

SDCI Director’s Report

Public School Amendments

Introduction

The Seattle Department of Construction and Inspections (SDCI), in consultation with the Department of Neighborhoods (DON) is proposing to amend the Land Use Code to update requirements for public school construction projects. The amendments are intended to help support current educational needs such as flexible classroom design, outdoor play areas, parking, and school bus loading. Changes are also proposed for the public school departure process that uses an advisory committee to consider flexibility in how standards are applied to school construction. These changes include the purpose of the committee, its decision-making process, and the make-up of the committee.

Summary of the Proposal

The proposal includes four code amendments to the Land Use Code by code section as follows:

Building height and bus loading in residential zones (SMC 23.51B.002)

- Changes to the allowed structure height to 45 feet with an additional allowance of 15 feet for screened or enclosed rooftop mechanical equipment. This would apply a height allowance that better accommodates multi-floor schools and allows equipment on rooftops to be screened from view and protected from the weather. Multi-floored schools can allow for more efficient use of land for outdoor play space and full-service schools to meet student and neighborhood needs.
- Updates the bus loading requirement to allow existing on-street (curbside) bus loading space to remain and would only require departures when curbside loading is expanded (i.e., additional buses or location enlarged).

Required parking (SMC 23.54.015)

- Changes the parking requirement to one parking space for every two classrooms. This would apply a requirement that addresses the number of staff and visitors generally on-site during school sessions.

Signs in residential zones (SMC 23.55.020 and 23.55.022)

- Updates the sign standards to allow two signs per school, one nonilluminated sign and one electric/reader board sign. The electric/reader board signs convey important school information and can accommodate translations into multiple languages.
- The update would allow one electric reader board sign outright, and would add new standards for frequency of movement, color, and operating standards. Current limits on size (height/width/sign area) would be maintained.

Update the process that allows consideration of departures from development standards (SMC 23.79.004)

- Updates the composition and service requirements of the advisory committee by modifying the composition of the advisory committee to allow a wider range of expertise; allow more continuity of members and afford more experience/training for committee members.

Background

The City allows public schools in all zones. In commercial zones, they need to meet the zone’s development standards (i.e. building height, building floor area limits). In residential zones, public schools need to meet standards for Public Schools in Residential Zones (Land Use Code [Chapter 23.51B](#)). These standards are out of date and do not accommodate the current and future educational needs of public schools.

Departures from development standards may be permitted or required pursuant to procedures and criteria established in Land Use Code [Chapter 23.79](#) Establishment of Development Standard Departure for Public Schools.

Proposal and Analysis

The proposed amendments are described and analyzed in more detail below:

HEIGHT

In the Neighborhood Residential and Lowrise zones, for new school construction on new school sites, the current maximum permitted height is 30 feet plus 5 feet for a pitched roof. For gyms and auditoriums that are accessory to the public school, the maximum permitted height is 35 feet plus 10 feet for a pitched roof if all portions of the structure above 30 feet are set back at least 20 feet from all lot lines.

For new public school construction on existing public school sites, the current maximum permitted height is 35 feet plus 15 feet for a pitched roof. The allowance for enclosed or screened rooftop mechanical equipment is an additional 15 feet.

For additions to existing public schools, on existing public school sites, the current maximum height permitted is the height of the existing school or 35 feet plus 15 feet for a pitched roof, whichever is greater. When the height limit is 35 feet, the ridge of the pitched roof on a principal structure may extend up to 15 feet above the height limit, and all parts of the roof above the height limit must be pitched at a rate of not less than 4:12.

The existing standards are out-of-date and include provisions that date back to the 1980s. Seattle Public Schools (SPS) routinely seeks height departures to allow for weather protection or screening of rooftop equipment. Using SDCI permit data, a total of 14 schools (ranging from elementary, middle, K-8 and high school) were analyzed. Six schools did not require a departure. Of this sample data, there were 8 of 14 that required a height departure. The following list includes the name of the school and the total amount of height requested and permitted to accommodate the building and rooftop mechanical equipment:

- Wing Luke 48 ft
- Genesee Hill 47.5 ft
- Jane Addams 58 ft
- Olympic Hills 40 ft
- Thorton Creek 43 ft
- Loyal Heights 54 ft
- Lincoln 60 ft
- Wilson Pacific 58 ft

In Neighborhood Residential and Lowrise zones, the proposal would allow up to 45 feet of height. In Midrise and Highrise zones, the proposal would allow up to the base height permitted in that zone for multifamily structures. The proposal would also allow 15' of additional height for rooftop mechanical equipment that is screened or enclosed. This update would better accommodate urban schools with stacked floors and common spaces. The proposal would better match the outcomes for school construction recently permitted by SDCI, meeting SPS school design specifications, technical information provided as part of permit applications, and as informed by the school advisory board.

