattle, Portland, and Vancouver have each seen a wave of new and rehabbed grocery stores developed in more urban mixed-use models recently. These developments are urbanistic by design—orient uses to the sidewalk, put parking underground or behind, and generally respond better to surrounding neighborhoods. All of these cities have zoning controls that encourage and sometimes require a mix of housing with commercial development. However, almost all of the mixed-use grocery store projects to date in Portland and Seattle have materialized due to strong initiative from the development community, and on occasion to redevelopment coordination by the cities themselves.

While here in San Francisco there has been a demonstrated capability and initial interest from the development community in mixed-use grocery store development, many grocery and large retail sites in areas appropriate for housing continue to be proposed with minimal reinvestment and the perpetuation of single-use commercial buildings set in surface parking lots. It seems that select zoning and planning code revisions are needed to encourage a more urban form of reuse.

Several planning code changes, along with urban design guidelines, would encourage the redevelopment of these sites with a substantial amount of new housing, more active retail frontages, and urban design appropriate for fine-grained neighborhood contexts:



Safeway does mixed-use in other cities: Milliken Development's "TriBeCa" 3 to 4 story housing/grocery project currently under construction in Seattle's Upper Queen Anne neighborhood.

- *Housing as a Required Use.* There is already a precedent in San Francisco to require housing in certain zoning districts where it is desirable and where the demand to build non-residential uses can be leveraged to introduce housing into the mix. For instance, the existing Van Ness and Rincon Hill Special Use Districts allow non-residential uses only if the ratio of residential to non-residential square footage is no less than 3:1 and 6:1, respectively. Such ratios could apply broadly across Neighborhood Commercial (NC) districts to encourage mixed-use on all larger sites through the use of thresholds: for example, development on parcels above one-half acre or of commercial development above 10,000 square feet would trigger a minimum ratio of 2:1 residential to non-residential square footage. Instead of a ratio, a minimum residential density (say, 50 units per acre) could apply to large sites or commercial uses.



Grocery store sites in San Francisco.

- *Relaxation of Parking Requirements.* Parking requirements for commercial uses are based on a regional auto-oriented “destination retail” model and not a neighborhood main-street model, which is based on drawing many people on foot from nearby residences or other adjacent shops. For large commercial uses in NC districts, parking requirements could be relaxed to facilitate neighborhood-scale building forms, and reflect neighborhood characteristics such as the density and mix of uses in the surrounding area, transit accessibility, and synergies with other commercial uses. In tandem with reduction in parking requirements and encouragement of a less car-based lifestyle, large commercial uses should engage in services such as home delivery, customer shuttles, and hosting car-sharing pods.



A Typical Grocery Site: The Safeway at 4950 Mission in the Excelsior, 2.05 acres, 0.4 FAR

- *Design Standards for Street-Facing Uses.* Existing controls do not adequately address large uses and sites; controls are needed to ensure that street-facing uses contribute to the urban quality of neighborhood commercial streets. Mitigation of the physical impacts of parking is most pressing for these large uses. Strategies might include requiring any above-grade parking to be set back at least 25 feet from sidewalks and “wrapped” with active uses such as retail, community facilities, residential units, lobbies, and stoops and entries to individual residential units; restricting the width of parking and loading access (e.g. 20 to 22 feet max, located only on side streets). Individual retail frontages should be limited in width to encourage large uses to be lined with smaller retail spaces facing the street. Primary entries to the main grocery stores and auxiliary retail spaces should be directly from sidewalks, rather than parking lots.

- *Design Standards for Large Parcels.* Because of their sheer scale, often surrounded by fine-grained neighborhoods, large sites and sites with large uses need extra design sensitivity to fit in with the neighborhood fabric. Critical neighborhood pattern elements that might counteract the tendency toward out-of-scale gigantism include the introduction of new streets and alleys to break up large sites into pedestrian-friendly blocks, the construction of multiple discrete buildings on a site instead of singular large masses, and incorporation of public open space.

- *Public Amenity and Value Recapture Programs.* It will be important to ensure that some portion of the value created from new development comes back to the community. In addition to the vitality that new housing will provide, publicly-accessible open space, streetscape enhancements and other amenities might be either funded through or created as part of new development.

In a time when suitable land for new housing is increasingly scarce, these sites are tremendous opportunities that ought not to be missed when redevelopment or retrofit of these sites are considered.

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