BUS LOADING

The current code requires bus loading to be located on the school property for new school construction and allows existing curbside loading locations around the school site to meet bus loading requirements for additions and remodels to existing schools. Historically, SPS uses curbside loading for bus loading due to limited land availability. Departures to allow curbside bus loading are commonly requested by SPS and granted by the City because otherwise there would be large areas of pavement for bus turnarounds and driveways onsite. SPS often seeks departures through the permit process to accommodate its loading needs. The proposal would correct outdated code to reflect current business practices. The proposed code provisions would no longer require SPS to seek a departure for bus loading for remodels and additions to current schools if there is no change in the existing conditions.

PARKING

The current parking requirements for public schools can be found in Seattle Municipal Code Chapter 23.54.015 – Required Parking and Maximum Parking Limits under Table C - Required Parking for Public Uses and Institutions. The public school requirement is: Schools, public elementary and secondary – 1 space for each 80 square feet of all auditoria or public assembly rooms, or 1 space for every 8 fixed seats in auditoria or public assembly rooms containing fixed seats, for new public schools on a new or existing public school site. For public schools located within an in certain areas, for example the Frequent Transit Service Area (FTSA) as shown in Director's Rule 3-2023, parking may not be required or may be reduced.

The existing requirement for the number of parking spaces is based on the size of assembly space, which would lead to more parking being required than would serve the daily needs of schools. SPS shows that daily demand is much lower and over supplying parking takes away space available for more desirable school uses.

Several peer cities such as Portland, San Francisco, and Austin have eliminated parking minimums to allow for schools to make better use of the land available for school buildings and programming. The Seattle approach is to apply a parking requirement for the schools that are not in an area that qualifies for either no parking or a reduced parking requirement. The Departure Process is available to consider a lower amount of on-site parking as part of the permit review process when examining a specific school proposal in the area in which it is proposed.

Based on consideration of information in a parking study provided by the School District and analysis of the results of SDCI's recent permits for public school construction, SDCI is recommending a parking requirement of 1 space for every 2 classrooms for all public schools. This requirement would provide a starting point for permitting schools using a parking standard that is based on the size of schools using the number of classrooms, which is an improvement over the current use of assembly area. The school departure process would be available to tailor the amount of parking on a case-by-case basis.

The number of parking spaces provided for recently permitted school construction that is not in an area that qualifies for a lower parking requirement due to proximity to transit, is widely ranging from a high of 71 parking spaces (a ratio of 2.95 parking spaces per classroom) to a low of 42 parking spaces (2.21 spaces per 19 classroom). This is due in part to the availability of parking on some existing school sites that SPS chose to keep when that land area is not needed for other educational purposes. The following

is a list of example permits that show schools permitted that represent similar outcomes that would result from the proposal.

Sample of recently permitted schools, roughly representative of the proposed parking requirement of 1 space for every classroom.

School Name	Number of Classrooms	Code Required number of parking spaces	Requested and Approved number of parking spaces	Results of Permitted Projects
Alki Elementary	20	48	33	33/20=1.65 parking spaces per classroom
Arbor Heights Elementary	39	138	55	55/39=1.41 parking spaces per classroom
Daniel Bagley Elementary	31	78	32	32/31=1.03 parking spaces per classroom
James Baldwin (formerly Northgate) Elementary	18	140	30	30/18=1.66 parking spaces per classroom
West Woodland Elementary	25	78	10	10/25=0.40 parking spaces per classroom

The proposal is intended to address the number of staff and visitors generally on-site during the school day. In addition, the proposal better accounts for SPS programming that promotes walking, biking and transit use as well as it gives more space available on school property to be used for play areas, landscape buffers and classrooms.

ELECTRIC/READER BOARD SIGNS

The existing sign standards do not allow for changing image signs outright. Current standards allow for static signage. SPS often seeks departures for electric/reader board signs. Of the last five years of SDCI permit data, approximately one-third of school projects (ranging from elementary, middle, K-8 and high school) required a departure from the existing code to allow for a sign upgrade to meet current school programming needs. These departure requests are routinely granted because the school programming information provided is vital information to school families and neighbors, including non-English speaking people.

This proposal would allow for one electric reader board sign outright for each school as well as one nonilluminated static sign. A departure request would no longer be required. The proposal would allow for messages to be more practically displayed in multiple languages, which is inclusive and representative of the diversity of SPS’s students and families served in the City. As a result of this update, there will be new standards for changing image signs to limit the frequency of movement and color as well as operating standards. Current code limits on sign dimensions (height/width/sign area) would be maintained and remain unchanged.

ADVISORY COMMITTEE

The current process for departures requires the committees to be assembled and staffed by the Department of Neighborhoods (DON) for each individual project. This process can be slow and not very nimble. In addition, every committee is disbanded once their review is completed. This proposal allows for DON to select and convene committee members with a wider range of expertise and training by making updates to the composition and membership of the advisory committee. For example, the membership requirements are updated to require that there would be a member with experience in land use and zoning, architecture or landscape architecture, economic development, real estate development, or educational services on the advisory committee.

The proposal includes updates to the existing membership requirements to remove barriers to make the overall membership composition more agile and to help the process run smoother. These updates include the advisory committee member who resides within 600 feet of the school, the member who has a business or property within 600 feet of the school, the parent or member of a Parent Teacher Association (PTA) or other school organization, and the member who is a representative at large to represent city-wide education issues. The changes made from the existing code to the proposal are anticipated to increase consistency in the recommendations provided for school projects.

The current code requires that DON select committee members in cooperation with the community organization representing the area for the member who resides within 600 feet of the school and any adjoining publicly owned property. The proposal updates this existing requirement by simply stating that the member would own a business or a property within 600 feet of the school.

Similar updates have been made for the member who represents the parents of the school to be replaced, expanded or remodeled. The proposal makes it clear that the member would either be a parent or guardian and/or a member of a PTA or other school organization. The proposal would update the current code to allow for one member that fits that membership criteria rather than two members. This update would create a faster pathway for decision-making to allow for more consistent recommendations to the SDCI Director.

Also, the current code has a requirement that there is a member that is selected by the Director of DON, who resides in a housing unit which will be demolished and who will be adversely affected by the demolition, when demolition of housing is necessitated by the District's proposal. The proposed code provisions would remove this requirement because SPS no longer demolishes houses to build school projects. This update would remove outdated code language.

Lastly, the current code requires that the SPS committee representative must be a voting member. The proposal makes a change to this requirement. The change is that the representative of SPS would be a non-voting member. This update would further strengthen the purview of the Advisory Committee.

Comprehensive Plan Consistency

The proposal is consistent with relevant goals and policies in the Seattle 2035 Comprehensive Plan including:

GOAL

CF G5 *"Make efficient use of resources when investing in facilities and service delivery that involve other agencies and organizations."*

POLICY

CF 5.3 *"Partner with Seattle Public Schools to plan for expected growth in student population, explore opportunities to reduce the costs of developing new schools, encourage the siting of new school facilities in or near urban centers and villages, and make it easy for students and families to walk and bike to school."*

POLICY

LU 3.2 *"Allow public facilities and small institutions to depart from development standards, if necessary to meet their particular functional requirements, while maintaining general design compatibility with the surrounding area's scale and character. Require public facilities and small institutions to adhere to zoned height limits, except for spires on religious institutions. Consider providing greater flexibility for schools in recognition of their important role in the community."*

POLICY

LU 3.3 *"Allow standards to be modified for required off-street parking associated with public facilities and small institutions based on the expected use and characteristics of the facility and the likely impacts on surrounding parking and development conditions, and on existing and planned transportation facilities in the area."*

GOAL

LU G6 *"Regulate off-street parking to address parking demand in ways that reduce reliance on automobiles, improve public health and safety, reduce greenhouse gas emissions, lower construction costs to reduce the cost of housing and increase affordable housing, create attractive and walkable environments, and promote economic development throughout the city."*

POLICY

LU 6.1 *"Establish parking requirements where appropriate for both single-occupant vehicles and their alternatives at levels that further this Plan's goal to increase the use of public transit, car pools, walking, and bicycles as alternatives to the use of single-occupant vehicles."*

POLICY

LU 6.3 *"Rely on market forces to determine the amount of parking provided in areas of the city that are well-served by transit, such as urban centers and urban villages."*

POLICY

LU 6.4 *"Consider setting maximums in urban centers and urban villages, where high levels of pedestrian, bicycle, and transit accessibility make many trips possible without a car."*

POLICY

LU 6.9 *"Require parking in areas with limited transit access and set the requirements to discourage underused parking facilities, even if occasional spillover parking could result."*

Public Outreach and Notice

Opportunities for public input in the preparation of this proposal have included social media posts as well as publication of the proposal translated into the top tier languages on the SDCI website. A list serv on the website has 175 people signed up to receive notifications of future steps in the legislative process, which will include a public hearing regarding the proposal at the City Council’s Land Use Committee.

Recommendation

The Director of SDCI recommends adoption of the proposed amendments to the Land Use Code. This proposal responds to the need to support school programming in modern public school buildings in the City by modifying existing standards and the departure process consistent with the Comprehensive Plan.

SDCI reviews approximately a dozen or more construction permit applications per year for new public schools or major additions or remodels. Nearly all applications include several departure requests. This proposal will not eliminate all the departure requests because each school project usually has at least four and sometime even upwards of nine or ten departure requests, but these amendments would help make the process run smoother and more efficiently and make better use of resources for the construction of public schools.